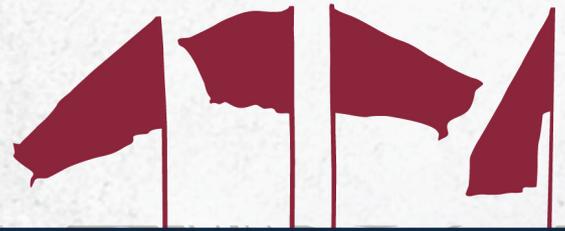


The 2024 Democracy



Overview

Asian Democracy from the Eyes
of Democracy Advocates and
Grassroots Movements

Published in May 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy in Asia in 2024 presents a complex landscape marked by significant fluctuations, yet it is predominantly overshadowed by a concerning rise in authoritarianism that influences various aspects of democratic practices across the region. Despite these challenges, the fervent struggle to protect and promote democracy continues unabated. Multi-sectoral institutions and vibrant civil society groups are uniting to tackle a wide array of critical issues, demonstrating a remarkable collaboration that transcends boundaries and sectors.

These advocates come together at numerous levels of engagement, forming a cohesive alliance that approaches the daunting challenges facing their countries. By working in solidarity, they aim to confront the pressing threats to democratic freedoms rather than facing these adversities in isolation. A thorough understanding of the democratic anomalies that pervade different sectors is crucial for crafting effective strategies and informed decision-making moving forward.

As we advance, maintaining vigilance and pursuing further efforts to consolidate democratic principles is imperative. This report serves both as an identification of these anomalies and as a rallying cry for action. It has been meticulously developed and presented directly by dedicated activists from relevant sectors, intended to inspire and engage democracy advocates across the region.

This document marks the inaugural collaboration of the Asia Democracy Network, inviting all supporters of democracy to join in our mission. Together, we aim to champion and safeguard democratic values throughout Asia, fostering solidarity among all who aspire for a more democratic future and ensuring that our collective efforts continue to thrive in unity.

Asia Democracy Network
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01

OUTLOOK OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE IN ASIA: ENABLING DEMOCRACY FROM THE LENS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Enabling Democracy From the Lens of Human Rights Defenders

By **KRISTINA UY GADAINGAN**

For Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and ARTICLE 19

Democracy, long regarded as the most effective system in the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, is facing unprecedented challenges across the Asian region and globally. The decline in democratic norms continues to be driven by several factors, including the rise of authoritarianism and spread of populist ideologies. These factors contribute to shrinking civic space and erosion of fundamental freedoms, threatening the overall stability and progress of democracy in the region.

Repressive tactics including surveillance, arbitrary detentions, and harassment of human rights defenders (HRDs) are increasingly used to silence and stifle actions by activists, civil society, journalists, and political opposition. Use of draconian laws also further restrict freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Moreover, many governments across the region have weaponized narratives through deliberate information and truth war, deploying state-controlled media, propaganda, and disinformation to manipulate public opinion and discredit HRDs, activists, journalists, and independent watchdogs.

These tactics systematically weaken democratic institutions and undermine checks and balances required for governance that respects democracy and human rights. The erosion of institutional independence, such as control of national human rights institutions and even parliaments, concentrates power and makes it difficult to ensure accountability. All these factors lead to the weakening of key foundations upon which democratic societies are built.

The threats witnessed in 2024 are not isolated but rather reflect enduring patterns that are likely to persist in the years ahead. While the future of democracy in the region remains uncertain, there is an urgent need for stronger collaboration and

solidarity among HRDs, civil society organizations, and regional and international allies. Civic spaces, people power, and strong democratic institutions demonstrated their positive impact as witnessed in Bangladesh and South Korea in 2024, where cross-cutting people's movements proved their potential to create positive impact. These positive results, while encouraging, should not overshadow the urgent need for sustained and coordinated efforts to safeguard democracy and human rights in the face of growing challenges.

2024 DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES: HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACES UNDER PRESSURE



Autocracy and populism dominate the current order

The political landscape in Asia continues to be shaped by a troubling rise in autocratic governance

“From enacting a gender apartheid to committing genocidal attacks against the Shia Hazaras and forcefully evicting Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other minorities, Taliban’s brutal rule has blatantly disregarded principles of universal human rights, national obligations, as well as the traditional values of the people of Afghanistan.”



and populist rhetorics. Key developments in 2024 include the entrenchment of authoritarian leaders across several Asian countries who have consolidated power through abuse of executive and legislative powers, manipulation of electoral rules, and suppression of fundamental freedoms.

Freedom House’s 2024 [Freedom of the World report](#) reveals a concerning picture: only five of the more than 40 countries in the region were categorized as ‘free,’ while eleven were deemed ‘partly free’. Majority of the nations fall under the ‘not free’ category reflecting significant limitations on political and civil liberties of the people in Asia.

The state of freedom in the region reflects how it continues to also grapple with serious human rights challenges. In Myanmar, the military junta’s control since the 2021 attempted coup has led to widespread violence, blatant disregard to the rule of law, repression against the civilian population, and a devastating humanitarian crisis. In Afghanistan, the Taliban rule since its takeover in 2021 has caused severe deterioration of human rights and unprecedented level of restrictions, most especially to women.

“From enacting a gender apartheid to committing genocidal attacks against the Shia Hazaras and forcefully evicting Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other minorities, Taliban’s brutal rule has blatantly disregarded principles of universal human rights, national obligations, as well as the traditional values of the people of Afghanistan.”

In Bangladesh, the authoritarian regime of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resorted to extreme measures to suppress protests across the country leading to the deaths of [thousands of protesters](#). In other cases in the region, populist leaders have exploited their mandates to erode democratic

safeguards and gain support for their autocratic approaches to governance.

Moreover, populism has emerged as a powerful force across Asia, as seen in Indonesia, India, and the Philippines where populist rhetorics have been used to discredit human rights, independent journalists, and democracy activists. As seen in these countries, narratives are shaped and manipulated, aggravated by the use of draconian measures guised to protect national security (i.e. Anti-Terrorism Act and Cybercrime Prevention Act in the Philippines and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in India) and information-related legislations (i.e. Electronic Information and Transaction Law (ITE) ITE in Indonesia), and even sedition laws. Such a trend deepens polarization in society and emboldens autocratic leaders, ultimately weakening inclusive and accountable democratic systems.

Weakened democratic institutions, fundamental freedoms under attack

The shrinking civic space across Asia goes hand and hand with the weakening of democratic institutions and the erosion of fundamental freedoms. Authoritarian governments in the region increasingly bypass checks and balances, undermine judicial independence, and suppress the vital role of civil society. This leads to the erosion of key democratic safeguards including the enactment and/or enforcement of draconian laws, creating a vicious cycle in restricting fundamental freedoms and furthers democratic decline.

Independent institutions, crucial for safeguarding fundamental freedoms such as NHRIs, have also come under pressure. For example, Indonesia’s national human rights commission (Komnas HAM) experienced budget slashes. In South Korea, the NHRC’s credibility was

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compromised after homophobic comments made publicly by its chairperson, and the perceived support from commissioners raised concerns regarding impartiality.

In Bangladesh, while Hasina's regime was ultimately ousted through people power, her prolonged rule significantly weakened key democratic institutions. In particular, the [judiciary was compromised](#), security forces were used to suppress dissent, and independent agencies such as the election commission and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) were brought under government control. The NHRC, in particular, was [widely seen](#) as a tool of the regime, failing to adequately protect protesters and human rights defenders.

Having weak democratic institutions poses a significant threat to the system of checks and balances, paving the way for autocracy to thrive and hindering meaningful public participation in governance. When institutions designed to safeguard human rights and fundamental freedoms are weakened, the space for dissent shrinks.

Furthermore, it leads to weaponization of draconian laws to stifle dissent and restrict fundamental freedoms. Legislations targeting freedom of expression, such as sedition and cybercrime laws, and those designed in the guise of security have been increasingly weaponized to silence HRDs, civil society, and dissenting voices. For example, in Vietnam, repressive laws are Article 112 of the Criminal Code is commonly used to [target bloggers and social media activists](#) who criticize the government or raise social issues online. These "security-related" measures and cybercrime laws are often used to stifle legitimate expression and have been increasingly weaponized to silence watchdogs and strengthen censorship.

In Malaysia, despite the political transition in 2022 and promises of reform by the current government, freedoms of expression and assembly remain areas of concern, particularly with introduction of amendments to the already [problematic Communication and Multimedia Act \(CMA\)](#), [FoE laws which will give unfettered power to the government to curb the](#)

[fundamental freedom of expression](#). In Thailand, Article 112 of its Criminal Code (Lèse Majesté) has been used to criminalize defamation or threats to the monarchy, however, its vague provisions have been used against HRDs, activists, and even politicians. As of [May 2024](#), more than half of the 43 individuals in detention for political charges are facing Section 112 charges.

In addition, media practitioners face censorship, self-censorship, and physical attacks, such as in countries like Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, and Cambodia among others.

In the [2024 Asia Pacific Report](#) of Civicus, the arbitrary detention of protesters and use of excessive force by security forces against peaceful protests were the major civic space violations documented in the region. Also noted in the report is the use of restrictive laws to prosecute human rights defenders and censorship denying people their right to access information.

State of Civic Space in Asia 2024

- **Closed:**
Afghanistan, China, Laos, Myanmar, Hong Kong, North Korea, Vietnam
- **Repressed:**
Brunei, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bangladesh
- **Obstructed:**
Bhutan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nepal, and Mongolia
- **Narrowed:**
South Korea and Timor Leste
- **Open:**
Taiwan and Japan

Source: [People Power Under Attack 2024 \(Civicus Monitor Report\)](#)

In a healthy democracy, there are strong checks and balances to prevent abuse of power.

As witnessed in South Korea, President Yoon Suk Yeol made a controversial [declaration of Martial law](#) in December 2024. While this drastic measure sparked widespread condemnation, the country's robust democratic institutions prevailed with its National Assembly swiftly voting to reject the declaration, averting a major threat to South Korea's democratic foundations.

However, despite this positive outcome, the incident highlighted existing vulnerabilities. The independence of key institutions has been compromised, as the NHRI remains a concern. [News reports](#) pointed to the NHRI chairperson being a loyal ally of President Yoon Suk Yeol and supported the President despite strong protests from civil society.

Battle of Truth: Age of disinformation and Influence operations

As the world increasingly becomes "digital," with new and expansive avenues for expression and political engagement, authoritarian regimes have also resorted to digital tools to control and undermine democratic values. This includes deploying cyber attacks, spreading disinformation, and surveilling and controlling digital activities to intimidate and target critics.

While digital spaces have become significant platforms for networking, mobilization and advocacy, they have also become battlegrounds where fundamental freedoms are routinely attacked. These spaces also witness a range of violations against HRDs, including doxxing, or public disclosure of private and confidential information of human rights defenders, to intimidate and silence them. For instance, incidents of doxxing were recorded in [Indonesia](#) in 2024.

However, among the biggest challenges to democracy and civic space in the digital age is the phenomenon of disinformation. Elections across Asia have been influenced by coordinated disinformation campaigns, often orchestrated by political actors and amplified by state-controlled or partisan media. These campaigns not only discredit political opponents but also undermine public trust in democratic institutions.

In the Philippines, state-sanctioned disinformation has targeted political opposition, journalists, HRDs, and activists. The use of red tagging tactics of the previous Duterte regime still continues to impact legitimate grassroots and democracy work of political parties and civil society organizations. The use of government machinery and security agencies significantly influenced [public opinion](#). Even the country's Supreme Court recognized the dangers of such tactics and [declared](#) red tagging as a threat to life, liberty, or security. Despite this legal recognition, the use of government machinery and security agencies to spread disinformation and discredit critics remains widespread, further undermining democratic discourse. While the use of propaganda and disinformation have been existing long before the internet, its extent has become unprecedented with social media platforms further fuelling propagation of harmful information. For example, in Myanmar, Facebook was used as a propaganda tool by ultra-nationalists to voice their anti-Muslim rhetoric, leading to extreme violence against the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities both within and [outside of Myanmar](#).

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has further amplified disinformation, especially during elections. In [Indonesia's 2024 elections](#) [AI-generated deepfakes](#) became prevalent portraying political figures in fabricated scenarios to mislead voters. Similarly in India, during the 2024 general elections, [AI technologies](#) were reported to create misleading content.

Non-traditional media platforms, such as blogs and social media influencers, have emerged as key players in this "battle for truth." However, these platforms are frequently co-opted by populist leaders to discredit traditional media, branding journalists as enemies of the state. But genuine journalists risk their lives to report on human rights abuses and corruption, while state-controlled media and propaganda narratives dominate public discourse.

Addressing these challenges requires tackling the unchecked power of big tech. Social media giants play a significant role in enabling the spread of harmful content, yet accountability remains limited. There is a growing call for regional and international frameworks to regulate digital platforms, ensuring they contribute to democratic resilience rather than its erosion.

Enabling Democracy From the Lens of Human Rights Defenders

By KRISTINA UY GADAINGAN

For Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and ARTICLE 19

LOOKING FORWARD: DEMOCRACY AS A WAY FORWARD

The challenges remain daunting but the resilience of civil society and human rights defenders offers a glimmer of hope. Democracy remains the best way forward with its emphasis on human rights, inclusiveness, and accountability. In Asia, there needs to be a multi-pronged approach that centers on regional solidarity and activism, amplifying stories of resilience and resistance.



In Bangladesh, student-led protests in 2024 demonstrated the power of collective action and the enduring desire for better, accountable, inclusive governance.

In Bangladesh, student-led protests in 2024 demonstrated the power of collective action and the enduring desire for better, accountable, inclusive governance.

People's movements, with a united vision of a more inclusive and just society, offer a powerful reminder that democracy remains a potent force to drive positive change. Youth activists and grassroots

movements play a vital role in shaping the future of democracy in Asia. The energy, creativity, and commitment to social justice demonstrated by the youth provide innovative approaches to sustainable advocacy and mobilization.

At the grassroots and national levels, empowering communities, particularly youth and vulnerable sectors, is crucial. This includes equipping them with the tools to navigate increasing threats both offline and online, strengthening their resilience through community organizing, and fostering cross-sector collaboration to effectively address the multifaceted challenges to democracy.

Beyond national borders, strengthening regional cooperation and solidarity is equally crucial to counter national, regional, and global threats to democracy and human rights. This includes establishing robust mechanisms for collaboration among human rights defenders and civil society organizations, and building allies within government institutions, such as parliamentarians and NHRIs, and regional bodies such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its instrumentalities such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights AICHR and ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), can play a role. Although their effectiveness can be limited by political realities and diverse interests.

Key steps towards regional solidarity include cross-border advocacy and support networks to facilitate information sharing and coordinated advocacy campaigns. Platforms like the annual Asia Democracy Assembly (ADA) and ASEAN People's Forum (APF) provide opportunities to connect, share experiences, and develop strategies for collective action. These collective efforts are a strong force that can truly help amplify voices and exert greater pressure on national, regional, and international bodies to uphold human rights and pave the way for democracy to thrive.

The Condition of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (Dalits) in Democracy

By PRITIKA PARIYAR AND BEENA PALLICAL

For the Asia Dalit Rights Forum (ADRF)

“

Democracy is not merely a form of Government...It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar

What Dr. Ambedkar said regarding democracy being an attitude of respect and reverence towards our fellowmen is still relevant today. Despite legislation, caste discrimination against Dalits persists in the 21st millennium, a cruel practice that dehumanizes and perpetuates the issue. “Dalit” refers to the people of South Asia and the diaspora globally once known as “untouchables,” who are systematically and institutionally deprived of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, facing discrimination and poverty due to the caste system (PWESCR, 2008). Caste differences are not just cultural or economic, but also graded inequality (Ambedkar 1987; Jaffrelot 2005), affecting all social groupings. Even outcastes and untouchables are internally divided and unequal. This makes it difficult for those at the receiving end to mobilize against the powerful and institutionalizes discrimination and exclusion (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). South Asian societies exhibit unique social inequality and exclusion due to their long-standing caste system. Despite differences in political and religious organization, caste-like institutional practices persist in some societies, despite some political and religious differences, and continue to perpetuate social exclusion (Sheth, 2004). With their concentration in South Asia, Dalit communities are the most marginalized and discriminated against in the world. Throughout their lives, almost 260 million Dalits worldwide experience various types of prejudice and marginalization. About 210 million Dalits, or almost 80% of the world's Dalit population, live in South Asia alone. Caste in South Asian countries is manifested through inequality and discrimination, with Dalits often forced into “unclean” occupations and facing limited access to public and private services. This results in a large gap between the general population and Dalits. This article explores the relationship between democracy and caste dynamics. It also analyzes the state of democracy for Dalits in South Asia and offers recommendations for sustainable progress.

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OVERLOOK ON SOUTH ASIA'S DEMOCRATIC LANDSCAPE

South Asia's approach to democracy is distinct due to its emphasis on democratization, economic development, and state consolidation, with some countries transitioning late from monarchies, despite slow and uneven progress. (Chadda, 2000). (Singh, 1998). Despite its flaws, people maintain their belief in democracy due to struggles for freedom and equality (Uyangoda, 2019). Political parties have played a crucial role in this shift, but organized parties alone may not be enough for democratization. South Asia's shared colonial past and diverse democratic results make it ideal for comparative analysis. The success of liberal democracy in this challenging environment requires altering dominant democratization approaches (Adeney & Wyatt, 2004).

The caste system in South Asia continues to impact political and electoral participation of marginalized groups like Dalits. The system categorizes individuals by occupation and social status, with the lowest rung referred to as "Untouchables" or "Scheduled Castes." Inclusive participation is crucial for democratic functioning and empowering people to choose their leaders (IFES, 2023). Traditional values and patriarchal practices have limited opportunities for

marginalized communities, including women, Dalits, and ethnic minorities. Effective leadership is needed to navigate this complexity and address key political issues for citizens' needs (Nepali, 2009). Caste-based marriages perpetuate inequality and discrimination in South Asian societies (Hasnain & Srivastava, 2023).

According to the 2023 Democracy Index report called 'Age of Conflict' by The Economist Intelligence Unit, 74 of the 167 countries and territories covered by the model are democracies of some type.

The data from the 2023 EIU Democracy Index report highlights the state of democracy in South Asia, where the caste system has influenced society. South Asia and Southeast Asia already had the lowest scores of all continent sub-regions. India, the most populous country in the world, showed the biggest improvement in the region with a high score (7.18) and ranking (41st). India's political culture and government performance scores increased, but civil rights scores decreased due to failures in protecting minority rights during ethnic violence in Manipur. Pakistan's score fell, resulting in a decline in judicial independence and electoral meddling, making it the only Asian country to be downgraded. Sri Lanka also experienced deteriorating government transparency and public trust after an economic

Country	Overall score	Rank	Change in rank from previous year	I electoral process and pluralism	II functioning of government	III political participation	IV political culture	V civil liberties
India	7.18	41=	5	8.67	7.86	7.22	6.25	5.88
Pakistan	3.25	118	-11	2.58	4.29	2.78	2.50	4.12
Bangladesh	5.87	75	-2	7.42	6.07	5.56	5.63	4.71
Nepal	4.60	98	3	4.83	5.36	5.00	2.50	5.29
Sri Lanka	6.17	70	-10	6.58	4.64	7.22	6.25	6.18

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023

collapse in 2022. (EIU, 2024).

Nepal celebrated its 74th Democracy Day, highlighting progress in consolidating democracy and establishing inclusive rule of law. However, challenges remain in transforming lives. The country's history includes the Shah dynasty and the Rana dynasty, which limited political engagement and civic liberties. The first uprising against the Rana autocracy in the 1940s led to the 1950-51 revolution, which established Nepal's first democratically elected government. However, the Panchayat System, which lasted for three decades, continued authoritarian control. The 1990 People's Movement re-established multiparty democracy, but political instability persisted. The Maoist insurgency in 1996 arose from poverty and inequality grievances. The 2006 People's Movement II led to the abolition of the monarchy in 2008 and the establishment of Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic. Nepal's democratic transition has been hindered by political instability, frequent government changes, power struggles, and parliamentary dissolutions. Ideals like power alternation, tolerance, and opposition respect remain weak, and state institutions remain vulnerable to political interference, questioning the rule of law (Dhakar, 2024).

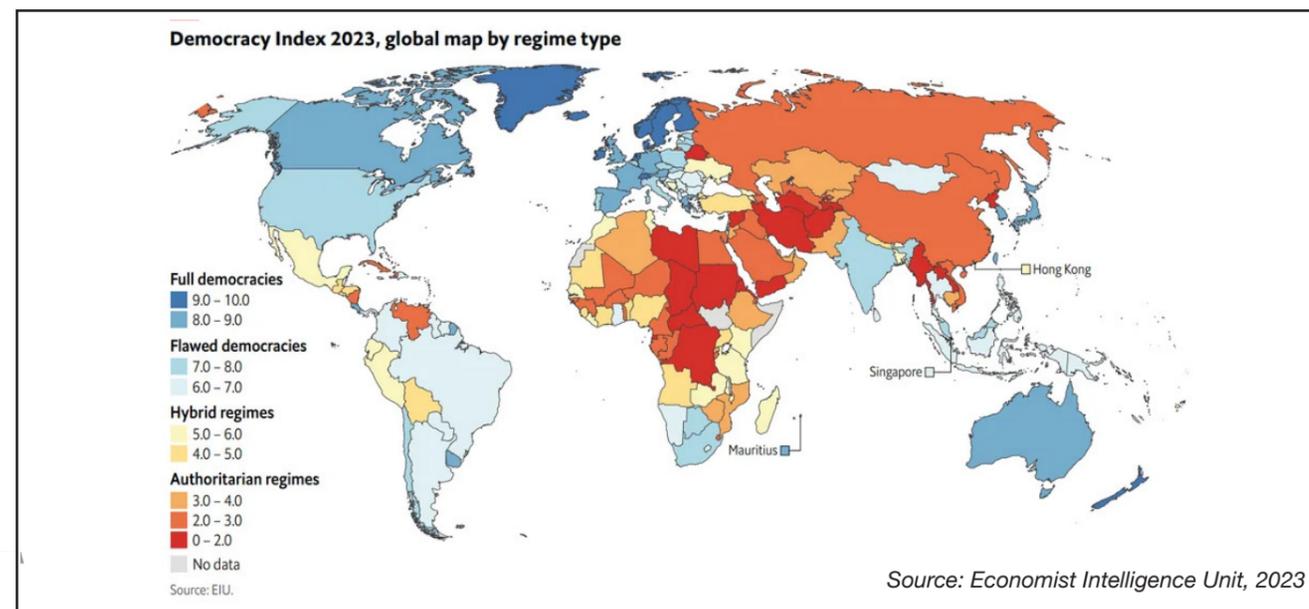
In Bangladesh student protest on job quotas has escalated into a nationwide uprising against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's rule. Government enforces curfew, internet blackout, and public holiday. Official death toll is 174, with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus appealing to international community. Bangladeshi protests began on June 2024 after the High Court reinstated quotas for government jobs to the relatives of freedom fighters. Although the Supreme Court reduced the quota to 5%, resentment persists. The unrest stems from the quota system's roots, its connection to Hasina and her party, and widespread discontent over economic despair, corruption, rigged elections, and human

rights abuses has come to the surface (Tripathi, 2024). India gained freedom in 1947 and adopted its Constitution, which includes unique safeguards for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which have helped protect their interests and accelerate socio-economic development. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee, incorporated these safeguards to ensure social, economic, and political justice for all citizens. Article 46 of the Constitution addresses the inequitable forces in the socio-economic system and political organizations, addressing the welfare of the downtrodden (Kanwar, 2019).

India's democracy has led to significant socio-political and economic disparities, with the ruling class dominating public policy and decision-making. This has resulted in marginalized groups, such as agricultural laborers and the poor, who are deprived of power, supremacy, justice, and decision-making. These groups are weakened socially, economically, and educationally due to lack of education and employment opportunities (Patil, 2019). Despite facing challenges and discrimination, marginalized communities in India have shown faith in the constitutional framework, but only through active efforts to remove injustice barriers can they retain their faith (Narasimha, 2024).

PERPETUATING THE CASTE SYSTEM STATE OF DEMOCRACY AND DALITS IN SOUTH ASIA

Sri Lanka's political situation has aggravated economic inequalities in the country, further sowing divisions. Sri Lanka's foreign reserves had plummeted from nearly USD 8 billion in November 2019 to less than 2 billion in December 2021, resulting in a severe economic crisis. The country's economy has been severely affected, with fuel supplies severely impacted, blackouts extended to over 10 hours, and



Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023

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food supplies threatened. Sri Lanka's economic crisis has escalated into a political crisis, with widespread protests demanding the resignation of the president and government. The crisis has forced a rethinking of foreign policies, with economists urging an arrangement with the IMF and World Bank (Devapriya, 2022).

Caste is a widely studied South Asian institution that has historically structured power relations among communities, legitimizing them through the systematic distribution of economic and cultural assets and deprivations. Dalits are spread throughout the South Asian sub-continent, with India being home to around 200 million Dalits, according to IFES (2024). In Nepal, around 3 million (13% of population) are also considered Dalits (Maharjan, 2021). Pakistan (85% of Hindu population; Zulfikar, 2024), Bangladesh (5.5-6.5 million; GFOD, 2023) and Sri Lanka (4-5 million; GFOD, 2023) are also home to sizable Dalit populations.

However, this sacralized system has not fully incorporated the cultural and historical identities of different communities. To understand exclusion in South Asian societies, caste should be seen as a historical-empirical power structure rather than a hierarchy of statuses. Caste has historically maintained communitarian identities among diverse ethnic, cultural, and social groups, while also forming local hierarchies. These hierarchies are arranged in an unequal system of graded exclusion, dominated by select communities, and undergo frequent movement (Sheth, 2004).

According to the report by International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES, 2023), India and Nepal's constitutional frameworks offer a foundation for Dalit activism and electoral participation reforms, unlike South Asian states like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, but these rights in India and Nepal are often not fully utilized. Nepal's legal framework is partially endorsed by international human rights conventions, and violence against Dalits is tolerated. The Caste Based Discriminations and Untouchability Act has led to at least 16 caste-based killings since

2011. India and Bangladesh both face significant challenges in addressing caste discrimination and ensuring representation in elections and politics. Dalits face persecution, limited employment, and violence, despite efforts to eliminate such discrimination. Despite international human rights conventions, directives like the Social Safety Net Programme and National Social Protection Strategy have little effect.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network's report on Dalits highlights discrimination in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Dalits are dismissed on religious grounds, not included in political or economic security measures, and often interpreted as Hindus in Pakistan. In Sri Lanka, Dalits face untouchability, restricted access to resources, and low representation in political parties. Institutional conditions favor minority men over women. Caste-based discrimination in India has been brought to the forefront with the mobilization of Dalits, formerly known as untouchables. The term 'Dalit' has gained international recognition, symbolizing oppression, and resistance against the caste system (Berg, 2015) (Chatterjee, 2004). Social media has played a significant role in exposing the hardships faced by Dalits to a wider audience, transcending geographical boundaries (ibid, 2020).

Despite constitutional measures to combat discrimination and inequality, there are still challenges in effectively implementing laws and preventing atrocities against Dalits. The complex social system of caste continues to perpetuate inequality and hinder equal opportunities for marginalized groups like Dalits, highlighting the ongoing struggle for social justice and inclusion in Indian society (Berg, 2020).

Debates surrounding Dalits and Dalit movements prioritize equality, dignity, justice, and rights, yet these rights are consistently met with oppression and violence. Dalits appreciate B. R. Ambedkar for drafting a constitution that provides them with fundamental rights and reservation policies. However, caste still prevails in Indian society, leading to Dalit members often distancing themselves from other castes,

causing fragmentation within their communities and movements. This exclusivity is deemed justified based on moral imperatives (Suzuki, 2021). In Indian society, equality, dignity, justice, and rights are tangible rights through collective action (Mangubhai 2014).

Despite historical criticisms of caste and gender exploitation, mainstream intellectual discourses have largely ignored untouchable voices challenging dominant structures in South Asian society. Colonial interventions did permit oppressed groups like Dalits and women to challenge their subordination, envisioning anti-caste egalitarian ideals. Unfortunately, mainstream narratives on colonial South Asia have often neglected Dalit perspectives, hindering a complete understanding of colonialism and modernity in the region (Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2008).

South Asian countries like India have seen a shift between democracy and authoritarianism, with India maintaining high political and civil liberties.

However, there is still underrepresentation of lower classes in political processes (Wagle, 2009 with elites dominating the system (Jeffrey, 2000 & 2002). This marginalization extends to minority groups like Christians, Muslims, and Dalits in leadership roles (Manchanda, 2006). Despite South Asia's economic growth, challenges like poverty and unemployment persist. India leads in GDP on Purchasing Power Parity, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh. Policy decisions prioritize representation quality over quantity (ibid, 2009), and while South Asia's economic development is progressing, poverty and unemployment persist (Das & Siddharth, 2021).



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY FOR DALITS IN SOUTH ASIA

- It is critical that Dalit agendas and players be acknowledged and made visible in mainstream academic and in the political settings.
- Empowering disempowered groups, like Dalits, through participation in decision-making processes is essential for a democratic society.
- Attitudes towards Dalits improve when they participate in democratic institutions.
- Government resources are often controlled by elites unless marginalized groups like Dalits participate and demand their fair share of allocation.
- The representatives who are supposed to represent Dalits through intermediate participation in the local governance have not taken their interests and concerns seriously, therefore they should be held accountable to counter lack of representation.
- Institutional barriers need to be removed to promote participatory democracy, involving all societal sections especially marginalised communities like Dalits in decision-making

- processes that impact their lives and livelihoods.
- It is a pity that the Dalit community face challenges in gaining representation in the legal profession as well, prompting urgent action to increase their representation in the judiciary.
- Dalits should play a more active part in the democratic process and not be restricted to "election-only" since democracy should be reflected in the responses of the citizen.

To conclude, democracy is prevalent globally, based on people's will, emphasizing citizenship as a key factor in a democratic system providing all rights to life. The constitution is a societal blueprint ensuring rights such as freedom, equality, and dignity for citizens and the democracy is about people unless it is such that the democracy will vanish.

Indigenous Self-Governance in Asia: A Democratic Alternative to Authoritarianism

By ASIA INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' PACT (AIPP)

Indigenous Peoples in Asia have long mobilized for self-governance. Their struggle is not isolated—it is deeply intertwined with broader political crises, democratic movements, and the persistence of authoritarian rule across the region.

The movement for indigenous rights reflects a larger call for political reform, particularly in states under authoritarian control such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, China, and Vietnam. Other countries, like Thailand, are only nominally democratic, while India and the Philippines show growing trends toward authoritarianism. In challenging entrenched state power, the movement of Indigenous Peoples aligns with the wider struggle for democracy and justice in Asia.

THE RIGHT TO SELF-GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Indigenous Peoples envision self-governance and sovereignty over their lands, territories, and resources. Yet, this vision cannot be realized in isolation. The broader political landscape in Asia—marked by military repression, fragile democracies, and rigid centralized governance—poses major barriers to self-governance. From Myanmar's military junta to Laos's tight control over indigenous communities; the challenges are part of a wider pattern of state dominance and suppression that has failed to build democratic institutions.

Indigenous Peoples of Asia are many peoples. They have their own distinct language, culture, customary laws and social and political institutions that are very different from those of the dominant people in their respective countries. While we find an enormous diversity among Indigenous Peoples, collectively, their common struggle has always been to attain the right to self-governance.

The early autonomous indigenous communities were the first self-governing polities prior to the formation

of nation states. These communities practiced forms of self-governance that were organically developed, and negotiated, within a strong village or community as its foundation.

In such customary governance systems, the primary authority for the governance resided in the community itself. It follows, therefore, that the ownership and control of their customary lands, territories and resources was also under customary governance. The primary purpose of governance was to ensure the well-being of the community of humans and non-human beings within their territories.

Across the world, Indigenous Peoples have been colonized. It makes little difference whether they were forced to live in countries created and ruled by the descendants of settled colonialists from overseas. Or like in Asia, in countries created after the colonizers had left and that are now ruled by the elites of dominant native ethnic groups. Indigenous Peoples in Asia have largely been subjected to internal colonialism. What all Indigenous Peoples have in common is the experience of discrimination, dispossession, and disempowerment that follows colonization, and above all: the loss of self-governance.

Many indigenous communities have been forcefully relocated, their land taken away, their forests destroyed, their mountains mined, and their valleys dammed and flooded. Children are forced into schools where none of their languages are spoken, where none of their knowledge and values are taught. And they are all forced to live under governments that are not their own, in which they can hardly participate, and on which they have no influence.

Therefore, decolonization, including that of the mind, is a necessary step to create space for re-acquiring old visions, worldviews, value systems and practices, which are the foundation of Indigenous Peoples' self-governance. This will enable Indigenous Peoples to rebuild, recover and restore consensual social and

political order, and free institutions.

The pursuit of self-governance in Asia requires a process of democratization and democracy. The state is required to revisit its institutional architecture for accommodating and protecting the right to self-governance of Indigenous Peoples. This is central to Indigenous Peoples' struggle, as it will enable them to grow individually and as communities in a self-determined manner. As such, the vision and mission of Indigenous Peoples has always been grounded in self-governance.

DECOLONIZATION AMIDST POLITICAL UPHEAVAL

Indigenous Peoples' movement in Asia is fundamentally about decolonization—challenging historical and present-day systems that suppress indigenous governance and autonomy.

Indigenous governance is more than a cultural right—it is about expanding democratic space in authoritarian regimes. Indigenous governance structures have historically functioned as democratic systems, with collective decision-making, participatory leadership, and consensus-based dispute resolution. However, colonial and post-colonial states have undermined these structures, replacing them with governance models that prioritize state control. For example, in Northeast India, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides limited autonomy to District Councils, yet state encroachment continues

to undermine their authority. Such autonomies, including seeking state recognition of their governance systems, carries risks. Governments often attempt to co-opt indigenous institutions by absorbing them into state governance structures in ways that dilute their autonomy. It is for this reason that indigenous movement revolves around organizing communities for reclaiming self-governance as a countermeasure to these suppressive structures, ensuring that governance models reflect indigenous worldviews and priorities.

Further, state-driven education systems and national histories often erase indigenous identities, languages, and historical narratives. For instance, among Asian countries such as in Thailand and Cambodia, indigenous languages and histories are frequently excluded from school curricula, reinforcing the dominance of the national culture. As a response, indigenous movements are documenting their oral histories, promote indigenous language education, and establish indigenous-led knowledge-sharing networks. Education is a key battleground for cultural survival, and indigenous scholars and activists are leading initiatives to decolonize curricula, integrate indigenous epistemologies, and empower future generations with knowledge of their heritage and governance traditions.

On another account, many governments frame indigenous governance as a separatist threat, as seen in Myanmar, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. Indigenous movements challenge these narratives by engaging with UN mechanisms to highlight their governance as a democratic

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ADN ASIA DEMOCRACY NETWORK

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right rather than a rebellion against the state. The criminalization of indigenous activism, particularly through anti-terrorism laws and militarized responses, reflects a broader pattern of state repression aimed at maintaining centralized control. However, indigenous communities continue to resist through advocacy, legal battles, and solidarity campaigns.

STRENGTHENING SELF-GOVERNANCE AND REPRESENTATION

Indigenous Peoples remain politically marginalized in Asia, with systemic barriers limiting their participation. Indigenous Peoples' movements, as part of their strategic effort, has been addressing this disparity through advocacy, leadership development, and network-building efforts.

In the vast majority of the countries, indigenous candidates have historically struggled to secure legislative or parliamentary seats due to systemic electoral disadvantages. Several indigenous organizations—in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, India and Nepal—collaborate with indigenous advocacy groups to push for electoral reforms that ensure fair representation. Additionally, regional organizations like AIPP, through platforms like the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), raises awareness of indigenous political exclusion and demands structural changes.

Other methods are also adopted e.g., in mainland India, local self-governance models are advocated for as an alternative to over-centralized state power. In Myanmar, indigenous groups have long advocated for federalism as a solution to ethnic conflicts and military domination. Indigenous organizations work with and supports these efforts by facilitating dialogues among indigenous leaders, legal experts, and policymakers to design governance structures that uphold indigenous sovereignty while maintaining national cohesion.

Further, participation in international advocacy has played a crucial role in supporting indigenous self-governance. UN mechanisms, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

(UNDRIP) and ILO Convention 169, provide frameworks for pushing governments to recognize indigenous sovereignty. In Nepal, indigenous movements leveraged ILO Convention 169 to push for constitutional recognition of their rights. Similarly, in Malaysia, indigenous groups used international advocacy to challenge land-grabbing policies. Further, a successful model can be seen in the Philippines' Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), which, despite its shortcomings, provides a legal basis for Indigenous Peoples to exercise control over their ancestral domains. These cases illustrate how indigenous movements can strategically engage with international institutions to strengthen their demands.

DEFENDING LAND AND TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY

Land dispossession is not only an indigenous issue—it is a tool of authoritarian control used to suppress resistance and consolidate state power. Across Asia, governments and state-backed corporations engage in large-scale land grabs, often with legal and military backing. Indigenous movements counter these threats through legal advocacy, community mobilization, and economic alternatives.

Indigenous organizations and regional organizations like AIPP work with international mechanisms such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to pressure governments into recognizing indigenous land tenure. In Cambodia, AIPP has supported indigenous communities in filing legal cases against illegal land grabs by agribusiness corporations. These efforts have resulted in landmark rulings that reinforce indigenous land claims, though enforcement remains a challenge.

As a strategy, grassroots mobilization is a critical defense against land dispossession. AIPP and indigenous organizations engage with indigenous communities in organizing protests, filing legal challenges, and employing direct action strategies. In several countries, like in the Philippines, Indonesia and Nepal, indigenous groups have successfully stalled destructive mega development projects through coordinated resistance, despite facing threats from

paramilitary forces.

Many state-led development projects, such as hydroelectric dams and monoculture plantations, are justified under the guise of economic progress but result in environmental destruction and displacement of indigenous communities. Indigenous organizations and AIPP promote indigenous-led conservation efforts as a sustainable alternative. In several countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, indigenous communities have pioneered community forest management and conservation models that demonstrate the ecological, cultural, spiritual and economic benefits of indigenous stewardship. By documenting and promoting these models, indigenous communities challenge the prevailing notion that state-driven development and technocratic solutions are the only viable path to economic growth and sustainability.

The ultimate goal of indigenous communities in Asia is to secure and protect their territorial sovereignty as traditional inhabitants and guardians. It is also to restore and nurture their spiritual connections with their lands and territories as stewards of a healthy planet.

Indigenous movements' engagement in decolonization and governance reclamation is a vital response to the political upheavals facing Indigenous Peoples in Asia. By reviving indigenous knowledge systems, advocating for self-governance, and defending land and territorial rights, indigenous communities are being empowered to resist state suppression and assert their territorial sovereignty.

CONNECTING INDIGENOUS STRUGGLES TO WIDER POLITICAL REFORM

As Asia experiences increasing democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism, indigenous self-governance becomes increasingly urgent. Their struggle is not isolated; it is part of a broader movement for political reform, human rights, and resistance against centralized state control. Indigenous governance offers a viable and democratic alternative to the often exclusionary and oppressive systems imposed by nation-states in Asia.

KEY REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS ILLUSTRATE THESE CONNECTIONS:

Myanmar: Myanmar's post-coup landscape

remains deeply unstable, with democracy appearing increasingly elusive. Since the military seized power in February 2021, ousting the civilian government, the country has descended into widespread conflict. Pro-democracy forces, including the National Unity Government (NUG) and armed resistance groups, have mounted an unprecedented challenge to military rule, gaining control of significant territories. However, the junta retains power in key urban areas and continues brutal crackdowns, leading to thousands of deaths and mass displacement. Indigenous communities are trapped in the conflict between the military junta and pro-democracy forces.

While the junta has proposed elections, these are widely seen as illegitimate, aimed at consolidating military dominance rather than restoring democracy. International responses have been mixed; Western nations impose sanctions, while China, Russia and India provide crucial support to the military. ASEAN's diplomatic efforts remain ineffective. The prospects for democracy depend on whether resistance forces can sustain momentum, form a united front, and gain broader international backing.

Bangladesh: The democratic transition in Bangladesh is troubled with challenges as the interim government, led by Muhammad Yunus, grapples with political instability, economic hardship, and regional tensions. While the downfall of Sheikh Hasina's 15-year regime created an opportunity for reform, the initial euphoria has faded, with Yunus facing mounting pressure to deliver. Political factions, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), student groups, and Islamist parties, are jostling for influence ahead of elections scheduled between December 2025 and June 2026. And Indigenous Peoples's voices are getting swallowed in the engulfing turmoil. The uncertainty surrounding electoral processes and governance reforms threatens to derail the transition.

Economically, Bangladesh struggles with inflation, power shortages, and corruption. Yunus has implemented financial reforms, but business confidence remains low. The Rohingya refugee crisis and instability along the Myanmar border add to the burden. Additionally, Bangladesh's strained ties with India—previously a staunch supporter of Hasina—exacerbate domestic unrest, particularly as anti-Indian sentiment grows.

International actors, especially the EU, see Bangladesh's transition as a strategic opportunity and

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are urged to support governance reforms, economic stability, and election monitoring. However, persistent factionalism and external pressures could hinder long-term democratic consolidation. Without broad political consensus and effective governance, Bangladesh risks slipping back into authoritarian rule or prolonged instability.

Northeast India: The Government of India (GOI) has long engaged in peace talks to address ethnic conflicts and political rights in Northeast India, a region plagued by organized armed resistance, ethnic tensions, and struggles for self-governance. Various ethnic groups—including the Nagas, Assamese, Bodos, Meiteis, and Kukis—have taken up arms at different times, citing political marginalization, economic neglect, and unresolved historical and political issues.

While peace negotiations with indigenous armed groups could contribute to democratization of the country, the GOI's approach has been marked by a mix of political talks, military operations, and economic incentives—often fostering open corruption. One of the most significant efforts, the Naga peace process, has been ongoing since 1997. Despite the signing of a Framework Agreement in 2015, a political solution remains elusive, and the process is nearly collapsing.

Deep-seated ethnic rivalries and intermittent violence have further hindered peace efforts. The GOI's inconsistent policies, reliance on temporary ceasefires, and failure to provide lasting political solutions have drawn criticism. The eruption of intense conflict between the Zo-Kuki and Meitei communities in May 2023 has further deepened the crisis, complicating ongoing peace talks. True peace depends on addressing unresolved political problems, governance failures, and inter-ethnic trust with a vision for genuine political reform and democratization.

Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China: One-party rule in these states severely limits political activism, leaving little room for indigenous advocacy or to usher in democracy. The suppression of indigenous voices is symptomatic of the broader suppression of civil society and dissent, necessitating stronger transnational and

international intervention and solidarity.

THE WAY FORWARD

In the context of the prevailing political trends and developments, AIPP as a regional organization of indigenous movements have taken the leadership role in consolidating indigenous movement for strengthening indigenous self-governance and connecting with democracy movement in Asia. In doing this, AIPP has focused on three important pillars for realizing indigenous self-governance and democratization in Asia.

1. Mutual Learning and Empowerment

The Centres of Excellence in Village Governance (CoE-VG) initiative builds upon AIPP's Indigenous Peoples' Self-Government and Democracy course. It focuses on leadership capacity building, community mobilization, and Indigenous Community Protocols (led by PACOS Trust). Through this initiative, AIPP partners with indigenous communities to recognize and promote self-governing communities, strengthening their customary institutions as pillars of the broader indigenous self-governance and democracy movement.

AIPP facilitates lateral learning among indigenous communities, enabling them to co-develop solutions to shared challenges. The initiative supports communities in defining and claiming their right to self-government, creating a 'snowball effect' that encourages others to follow suit. Through this initiative, the COE-VG communities are reviving their governance and knowledge systems, restoring spiritual connections with their lands and territories, and building their capacities to be good Guardians and Stewards. Elders are transferring knowledge and youth are producing new insights and knowledge, and women are participating as active leaders in the community.

2. Strengthening Leadership

The AIPP School of Participation (ASP) develops second-line indigenous leadership by equipping youth leaders with knowledge and practical skills on indigenous governance systems, land stewardship,

and democratic engagement. Targeting members of the Asia Indigenous Youth Platform (AIYP) and other networks, ASP ensures that future indigenous leaders can engage with states from positions of strength.

ASP's course focuses on revitalizing indigenous governance values and fostering community fellowship through participatory, reciprocal learning. It aims to establish a strong network of indigenous scholar-activists and youth leaders committed to long-term territorial self-governance, conservation, and climate action.

3. Strengthening the Indigenous Peoples' Movement in Asia

For over three decades, AIPP has built a strong, integrated Indigenous Peoples' movement in Asia, expanding its membership and establishing networks in areas such as indigenous knowledge, media, human rights, women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

This approach ensures that AIPP members and networks remain central to its strategic direction and actions at local, regional, and global levels.

AIPP continues to grow by strengthening its membership and networks through capacity-building, fostering active participation, and decentralizing leadership. At the same time, it has intensified efforts to connect indigenous movements with pro-democracy actors, reinforcing solidarity and mobilization at the country and regional level. This approach not only strengthens indigenous political engagement but also contributes to the broader struggle for self-governance and democratization across Asia.

By reclaiming governance and defending their land and territorial rights, Indigenous Peoples resist state suppression and assert their sovereignty. Their movement not only strengthens indigenous resilience but also plays a crucial role in shaping a more democratic and just Asia.

Interwoven Struggles: LGBTQIAN+ Rights and the Pro-Democracy Movement in Southeast Asia

By **NICA DUMLAO**

For the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC)

As pro-democracy movements consolidate across Southeast Asia, the fight for LGBTQIAN+ rights has become an essential facet of efforts to expand civic spaces and strengthen human rights advocacy. Democracy and LGBTQIAN+ rights are deeply interconnected: when democracy falters, LGBTQIAN+ communities often bear the brunt of repression. Authoritarian regimes amplify silencing mechanisms, homophobia, and transphobia, further marginalizing queer voices. This reality highlights the dual role of LGBTQIAN+ activists as both beneficiaries of democratic freedoms and pivotal contributors to the struggle for justice and equality.

In the face of rising authoritarianism, the urgency of solidarity between LGBTQIAN+ advocacy and broader civil society movements has never been clearer. We see a trend of Asian governments escalating censure of LGBTQIAN+ related issues, with some critical politicians warning against the spread of “cultural wars” from the West into Asia. This makes advocacies to enable greater inclusion of LGBTQIAN+ in crucial democratic processes and representation in Asia more difficult. Limitations in resources has forced a siloed approach to promoting democratizations, which further marginalized LGBTQIAN+ advocacies, and sidelined the voices of their activists in crucial conversations on political participation.

Organizations like the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC) have been at the forefront of this intersection, embedding democratic values into the heart of LGBTQIAN+ activism. Their work underscores the principle that advancing human rights for all is vital to preserving and expanding democratic spaces. Our commitment to democracy is not abstract; it is a foundational pillar of the organization’s structure and mission. From its inception, democracy has served as a guiding principle in shaping ASC’s framework,

ensuring that LGBTQIAN+ voices are amplified within the pro-democracy movement. By fostering inclusive leadership and advocating for policies that uphold human rights, ASC empowers individuals to challenge oppression and work toward a future where democracy and LGBTQIAN+ rights thrive hand in hand.

DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS: LGBTQIAN+ RIGHTS IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS

Across Southeast Asia, democratic principles are increasingly under threat, and the plight of LGBTQIAN+ communities in authoritarian regimes lays bare the growing erosion of civic freedoms. As civic spaces shrink and human rights defenders are systematically targeted, LGBTQIAN+ advocates face heightened risks of criminalization, violence, and persecution for their efforts to claim fundamental rights and recognition. According to [Civicus Monitor 2024](#), civic space in Southeast Asia continue to be mostly restrictive, which suggests discussions on inclusion and participation of LGBTQIAN+ in political discourses to be mostly repressed.

Cambodia serves as a stark illustration of this intersection between LGBTQIAN+ rights and political repression. On July 23, 2024, two LGBTQIAN+ activists, Srun Srorn and Pheung Sophea, both closely connected to ASC, [were arrested after hosting a Facebook Live discussion](#) on issues concerning the [Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam development triangle](#). The video, which raised concerns about government policies in the region, provoked the ire of authorities, resulting in their imprisonment. Their arrests exemplify the dangers faced by activists in Cambodia, where dissenting voices and civil society actors are increasingly silenced through state-led persecution.

The situation in Myanmar is equally dire. Since the 2021 military coup, LGBTQIAN+ communities have become particularly vulnerable to the junta’s draconian policies. Grassroots organizations like Queers of Burma Alternative (QBA) have worked tirelessly to amplify the voices of LGBTQIAN+ activists. However, the coup deeply disrupted their efforts, with members participating in nonviolent demonstrations for democracy and human rights often facing imprisonment, displacement, and brutal repression by the military.

Recently, QBA released a [report](#) highlighting the compounded struggles faced by Myanmar’s LGBTQIAN+ community under the recently enacted Conscription Law. This law mandates young adults to serve in the military for two to five years, with harsh penalties for evasion. For LGBTQIAN+ individuals, this policy is particularly oppressive, as pervasive homophobia and transphobia within both society and the military expose them to heightened risks of discrimination, violence, and exploitation.

The military junta’s deliberate targeting of LGBTQIAN+ individuals reflects its perception of a connection between LGBTQIAN+ advocacy and the pro-democracy movement. In a [statement](#) delivered by ASC at the UN Human Rights Council’s 54th Session on September 11, 2023, the organization expressed grave concern over the junta’s systematic identification and arrest of LGBTQIAN+ individuals. Activists in custody have reportedly faced sexual violence, including harassment, genital harm, and rape by military personnel. ASC called on the Council to enhance mechanisms for engaging with Myanmar’s LGBTQIAN+ human rights defenders and urged UN agencies and humanitarian actors to adopt survivor-centered approaches, ensuring the inclusion of LGBTQIAN+ individuals in crisis responses while prioritizing their rights and well-being.

These repressive contexts in Cambodia and Myanmar underscore the critical need for regional and international solidarity in defending LGBTQIAN+ rights as integral to the broader struggle for democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia. While the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQIAN+ individuals have grown in the recent years, some countries in the region continue to criminalize same-sex relations and various forms of gender expression. Brunei, Malaysia and some parts of Indonesia continue to impose severe and degrading punishments for same-sex acts and relations such as caning and death by stoning.

The lack of LGBTQIAN+ representation in political decision-making bodies suffocates the promotion of equal protection rights in Southeast Asia. In 2024, Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to recognize same-sex marriage after the Thai Senate approved the measure. Despite popular clamor in Thailand for same-sex rights, the struggle to pass the law lasted for decades due to a lack of LGBTQIAN+ representation in a military dominated parliament. Similar situation can be observed in Vietnam, where at least 65% of the citizens favor allowing same-sex couples to marry, according to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey. In the Philippines, the national government is yet to pass an anti-discrimination bill on the basis of gender identity and expression even after two decades of debate in congress.

MOBILIZING LEADERSHIP: STRENGTHENING LGBTQIAN+ LEADERSHIP FOR MOVEMENT-BUILDING

Building leadership within the LGBTQIAN+ community is essential for sustaining pro-democracy and human rights movements. By equipping activists with the skills necessary to navigate the complex political landscapes of their respective countries, LGBTQIAN+ leaders can help expand democratic space and drive transformative change.

Leadership development programs for LGBTQIAN+ activists are pivotal in fostering a generation of queer leaders who not only advocate for LGBTQIAN+ rights but also contribute to broader human rights and democracy initiatives. A key example of this is the [ASEAN Queer Leadership Week](#), an initiative that brings together LGBTQIAN+ leaders from across Southeast Asia to enhance their advocacy, governance, and intersectional leadership skills. These programs focus on capacity-building, ensuring queer leaders are better positioned to engage in diverse movements such as climate justice, labor rights, disability rights, and pro-democracy struggles, particularly in countries with challenging democratic contexts like Myanmar, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. By promoting cross-movement and intersectional praxis, these efforts are crucial for transformative change.

The [Free To Be Me Philippines](#) project also plays a significant role in nurturing leadership within the country’s LGBTQIAN+ community. One of its flagship

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initiatives, [the Building Strong and Inclusive Queer Movement \(BASIQ\) webinar series](#), held from January to March 2024, addressed key issues such as intersectionality, intersex issues, and the relationship between disability and LGBTQIA+ identity. These sessions fostered deeper understanding of under-discussed issues and encouraged dialogue and mutual support among activists.

Additionally, the [leadership camp](#) organized by ASC and Free To Be Me Philippines offer invaluable opportunities for activists to develop practical skills in governance, leadership, and feedback, essential for their sustainability within the broader civil society movement. These camps emphasize a “gradual release of responsibility” model, allowing participants to progressively take on greater roles in designing and facilitating sessions. This approach ensures that leaders are not only trained but also empowered to take ownership of their own capacity development and lead within their communities and organizations.

EXPANDING CIVIC SPACE: LGBTQIAN+ ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY FOR EXPANDING HUMAN RIGHTS

The fight to expand civic space lies at the heart of LGBTQIAN+ activism across Southeast Asia. For marginalized communities, such as LGBTQIAN+ individuals, activism not only amplifies silenced voices but also serves as a critical mechanism for advancing human rights and resisting oppression. Through its programs, ASC has significantly contributed to shaping regional and international advocacy efforts, bridging grassroots movements with broader democratic and human rights agendas.

One flagship initiative in this area is the [ASEAN Queer Advocacy Week](#), launched in 2016. This platform connects LGBTQIAN+ activists from across the region with diplomatic missions, which play a pivotal role in influencing the ASEAN human rights agenda. During the 2024 edition, its fourth iteration, over 20 activists from various Southeast Asian countries gathered to share firsthand accounts of the

state of LGBTQIAN+ rights in their communities. These direct engagements urged diplomatic missions to take stronger stances on LGBTQIAN+ issues and use their influence to push for inclusivity and equality across ASEAN. By fostering these interactions, ASEAN Advocacy Week helps narrow the gap between grassroots movements and international diplomatic mechanisms, ensuring that LGBTQIAN+ voices resonate on the global stage.

Equally essential to expanding civic space are cultural and thought leadership platforms that empower LGBTQIAN+ communities to resist oppression and imagine more inclusive futures. One such initiative is the [Southeast Asia Queer Cultural Festival](#), launched in 2021 and now in its second edition. This festival is a convergence of arts, culture, and activism, where music, theater, visual arts, and literature are harnessed to challenge societal biases and celebrate queer resilience. The festival is grounded in a vital call:

“Too often, modern nation-states in Southeast Asia have failed their peoples, especially those on the margins. Governments have wielded power to oppress rather than protect, leaving LGBTQIAN+ individuals to navigate ever-shrinking civic spaces amid ongoing discrimination. In response, we call upon fellow queers to imagine new nations and communities—societies that sustain us and celebrate our existence. What histories can we share about how we thrived in the past? What collectives do we build in the present? And how can queer activists work toward a safer, more sustainable future? What queer utopias can artists dream up to inspire our current realities?”

”

The festival fosters community resilience and envisions societies that uphold dignity, inclusivity, and sustainability. By weaving together Southeast Asia’s diverse queer narratives, it highlights identities that transcend borders and shatter biases, celebrating the power of collective imagination to inspire democratic spaces and a more caring future.

Another crucial platform for thought leadership is the [ASEAN Queer Imaginings](#), which creates space for LGBTQIAN+ thinkers to develop groundbreaking strategies for advocacy. Since the launch of its first edition in 2021, this initiative has served as a catalyst for innovative approaches to LGBTQIAN+ activism. The [second edition](#), launched in 2023 and translated into Thai and Khmer, featured contributions from more than 20 LGBTQIAN+ thought leaders across the region. By fostering discourse on democracy, human rights, and LGBTQIAN+ rights, the report ensures that the movement remains dynamic and adaptable amidst shifting political landscapes. Through ASEAN Queer Imaginings, LGBTQIAN+ continue to guide the movement’s evolution, empowering LGBTQIAN+ communities to lead in reimagining activism and advancing the fight for equality.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate the multifaceted approach of ASC in expanding civic space—bridging grassroots activism with diplomatic advocacy, celebrating the power of cultural resistance,

and cultivating thought leadership to shape the future of LGBTQIAN+ rights in Southeast Asia.

EXPANDING DEMOCRATIC HORIZONS THROUGH LGBTQIAN+ ACTIVISM

As Southeast Asia navigates a tumultuous political landscape, the intersection of LGBTQIAN+ rights and democracy becomes increasingly apparent. The role of LGBTQIAN+ activists in advancing both human rights and democratic values is indispensable. Through leadership development, cultural activism, and advocacy for expanded civic space, LGBTQIAN+ movements continue to challenge authoritarianism, amplify marginalized voices, and contribute to the ongoing struggle for democracy.

Investing in leadership development programs and deepening engagement with both LGBTQIAN+ communities and broader civil society is essential for strengthening these movements. By nurturing the next generation of leaders and fostering collaboration across sectors, we can ensure that the fight for LGBTQIAN+ rights is not only sustained but also expanded to encompass all marginalized groups.

It is only through strengthening these movements and deepening solidarity between LGBTQIAN+ advocates and the broader civil society that we can hope to secure a future where human rights, dignity, and freedom are accessible to all.



International Migration and the Democratic Rights of Asian Migrant Workers – Reflections from 2024

By C S AKHIL

For Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)

In 2024, Asia and the Pacific continued to be at the forefront of global migration trends, with the region hosting 58 percent of the world's population and accounting for nearly one-third of all international migrants (UN DESA, 2024). Migration in this region is largely intra-regional, driven by a combination of factors, including economic aspirations, family support, environmental changes, conflicts, and entrenched inequalities. While migration can offer improved opportunities, it also exposes migrants to various risks, such as exploitation, discrimination, and social exclusion.

The movement of people across borders has significant social, economic, and demographic implications, benefiting both origin and destination countries. However, realizing the full potential of migration for development requires protecting the rights of migrants and recognizing their contributions. This calls for governance frameworks that are human-centered and grounded in human rights principles.

Civil society has played a pivotal role in this effort. Across Asia, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in advocating for migrant rights, providing essential services, and holding governments accountable for the creation of just and inclusive migration policies. Their work underscores the importance of involving all sectors of society, ensuring that migration governance is not solely a matter of state policy but a shared responsibility among communities, institutions, and governments.

The relationship between migration and democracy is crucial in this context. Democratic governance provides the framework for inclusive, transparent, and accountable migration policies. Simultaneously, civil society, particularly through the advocacy of groups like Migrant Forum in Asia

(MFA), ensures that migrants' voices are heard, and their rights are protected. This report examines how democratic values, civil society engagement, and the perspectives of MFA partners have contributed to enhancing migration governance in Asia, fostering more inclusive and equitable outcomes for all.

I. CHALLENGES TO MIGRANTS' DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

International migration raises critical questions about the democratic rights of migrant workers, particularly in the Asian region. Ideally, migrants should have access to fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, equality before the law, and participation in political processes, even if they are not citizens of their host countries. However, these rights are often contested due to national sovereignty and legal restrictions. Migrants frequently face significant barriers to justice, inclusion, and participation, which reinforce their vulnerabilities throughout their migration journeys.

Access to Justice remains a major challenge for migrant workers, especially in destination countries. Legal systems often limit access to redressal mechanisms, with migrant workers' ability to seek justice determined by factors such as their documentation status, type of employment, and gender. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, as many workers were repatriated without resolving issues of unpaid wages and compensation. Detained and deported workers were particularly affected as pandemic-related delays hindered proper resolution of their cases. Civil society reports indicated that countries of origin (COO) missions, already burdened with repatriation efforts, failed to provide adequate legal aid for these workers (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

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Inclusion is another area where migrant workers are marginalized. Despite long-term residence in host countries, they are often perceived as “temporary” and remain excluded from the broader societal fabric. This exclusion is especially pronounced among female domestic workers, whose working and living conditions are largely dependent on employers, with limited avenues for redressal. In many countries of destination, migrant workers are denied the freedom to associate or join trade unions, which limits their ability to advocate for their rights. This exclusion was starkly visible during the pandemic when migrant workers were often left out of government support schemes (ILO, 2021).

Participation in political and governance processes is essential for ensuring the democratic rights of migrant workers. However, in many countries, especially in the Gulf region, migrant workers' mobility and labor conditions are governed by contracts that restrict their autonomy. In countries of origin, migrants are rarely granted the right to participate in elections or governance processes, depriving them of a voice in their home country's democratic systems. The right to vote and engage in civic participation is crucial for improving the quality of democratic processes, yet the extent of participation warranted for migrant workers remains an ongoing debate (Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2022).

Disaggregated Data on migrant workers is often incomplete or not collected by migrant status, which hampers progress toward addressing these issues. This lack of visibility obscures a full understanding of their needs and limits accountability from governments and service providers (UN DESA, 2021). Civil society organizations that attempt to fill these gaps face resource and capacity constraints, further complicating efforts to provide tailored support to migrants.

The lack of social protection for migrant workers, particularly the absence of portability for social security benefits, further exacerbates their vulnerabilities. In many host countries, migrants are denied access to basic services, including healthcare,

social security, and pensions. This lack of protection affects their quality of life in the host country and impacts their ability to reintegrate with dignity upon returning to their COO (ILO, 2022). Forceful deportations also violate migrants' basic rights and challenge their right to mobility, often leaving them in precarious situations where they face further marginalization (Amnesty International, 2020).

Together, the denial of democratic rights perpetuates the vulnerabilities of migrants throughout their journeys. Without concerted efforts from governments, civil society, and international organizations, the discourse around migrant rights remains stagnant. A meaningful approach requires greater cooperation to ensure justice, inclusion, participation, and protection for migrant workers.

II. KEY STAKEHOLDER INTERVENTIONS IN 2024

Multilateral Efforts. In 2024, ASEAN finalized its Comprehensive Agreement on Migrant Workers' Rights, aimed at improving working conditions, promoting fair recruitment practices, and establishing stronger mechanisms to address workplace abuses. This agreement builds on the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, pushing for more binding and accountable enforcement. Efforts also continued to address human trafficking and refugee crises, particularly involving the Rohingya population. Coordinated initiatives between Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia focused on managing refugee influxes and providing humanitarian aid, while combating cross-border trafficking networks.

In South Asia, the Colombo Process, also known as the Regional Consultative Process on the Management of Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia, concentrated on strengthening dialogue with other regional bodies, such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD), to enhance regional cooperation on migration issues. Additionally, the forum committed to conducting a comprehensive regional review of the Global

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By C S AKHIL

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Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) to better align regional efforts with global migration frameworks.

Bilateral Initiatives. India renewed and strengthened its bilateral agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to protect and improve the welfare of Indian expatriates. These agreements focused on labor rights, better living conditions, and streamlined repatriation processes for distressed workers. Special emphasis was placed on addressing wage theft and human trafficking in vulnerable sectors, such as domestic work and construction. Similarly, Bangladesh renewed labor agreements with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, ensuring safe migration and preventing human trafficking. These agreements also included enhanced pre-departure training, financial literacy programs, and improved mechanisms for addressing labor violations through diplomatic channels.

On May 2, 2024, the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) in the Philippines announced a pilot project recruiting 100 Filipino caregivers under the Employment Permit System (EPS) between the Philippines and South Korea. This project is designed to provide caregiving assistance to eligible Korean households, including those with infants, young children, pregnant women, single parents, or working couples.

Country-Level Interventions. In 2024, Japan expanded its Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and Specified Skilled Worker Program, attracting more workers from Southeast Asia. To address labor shortages in aging industries, Japan signed agreements with Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines to increase the number of skilled and semi-skilled workers in healthcare, construction, and manufacturing sectors. Similarly, Taiwan introduced reforms aimed at improving the rights of Southeast Asian domestic workers, focusing on better rest periods, enhanced accommodation standards, and addressing the issue of debt bondage often tied to recruitment agencies.

India also introduced the e-Migrate V2.0 web portal

and mobile app to streamline overseas employment processes for Indian workers. This platform allows for easy registration, recruitment tracking, and access to authorized employers, while also offering a grievance redressal mechanism for Indian workers abroad.

Civil Society Interventions. In 2024, civil society organizations across Asia played a crucial role in advocating for migrant rights, addressing key issues such as wage theft, exploitation, and the lack of labor protections. One of the most prominent initiatives was the Wage Theft Campaign, launched in collaboration with South Asian organizations and international human rights groups. This campaign aimed to address wage theft in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where many migrant workers were denied their rightful wages or faced unjust deductions.

Other notable efforts included the Safe Migration initiatives in Bangladesh and Nepal, which focused on educating potential migrants about safe migration practices and the risks of irregular migration. These initiatives, alongside campaigns that addressed human trafficking, climate-induced migration, and provided legal aid for migrant workers in the GCC, highlighted the critical role of civil society in filling the gaps left by inadequate or insufficient government policies.

In 2024, Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) and its partners were instrumental in advocating for the rights of migrant workers across the region, particularly focusing on labor conditions, social justice, and legal protections. MFA, a regional network of non-governmental organizations, associations, and trade unions, worked closely with its partners to launch campaigns, carry out research initiatives, and provide direct support to migrant workers. One of its key initiatives was the Wage Theft Campaign, which continued to tackle the issue of wage theft, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. MFA and its partners expanded the campaign to hold employers accountable in Gulf and Asian countries for withholding wages from laid-off workers.

The Justice for Migrant Domestic Workers campaign was another significant effort led by MFA, advocating for the protection of migrant domestic workers who are often excluded from labor laws. This campaign actively pushed for the ratification of ILO Convention 189 in more Asian countries, which would extend greater protections to domestic workers.

MFA and its partners also focused on pre-departure and post-arrival orientation programs to educate migrants about their rights and how to avoid exploitation. These programs, spearheaded by partners in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Center for Migrant Advocacy (Philippines), provided essential support to migrant workers, including legal assistance and cultural integration. Additionally, MFA actively advocated for the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). In collaboration with its partners, MFA promoted ethical recruitment practices, the elimination of recruitment fees, and the fair treatment of migrants.

In response to emerging challenges, MFA and its partners launched initiatives like the “Zero Recruitment Fee for Migrants” campaign, targeting unethical recruitment practices in countries such as Nepal and the Philippines. They also addressed the growing issue of climate-induced migration, collaborating with various organizations to advocate for legal protections for individuals displaced by climate change.

MFA’s legal advocacy for detained migrants was another notable effort in 2024, focusing on the inhumane conditions faced by migrants in detention centers. Ensuring free legal aid and access to justice was a key objective of MFA, which prioritized the need for comprehensive social protection as a solution to migrant vulnerabilities. MFA underscored this by releasing a statement during the International Migrants Day celebrations. These campaigns and initiatives exemplify MFA’s ongoing commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of migrant workers across Asia.

III. SOME POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

While the region still faces significant headwinds to the promotion of migrants’ rights, consolidated efforts by stakeholders have created significant progress in 2024. Positive developments on the

political participation of migrants were made this year, with many countries enabling greater avenues for political participation and representation. States have been revising electoral frameworks and utilizing technology to enable wider participation of migrant workers during elections. Through collective actions, we also saw some expansion on promotion of better labor practices and benefits, the implementation of amnesty programs as they relate to undocumented workers, and positive developments on wage justice for migrants. While these activities remained mostly on the periphery of mainstream political discussions, these were notable efforts aimed at increasing migrant participation and ensuring their rights are safeguarded.

INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF MIGRANTS: VOTING RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATION

Overseas Voting and Political Engagement.

During the 2024 midterm elections in the Philippines, overseas voting was a focal point, despite logistical challenges. The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and Filipino migrant groups worked together to boost overseas voter registration, which resulted in an increase in voter turnout among overseas workers. A major development for 2025 is the introduction of internet voting. COMELEC aims to enable up to three million Filipinos living abroad to participate in the upcoming midterm elections. As of now, more than 1.1 million Filipinos abroad have already registered. Political parties also recognized the growing influence of overseas Filipinos, strengthening their outreach to migrant voters and advocating for better labor protections in host countries. This initiative in the Philippines could potentially set a precedent for other origin countries to explore internet or online voting for their migrants.

India: Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Voting Rights Debate.

India in 2024 saw renewed political discussions about extending voting rights to Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), a long-debated issue. Despite being economically critical due to their substantial remittances, NRIs, especially those in the Gulf and Western countries, have had limited electoral participation, with proxy voting provisions passed but never fully implemented. The issue of NRI voting rights resurfaced during the 2024 general elections, as various advocacy groups

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called for absentee voting rights and increased NRI representation in the Indian Parliament.

Global Kerala Assembly (Loka Kerala Sabha).

Kerala's Loka Kerala Sabha (LKS) stands out as a unique democratic platform that fosters socio-political and economic integration between the Keralites abroad and their home state. The fourth LKS assembly, held in June 2024, saw representatives from 103 countries and 25 Indian states participate. Discussions during the assembly included important topics such as the Draft Emigration Bill 2021, recruitment practices, reintegration strategies, support for vulnerable migrants, and the evolving migration dynamics. Regional discussions were held to address issues concerning different parts of the world. While the LKS does not grant direct electoral representation, it is considered a powerful example of democratic engagement by a diaspora without formal voting rights.

Bangladesh: Calls for Political Recognition.

In Bangladesh, migrant workers, particularly in the Middle East, continued to advocate for greater political recognition in 2024. Despite their significant contributions to the economy through remittances, they lack a mechanism for absentee voting. Civil society groups have called for better representation and the inclusion of returnee migrants in local governance, pushing for policies to support labor rights and extend welfare programs for returning migrants.

Nepal: Advocacy for Absentee Voting Rights.

Nepalese workers, especially those in the Gulf and Malaysia, have been increasingly vocal about the need for absentee voting rights. In 2024, discussions progressed with the Nepalese government, with the Chief Election Commissioner confirming that a proposed Election Management Bill would potentially grant Nepalese abroad the ability to vote. Online voting and advance voting mechanisms are being explored, following the Supreme Court's directive

for the government to make legal arrangements for overseas Nepalis to vote. Advocacy efforts have also focused on ensuring better labor protections for Nepalese workers abroad.

Sri Lanka: Migrants' Right to Vote. Sri Lankan migrant worker groups have been advocating for political enfranchisement for years, and the 2024 presidential election reignited the debate. With more than 11% of the adult population unable to vote due to their overseas status, there is growing pressure on the government to allow migrant workers to participate in elections. While voting rights for overseas Sri Lankans remain a subject of discussion, the current political climate has yet to fully embrace such reforms.

MIGRANT RIGHTS IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES

Political participation for migrants in GCC countries remains highly restricted, but 2024 witnessed continued labor reforms to improve conditions for migrant workers, particularly in Qatar and Bahrain. Migrants from South and Southeast Asia play a critical role in key sectors such as construction and domestic work in the GCC.

- Bahrain introduced a provident fund for migrant workers in March 2024, which secures severance pay (end-of-service indemnities) by requiring employers to contribute to the fund. This move helps address the common issue of non-payment of benefits upon termination.
- Saudi Arabia introduced reforms in its social insurance program to improve employment flexibility between the public and private sectors, particularly for Saudi nationals.
- Qatar ratified a social insurance reform law in April 2024, extending coverage to private-sector workers and self-employed individuals while also increasing employer and employee contribution rates.

- Oman reshaped its social protection system with reforms extending maternity, paternity, sickness, and employment injury insurance in July 2024. These reforms are expected to address workplace challenges faced by both local and migrant workers.

Qatar has also led the way in engaging civil society in labor reforms. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Qatar's Ministry of Labour and the Migrant Forum Asia (MFA) in 2024, promoting access to justice for migrant workers and allowing for collaborative efforts to address labor issues. The MoU includes training programs and support mechanisms for migrants to lodge labor-related complaints.

MIGRANT AMNESTY PROGRAMS: UAE AND MALAYSIA

Amnesty programs were a key focus in 2024, with both the UAE and Malaysia implementing initiatives to address the status of undocumented migrants.

Malaysia's Migrant Repatriation Program (PRM) allowed undocumented foreign workers to return home without penalties between March and December 2024. Despite this, the program faced criticism for disproportionately targeting migrants while employers who contributed to workers' undocumented status remained unpunished.

The UAE extended its visa amnesty program, initially conceived for a month in September, through December 2024, allowing individuals with irregular immigration status to regularize their status or leave the country without penalties. The program was extended due to high demand from migrants seeking to regularize their status. This extension provided more opportunities for those facing legal obstacles or challenges in securing documentation on time. Unlike the Malaysian program, a key difference is that qualified individuals can settle their immigration status without paying fines. After regularizing their status, they can also apply for new residency, renew their visa, or change their status if they find a new job. This is an important provision that protects the basic human and labor rights of workers. However, similar to Malaysia's program, it offers only a temporary solution to the issue of undocumented workers and may not adequately address the root causes of irregular migration. Even though it is a short-term fix to a larger problem, the program is moving in the

right direction.

In contrast, South Korea launched a crackdown on undocumented migrants in 2024, leading to concerns about the disproportionate impact on low-wage workers and vulnerable communities, highlighting the complexities of migration enforcement.

Access to Justice: Wage Theft Campaigns

Access to justice remains a significant challenge for migrant workers globally. In 2024, migrant advocacy groups like Migrant Forum Asia (MFA) intensified efforts to address wage theft, a persistent problem for migrant workers. Many migrants lack the necessary legal knowledge to file complaints, face language barriers, and fear retaliation from employers. Campaigns in 2024 succeeded in bringing more attention to this issue, with governments beginning to acknowledge the need for justice mechanisms to address these violations.

The year 2024 saw incremental progress in securing the democratic rights of migrant workers across Asia, but significant gaps remain. Countries of origin and destination must work together to enhance justice, inclusion, participation, and protection for migrant workers. Through collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, and international organizations, the rights of migrant workers can be safeguarded, ensuring a more democratic environment for all.

IV. WAYS FORWARD

To safeguard the democratic rights of international migrants, stakeholders must advocate for more inclusive electoral participation for migrants and consider electoral representation in their countries of origin. Destination countries should not only provide the space for workers to participate in the electoral processes of their home countries but also ensure basic democratic rights such as unionization, bargaining power, access to justice, and social protection. Additionally, undocumented workers deserve to enjoy democratic rights, which are often denied during their migration journey.

From the perspective of civil society, the following recommendations can help enhance efforts to ensure democratic rights for international migrant workers:

- **Binding Bilateral Agreements (BLAs):** Stakeholders should push for BLAs that are more binding than Memoranda of Understanding

(MOUs). These agreements should include comprehensive provisions for the protection of migrants, ensuring fair wages, access to justice, and safeguarding basic labor and human rights.

- **Social Protection Access:** Ensure that all migrant workers, especially in destination countries, have access to social protection, including healthcare. Furthermore, it is important to guarantee the portability of social security benefits throughout all stages of migration.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:** Create an enabling environment that facilitates partnerships among civil society organizations, the private sector, government ministries, and migrant communities. These partnerships should focus on disseminating information about available social protection programs in both countries of origin and destination.
- **Grievance Redressal Platforms:** Establish platforms for coordination between government and non-government stakeholders to address the grievances of repatriated workers and returnees. These platforms should also facilitate bilateral frameworks that allow repatriated workers to claim unpaid wages.
- **Protection of Undocumented Migrants:** Strengthen registration programs for undocumented migrant workers to regularize their status, providing them with access to legal protections and ensuring their basic rights are upheld.
- **Stakeholder Mobilization:** Implement awareness programs that engage governments, recruitment agencies, employers, and migrant communities. These initiatives are essential to ensure all parties understand their roles and responsibilities in promoting safe and regular migration.
- **Voting Rights for Migrants:** Advocate for voting rights for migrants while they work in destination countries. Destination countries should facilitate this process by providing the necessary technical and logistical support to ensure migrant participation in the electoral process of their home countries.
- **Migrant Representation in Law-Making Bodies:** Advocate for migrant representation in legislative bodies, either through electoral processes or nominations. This representation is vital to ensuring that the voices of migrant workers are heard in policy-making decisions.

02

OUTLOOK ON FORTIFYING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS: PRESERVING THE SANCTITY OF THE BALLOT AND PEOPLE'S REPRESENTATION IN GOVERNMENT

Electoral Processes in Asia: Strengthening Citizen Observation and Fortifying Electoral Participation

By **BRIZZA ROSALES** (*Executive Director*) AND **MANJESH RANA** (*Senior Program Officer for International Election Observation*)

For Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)

I. INTRODUCTION

Electoral processes are the foundation of democracy, ensuring that political power remains accountable to the people. Free, fair, and competitive elections uphold democratic principles by fostering political participation, representation, and the rule of law. However, in 2024, elections worldwide face growing threats, including digital disinformation, political interference, and restrictions on electoral monitoring, which challenge their integrity and function. In several countries across Asia, these challenges have manifested through government-led suppression of opposition forces, co-optation of electoral institutions, and AI-driven disinformation campaigns that manipulate public perception.

At their core, electoral processes sustain democracy by providing legitimacy to governments, enabling peaceful transitions of power, and ensuring governance reflects the will of the people. When elections are conducted transparently and inclusively, they foster public trust in institutions, encourage civic engagement, and deter authoritarian tendencies. A well-functioning electoral system serves as a safeguard against political instability, acting as a structured and legal means for resolving political disputes and preventing violence. However, when elections are compromised through fraud, voter suppression, or undue influence over judicial and electoral institutions, political instability increases, resulting in disillusionment, declining political participation, and polarization.

Beyond procedural fairness, elections are critical for democratic consolidation, particularly in enabling marginalized groups to participate

in decision-making. Free and fair elections reinforce political pluralism by compelling political parties to engage with citizens, articulate policy alternatives, and strengthen civic education. However, electoral integrity is not merely about holding elections—it is about ensuring that they are meaningful, competitive, and inclusive. In countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar, elections have been held under conditions that effectively exclude opposition parties, limit media freedoms, and manipulate legal frameworks to favor ruling elites. Without credible elections, citizens lose faith in democratic institutions, creating conditions for authoritarian retrenchment and social unrest.

A major challenge in the 2024 election cycle is the growing influence of disinformation, which skews public opinion, influences voter decisions, and erodes confidence in democratic systems. Political actors and external groups have leveraged digital platforms to disseminate deceptive narratives, intensifying political divisions and discouraging voter participation. The use of AI-generated deepfakes, algorithm-driven falsehoods, and organized propaganda efforts has made it increasingly difficult for people to differentiate between truth and misinformation. In countries like Indonesia and India, AI-powered political advertising and manipulated media have been deployed to undermine opponents, sparking significant concerns over the integrity of the electoral process.

In parallel, political corruption continues to erode electoral fairness through vote-buying, suppression of opposition candidates, and manipulation of electoral oversight bodies. Rather than engaging

in outright electoral fraud, many regimes now employ ‘authoritarian legalism’—a strategy where governments use the judicial system to harass opposition leaders, restrict independent media, and alter election rules to consolidate power. These strategies enable ruling parties to project an illusion of democracy while gradually undermining the very institutions that support it.

Across various electoral contexts, governments have hollowed out democracy while maintaining an illusion of legitimacy. These tactics include:

- **Judicial interference:** packing courts with politically aligned judges or limiting the jurisdiction of judicial bodies in election-related disputes;
- **Electoral manipulation:** redistricting to favor ruling parties, restricting political finance laws to weaken opposition funding, and controlling election commissions to ensure compliance with the ruling government’s agenda;
- **Shrinking civic space:** enforcing defamation, sedition, and ‘fake news’ laws to suppress dissent, restrict journalistic freedom, and criminalize independent election observation;
- **Militarization of governance:** where security forces play an outsized role in political decision-making, often acting as enforcers of electoral repression.

II. KEY TRENDS IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES ACROSS ASIA

In the super-election year 2024, a total of 74 countries went to the polls across the globe, revealing key trends in electoral processes. Asia itself witnessing elections in over 20 nations, including some of the most populous countries, like India and Indonesia. While some countries experienced democratic advancements, others witnessed increased political co-optation, greater autocratic influences and the visible impact of technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) in an attempt to manipulate voters. These trends highlight both opportunities and challenges for electoral integrity across Asia.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

Advancing reforms on electoral democracy have been slow post-second wave of democratization. With the growing autocratic influence over political, economic and social resources, elections across Asia are impacted and increasingly shaped by several factors, including the complex interplay of political interference, weak institutional safeguards, restrictive electoral laws to the abuse of state resources, weaponization of misinformation and disinformation and emerging technological advancements, potentially impacting the outcome of elections and undermining the electoral integrity. While on one hand autocratic influences continue to manipulate electoral systems — such as in Cambodia, Bangladesh and Myanmar, on the other hand, even established democracies like India and Indonesia grapple with concerns over fair competition and digital manipulation, including the excessive use of AI. At this juncture, it is crucial to examine the growing threats to free and fair elections, especially the ones that threaten electoral integrity through the entrenchment of power, misuse of technology and the degradation of public trust in democratic institutions.

Political Co-optation and Autocratic Influences on Electoral Systems

Countries across Asia continue to struggle with political interference in their electoral systems, leading to questions about democratic legitimacy. Economic and political elites in the region continue to control vast resources, enabling them to tilt the electoral playing field to their favor through repressive actions, and control of democratic institutions and state resources. In countries such as Cambodia, Bangladesh and Myanmar, ruling parties or military regimes used electoral manipulation, restrictive laws and suppression of opposition. Bangladesh serves as another example, with its last elections held in early 2024 marred by reports of voter intimidation and suppression of opposition parties and leaders, casting doubts over the credibility of the entire electoral process, eventually leading to massive student-led protests forcing the abusive Sheikh Hasina government to resign in August 2024. On a similar note, Myanmar’s military-controlled elections lacked legitimacy, with the opposition parties excluded and constant suppression of dissent.

Even relatively stable democracies like India and

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Indonesia are surrounded by concerns over the misuse and abuse of state resources for electoral advantage. Reports suggest a rising trend where incumbents strategically leverage government welfare programs and schemes to influence voter behaviour. This has led to a wider debate on whether the electoral competition in Asia remains fair and open.

The Increasing Role of Technology in Disinformation and Voter Manipulation

The 2024 elections also highlighted the growing impact of technology, including the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), both as a tool to expand political outreach and as a mechanism for disinformation and voter manipulation. Its influence has been widely noticed in several Asian nations, particularly in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, with several instances of AI-generated deepfakes, misleading social media campaigns, and hate speeches reported.

Misinformation and disinformation campaigns were often driven by political actors to discredit the opposition. For example, in India, some of the major political parties were projected to have spent large amounts of campaign money on AI-generated content ahead of elections — India spent around US\$50 million on AI technology during elections.²⁶ While reports indicated that largely the candidates and political parties made constructive use of AI for targeted communication and amplify voter engagement, a deeper analysis shows it has also been used to spread disinformation and mudslinging. Two biggest national parties — the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) — laid accusations against each other of misusing AI to spread fake news, primarily through deepfakes or digitally altered audio, video or images. Similarly, in Indonesia, other than excessive usage of AI-generated deepfake technology concerns over algorithm biases in targeted online political advertising campaigns raised questions about

fairness in political competition.

Efforts to regulate digital campaigns and the use of AI in elections remain inconsistent across the region. While a few countries have introduced guidelines and regulations to counter voter manipulation online, enforcement has largely been weak. While the national AI regulatory framework is still a work in progress, the Election Commission of India (ECI) issued an advisory to all recognized parties to not engage in deepfakes and misinformation during the 2024 general elections. Similarly, in the Philippines, where the midterm elections are scheduled for May 2025, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) issued guidelines for the use of AI during elections. The absence of robust legal mechanisms also allowed AI-powered disinformation campaigns to rise in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other countries in the subcontinent, stressing the need for stricter legal and compliance measures to combat its misuse. Many governments themselves have been accused of weaponizing AI-driven disinformation to maintain their political control.

NOTABLE REGIONAL CASES

Myanmar's Military-Controlled Elections

Myanmar has faced relentless resistance since the 2021 military coup, with young people at the forefront of mass protests, and the civil disobedience movement against the junta. In response, the military has carried out brutal crackdowns, using airstrikes, arbitrary arrests, internet blackouts, and extrajudicial killings to stifle dissent. Thousands of pro-democracy activists, journalists, and ethnic minorities have been imprisoned or killed amid the ongoing violence.

Despite the ongoing unrest, the junta remains intent on proceeding with what is widely regarded as a sham election in 2025. Several organizations working towards safeguarding electoral integrity oppose the plans of Myanmar's illegitimate military

junta to hold these elections, fearing that the present situation, which is marred by draconian laws banning opposition political parties, the arrest and detention of political leaders and democracy activists and severe restrictions on media, is unfavorable to free and fair elections in the line of international standards on democratic elections or commitments for electoral integrity.

Electoral Reforms and Challenges in Democratizing Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

In June 2024, Thailand concluded its complex senate elections, representing a crucial test for its democratic transition, marking the first house polls held since the 2014 military coup. While the opposition parties gained significant ground, concerns still prevail over whether the new senate proves to be a departure from the ongoing military-appointed body, or if it shall perpetuate the status quo. Nonetheless, the electoral process did showcase progress, but at the same time, it underscores the ongoing challenges in fully restoring democracy.

Towards its path to economic recovery and political stability, Sri Lanka witnessed two back-to-back elections — presidential elections in September 2024 and parliamentary elections in November 2024. The elections were marked by debates over recovery from the economic crisis that led to mass-level protests in 2022, popularly known as Aragalaya, and the governance reforms. Election Observers, including the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), reported several concerns — significant abuse of state resources, spread of misinformation and disinformation and media independence — particularly during the presidential elections. Furthermore, while Sri Lanka has taken a significant step by introducing a campaign finance law, several loopholes continue to hinder its effective enforcement. The new government came to power with high expectations for change, including much-needed electoral reforms. However, it remains to be seen how these commitments will unfold in practice.

Just like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh's movement for change was driven by student-led protests, ultimately forcing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee after 15 years in power. Her tenure saw the systematic weakening of democratic institutions,

suppression of opposition voices, economic mismanagement, and rising corruption, leading to widespread discontent. While the Awami League claimed victory in the 2024 election, it was largely due to an opposition boycott and low voter turnout. The interim government, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, now faces the challenge of restoring governance, implementing electoral reforms, and preventing the resurgence of authoritarianism, but it remains to be seen how these efforts will unfold.

III. ROLE OF CITIZEN OBSERVATION IN ELECTION INTEGRITY

SIGNIFICANCE OF CITIZEN OBSERVATION

Citizen election observation is essential in promoting transparency, accountability, and trust in electoral processes, especially in Asia where a majority of states are still democratizing, and thus require crucial attention and support. Independent observers act as impartial watchdogs, identifying electoral fraud, reporting irregularities, and advocating for reforms. Their presence enhances the credibility of elections and reassures the electorate that democratic processes are upheld.

Citizen observers provide independent assessments that expose potential electoral malpractice. Their reports contribute to holding electoral bodies accountable and fostering improvements for future elections. Nonpartisan citizen observers help counter misinformation and ensure that elections are perceived as fair. Their oversight of campaign financing, state resource abuse, and election-day processes increases public confidence in electoral institutions. Observers' contributions in various Asian elections have been pivotal in maintaining voter engagement and trust in democratic systems.

CHALLENGES FOR OBSERVERS

Authoritarian governments often impose severe restrictions on election monitoring, limiting observer access to polling stations and suppressing independent assessments. In Cambodia and Bangladesh both domestic and international observer groups have faced bans, legal threats, and intimidation, hindering their ability to provide credible election evaluations. The UN Declaration

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emphasizes that access to electoral institutions, candidates, and media personnel is crucial to ensuring comprehensive election assessments.

In conflict-prone areas, election observers face threats from political militias, extremist groups, and repressive state forces. The situation in Myanmar and Afghanistan underscores the dangers faced by election monitors, highlighting the urgent need for stronger protection mechanisms and international support.

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) comprises member organizations across Asia, all dedicated to upholding democratic values and safeguarding electoral integrity through free and fair elections. However, globally, election observer rights and access to the electoral process face increasing restrictions, posing a serious challenge to transparency and accountability.

Recognizing these threats, the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have launched a comprehensive research initiative to analyze regional and contextual trends in observer rights, identify barriers to independent election monitoring, and explore opportunities to strengthen the role of nonpartisan citizen observers. This research aims to enhance global strategies for protecting electoral transparency and ensuring that observers can continue their vital work in defending democratic principles.

In Asia, these challenges have manifested in various ways, particularly in countries that held elections in 2023 and 2024:

→ **Pakistan (2024):** Election monitors, including TDEA-FAFEN, faced restrictions on observer accreditation, late approvals, and limited access to polling stations. Reports also highlighted voter suppression and internet blackouts affecting transparency.

→ **Bangladesh (2024):** Odhikar and other election monitors encountered significant

challenges, with government crackdowns on civil society organizations restricting their ability to observe elections freely. Many organizations faced pressure and threats for reporting on electoral irregularities.

→ **Indonesia (2024):** Despite the well-established role of election monitors like Perludem, KIPP, and JPPR, misinformation and AI-generated disinformation complicated election observation efforts, requiring new verification methods for election-related content.

→ **Cambodia (2023):** In the 2023 Cambodian general elections, the government imposed severe restrictions on independent election monitoring, further tightening control over civil society organizations. The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) faced obstacles in monitoring the electoral process, as authorities continued to suppress independent oversight.

→ **Myanmar (2023-present):** PACE and NMF have struggled to continue electoral work amid the post-coup crackdown. The junta's control over electoral processes has made independent observation nearly impossible, with many observers operating from exile.

→ **Sri Lanka (2024):** Observers from PAFFREL and CMEV faced increased political tensions and economic instability, which have heightened risks for election observers.

Despite these barriers, ANFREL member organizations continue to advocate for observer rights, working to ensure greater transparency in electoral processes. Regional and global collaborations are essential in addressing these threats and ensuring that election observation remains a crucial mechanism for protecting democracy.

IV. PRESERVING THE SANCTITY OF THE BALLOT

One of the key essentials of democratic governance is ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. The challenges posed by political interference, technological manipulation, and electoral irregularities threaten the integrity of the process. Addressing these issues mandates significant electoral reforms, public awareness initiatives, and independent and impartial election observation. At the same time, emerging technological innovations present new opportunities to enhance transparency and strengthen electoral integrity.



STRATEGIES FOR ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Independent and Impartial Election Monitoring

Independent election observation remains a vital safeguard for maintaining electoral integrity by ensuring transparency and accountability in the electoral process. Organisations, such as ANFREL, play a critical role in monitoring various stages of the electoral process – registration of voters, candidates and political parties, campaign period, casting of ballots, counting of ballots, and post-election developments – to assess if they comply with the national legislation and international standards governing elections. Their presence deters electoral fraud, enhances public trust and provides evidence-based evaluation of the entire electoral process. They have played an important role, particularly in countries where electoral integrity is under frequent

scrutiny, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Cambodia, where independent observers have highlighted instances of political co-optation and autocratic influences, suppression of opposition, and vote manipulation. Strengthening the role of both domestic and international observers by expanding the scope of their monitoring and granting them greater access to polling stations and election-related data is crucial for ensuring an impartial assessment of the electoral processes.

Public Awareness Campaigns to Counter Disinformation

With the rise of disinformation in elections, particularly through online platforms, public awareness campaigns are crucial to countering its impact. To combat disinformation, therefore, it is a must for governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), and media and tech platforms to work together towards enhancing digital literacy among voters. Initiatives such as Facebook's fact-checking campaign by partnering with third-party fact-checkers to reduce the spread of misinformation and provide more reliable information to its users⁵¹, Google's transparency initiatives to help government communicate more effectively, and voter education programmes at the grass-root level by the election commissions and CSOs, have all proven effective in minimising the spread of false information or fake news during elections. Highlighting some of the best practices, in India, ECI partnered and collaborated with various social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, sports agencies like the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), Indian Postal Services, cinema theatres, telecom operators, etc, to increase voter awareness and enhance participation. It also partnered with Google to combat disinformation during elections.

A 2024 report laid down some of the major policy interventions that can help democratic governments and other stakeholders combat misinformation and disinformation, enhancing the importance of enhancing public information, and affirmative actions by the government and digital platforms. Similarly, Indonesia's election commission—Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU)—established digital monitoring teams to combat AI-generated disinformation campaigns.

Electoral Processes in Asia: Strengthening Citizen Observation and Fortifying Electoral Participation

By **BRIZZA ROSALES** (Executive Director) AND **MANJESH RANA** (Senior Program Officer for International Election Observation)
For Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)

Table 1. Overview of Case Studies¹

Type	Intervention	How much is known?	How effective does it seem?	How easily does it scale?
	1. Supporting local journalism	Modest	Significant	Difficult
	2. Media literacy education	Significant	Significant	Difficult
	3. Fact-checking	Significant	Modest	Modest
	4. Labeling social media content	Modest	Modest	Easy
	5. Counter-messaging strategies	Modest	Modest	Difficult
	6. Cybersecurity for elections and campaigns	Modest	Modest	Modest
	7. Statecraft, deterrence, and disruption	Modest	Limited	Modest
	8. Removing inauthentic asset networks	Limited	Modest	Modest
	9. Reducing data collection and targeted ads	Modest	Limited	Difficult
	10. Changing recommendation algorithms	Limited	Significant	Modest

 Public information  Government action  Platform action

Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide \(2024\)](#)

Figure: Countering Disinformation

Legal and Policy Recommendations to Address Voter Suppression

Voter suppression, in the form of restrictive voter ID laws, voter intimidation and limited polling access, remains a significant challenge in many

Asian countries. In Bangladesh, stringent voter ID laws have led to the exclusion of millions of citizens from the voter list, disproportionately affecting rural and economically disadvantaged communities. In Myanmar, junta-backed authorities have been using voter intimidation tactics to entail fear and suppress

political freedoms. If the proposed elections proceed, they are likely to be held under heavy security force presence at polling stations, creating an environment of coercion that limits accessibility and undermines electoral freedom. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, voter suppression continues, with the government openly warning to prosecute anyone who will encourage others to ‘spoil their ballots’ or protest against the controversial elections.

To counter these challenges, it is critical to strengthen the legal protection for the voters, safeguarding their right to vote, and ensuring free and inclusive participation. In Sri Lanka, even though several sectors are still disenfranchised, the Election Commission’s efforts towards simplifying voter registration have ensured better access for marginalized communities. Similarly, COMELEC has expanded advanced voting options for overseas Filipinos and early voting on the election fat for vulnerable groups like senior citizens and disabled voters. Learning from best practices, and expanding such policies across the region, coupled with stringent penalties for electoral malpractices will help ensure fair and accessible elections.

Innovations in Election Observation

Use of Technology for Real-Time Monitoring

The integration of advanced technology in election monitoring plays an important role, in enhancing transparency and accountability during elections. Smartphone applications, AI-driven analytics, and blockchain technology enable observers and voters to report abuses and irregularities in real-time. International election observer groups, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe, and ANFREL in Asia, and several other international and domestic observers have piloted digital tools to allow observers to provide real-time data on election-related violence, irregularities and abuse. For instance, in 2024, ANFREL utilized technology to document incidents of voter suppression, abuse of state resources, and electoral violence and fraud, enabling real-time reporting for analysis in its election monitoring efforts during Indonesian general elections and back-to-back presidential and parliamentary elections held in Sri Lanka.

Over the last decade, a large part of campaign activities have also shifted to social media, making

it a critical space for regular monitoring to check the spread of misinformation and disinformation during the campaign period. Increasing numbers of digital users have highlighted the need to include this in the ongoing election monitoring efforts in the region. Several domestic organizations – such as collaborative fact-checking project Tsek.ph for the upcoming elections in the Philippines which provides weekly updates about the instances of disinformation, and Hashtag Generations in Sri Lanka, which actively monitored online misinformation and hate campaigns during recently concluded elections and led fact-checking initiatives – play a crucial role to understand and combat voter manipulation and to safeguard electoral discourse and public trust.

Broadening the scope of monitoring initiatives, and expanding the use of these technological innovations across different electoral contexts can help ensure that such irregularities are timely detected and addressed, ultimately adding towards the efforts to strengthen electoral integrity and fostering public trust in democratic institutions.

Data-Driven Approaches to Analyze Election Integrity

Furthermore, on innovative approaches, advancement in data analytic techniques now enable more comprehensive analysis and evaluation of election integrity. AI and large-scale quantitative and qualitative data are helping decode patterns of electoral fraud, voter suppression and instances of misinformation and disinformation online. Analysis of voter demographics, electoral participation, social media trends and patterns, and electoral frauds and violations can provide a more precise evaluation of electoral processes, and help ensure the safeguarding of electoral integrity.

For instance, in several countries, including India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, election monitoring groups utilised AI-based tools to understand patterns of online political manipulation and to identify coordinated online disinformation campaigns. Incorporating these data-driven approaches into mainstream election observation methodologies will enhance electoral transparency, and facilitate better collaboration between election commissions, CSOs, media, and tech platforms, ensuring comprehensive and credible assessment of electoral processes.

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V. ADVOCACY FOR FUTURE ELECTORAL REFORM

As electoral processes across Asian countries continue to evolve, ensuring their credibility and inclusivity remains a critical challenge. Future electoral reforms must prioritize empowering democratic institutions by strengthening existing frameworks to combat electoral fraud, enhancing the participation of marginalized voters, and fostering collaboration between regional and international organizations.

To achieve these reforms effectively, ANFREL integrates a pragmatic and adaptive approach to implementing change. This approach evaluates reforms based on their potential impact in changing social actors' behavior, their sustainability as everyday practice, and their feasibility given political realities. Recognizing the need for an entrepreneurial mindset in pursuing reforms, we draw from the Development Entrepreneurship methodology, which emphasizes starting with small but meaningful changes, building coalitions, adjusting to unexpected challenges, and shaping future developments in the electoral landscape.

Priority Areas for Electoral Reform

Political and public participation plays a key role in democratic governance, upholding the rule of law, promoting and practicing social inclusion and fostering economic development.⁶⁸ A true democratic electoral process emphasizes the principle of equity and ensures that all its citizens, irrespective of their religion, belief, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, language, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, educational background, health, disability, or other status, and they all should be able to exercise their right to vote freely. However systematic barriers leading to social exclusion continue to hinder the participation of various groups across Asia, often resulting in

their disenfranchisement. In his essay on social exclusion, Nobel Laureate Sen goes deeper into the concept and provides a useful distinction between active and passive exclusion. *Active exclusion* arises when certain groups, like immigrants or refugees, are deliberately denied usable political status, further leading to their political and social marginalization — an issue affecting several minority groups in Europe, Asia and in other parts. In contrast, passive exclusion results from broader social processes, where exclusion is not the result of deliberate

intent but rather structural or systemic factors that inadvertently hinder access and limit participation — a clear example is the poverty and social isolation arising from a sluggish economy that deepens social marginalisation.

Even though several countries across Asia have introduced various measures fostering inclusivity in the electoral process, several groups, such as women, Indigenous communities, social, religious, ethnic and other minorities, rural populations, poor, persons with disabilities and refugees, often face significant barriers in voter registration and polling station accessibility, severely affecting their political participation. India has given legal and political recognition to transgenders, who are now identified as 'third gender' in their voting IDs, and has extended voting rights to Tibetans, a refugee community living in India for the last six decades. Sri Lanka's election commission introduced special voter IDs to facilitate the persons with disabilities, and in addition, provided special training to its poll officers to equip them with sign language. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, COMELEC expanded accessibility programs, including introducing early voting for senior citizens and persons with disabilities, while Nepal's election commission implemented mobile voter registration units to improve voter turnout in remote areas. Advocacy for similar policies, and promoting more innovative ways in other Asian countries is essential to ensuring genuinely

representative elections.

Electoral fraud continues to be a significant concern across Asia, eroding public confidence in democratic institutions and electoral processes. Fraudulent tactics like vote-buying, coercion, suppression of opposition, abuse of state resources and digital manipulation are often used to influence electoral outcomes in favor of incumbents. It is essential to strengthen electoral legal frameworks to address these issues and ensure free and fair elections across Asia.

Several countries across Asia, including India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, have introduced stricter regulations on campaign financing, however, these measures often fall short in terms of effective implementation and enforcement, limiting their impact on ensuring financial transparency and accountability in elections. These incremental yet impactful changes demonstrate how electoral inclusivity can be gradually expanded, with continued coalition-building between civil society organizations, election commissions, and policymakers ensuring that reforms are not only introduced but also sustained and replicated in other contexts.

To address this, electoral reforms must focus on mechanisms that are self-implementing, creating incentives that naturally deter fraudulent practices rather than relying solely on regulatory enforcement. Piloting automated monitoring systems to track campaign finance violations, strengthening collaborations between civil society organizations to document and report abuses, and adapting to emerging threats such as AI-driven misinformation are critical strategies in ensuring that reforms are responsive and resilient.

Collaboration among regional and international organizations is another essential element in strengthening democratic processes. Regional election observation bodies like ANFREL play a crucial role by partnering with domestic organizations that possess contextual expertise. While domestic civil society organizations can navigate political complexities on the ground, regional organizations can provide technical training, capacity-building, and independent electoral assessments. Recent initiatives, such as ANFREL's work in Indonesia and Sri Lanka in documenting abuses of state resources, media bias, and electoral disinformation, demonstrate the

value of grassroots collaborations in strengthening electoral integrity. Expanding such partnerships will be essential in pushing for long-term reforms that withstand political transitions and external pressures.

In a globalized world, democratic institutions also benefit from international knowledge-sharing. Collaborations between governments, election monitoring bodies, and international organizations facilitate the exchange of best practices and technical assistance. For instance, the United Nations and the European Union have constantly supported electoral reform efforts across Asia, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, by offering technical assistance and support to local CSOs.⁸⁰ Organizations like the Carter Center and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) provided funding for voter education programs in several Asian countries, and have worked closely with the local governments and CSOs through various programs to improve election management capacity and promote inclusive participation, enhance electoral security and limit digital manipulation of voters.⁸¹ Expanding such international partnerships can help ensure that the electoral systems across Asia remain resilient against emerging challenges and threats to democracy.

A Roadmap for Electoral Reforms

A pragmatic and adaptive approach to electoral reforms ensures that interventions are impactful, sustainable, and feasible. Recognizing the need for a dynamic methodology in reform efforts, we emphasize starting with incremental changes, fostering strong coalitions, adapting to unexpected developments, and shaping long-term democratic transformations.

Moving forward, electoral reform efforts must focus on scaling successful inclusivity initiatives, enhancing enforcement mechanisms for fraud prevention through collaborative monitoring and adaptive policymaking, and strengthening both regional and international partnerships to ensure sustained knowledge exchange and electoral integrity.

VI. CONCLUSION

To combat these challenges, civil society

organizations, election observers, and global democratic networks must unite in defending electoral integrity. Independent election monitoring remains a vital safeguard against fraud, manipulation, and state interference. Organizations like ANFREL and its regional partners must be empowered with stronger legal protections, broader access to polling and electoral data, and increased capacity to combat emerging threats like AI-driven misinformation. Furthermore, voter education and public awareness campaigns must be expanded, ensuring that citizens are not only informed about their electoral rights but also equipped to recognize and resist manipulation efforts.

However, defending electoral integrity cannot be the responsibility of civil society alone. Governments, regional bodies, and the international community must actively uphold democratic norms by strengthening legal frameworks, enforcing election laws, and holding violators accountable.

Reforms should focus on protecting observer rights, regulating digital political campaigns, and ensuring that election commissions remain independent and transparent.

Democratic backsliding does not occur overnight—it is the result of gradual erosion. The time to act is now, before these threats become deeply entrenched.

Democracy is only as strong as the commitment of its citizens to defend it. As we move forward, each stakeholder—voters, election monitors, civil society groups, policymakers, and international organizations—must play their part in safeguarding electoral integrity. The resilience of democracy depends on our collective vigilance, action, and unwavering commitment to free, fair, and credible elections. The right to vote is not just a privilege—it is a responsibility. Let us work together to ensure that elections remain a true reflection of the people’s will, now and in the future.

Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy: Elections and Political Parties in Southeast and East Asia

By **CELITO F. ARLEGUE** (*Executive Director*)
Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD)

Elections are considered the hallmark of democracy, and the year 2024, being the “super year for elections” (*A ‘Super Year’ for Elections*, n.d.) should be good for democracy. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Half of the world’s population went to the polls last year, and this included the electorate in Asian countries which are among the populous in the world such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan and Pakistan. The process and outcome of these elections, however, do not contribute to making 2024 a year of democracy for Asia.

In Bangladesh and Pakistan, for example, the autocratic leaders used “cheating, detentions of politicians, and other means of making votes unfair to claim another term in office” (Kurlantzick, 2024: 1). Similarly, in India, the incumbent won by prosecuting the opposition, centralizing political power, and ramping up Hindu nationalism at the expense of religious minorities (Human Rights Foundation, 2025). Indonesian elections saw the victory of a former army general with a record of human rights violations, leading to calls for his administration to promptly and publicly demonstrate its intention to protect and promote human rights in Indonesia and in the region (“Indonesia: Prabowo Presidency Raises Rights Concerns”, 2025). In Japan, elections took place amidst a political funding corruption scandal that implicated senior lawmakers and cabinet members from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), although the party still won most of the seats (Khalil, 2024).

The failure of elections to advance democracy should not come as a surprise. The use of elections to gain legitimacy has been in the playbook of authoritarians of various shades in modern history.

When these autocrats could no longer rely on economic performance as a basis of legitimacy, they oftentimes resort to the use of manipulated elections to have some semblance of popular support.

These elections in semi-democratic or undemocratic countries lack the characteristics associated with free and fair elections such as the absence of voter intimidation or fraud, a level playing field for campaigning, the presence of credible opposition among others. In elections in Bangladesh and Pakistan last year, for example, their respective ruling parties implemented measures to diminish the opposition parties’ chances of success – violating fundamental political rights in the process. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the other hand, used anti-Muslim campaign rhetoric to gain support from his country’s Hindu majority, which, in turn, worsen extremism and heightened the country’s religious divide. In Indonesia, existing laws and regulations were either revised or circumvented to support the administration candidates – which puts into question the country’s adherence to rule of law.

The impact of these 2024 elections on political rights, religious tolerance and the rule of law indicate that elections, on their own, do not necessarily advance democracy. One aspect that is oftentimes neglected in this nexus between elections and democracy is the importance of political parties. It has been said that democracy cannot function without political parties, so it may be instructive to look at how political parties operate to understand the current state of democracy. As argued by Poguntke and Hofmeister (2024: 1): “...when it comes to analysing the operations of modern democracies and their potential weaknesses, it is important to

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have a clear understanding of how their parties operate and what challenges they are facing.”

Political parties, therefore, can be considered the missing link in the relationship between elections and democracy. More specifically, the operation of political parties can be a result of, and contributory factor to, the process of elections and by extension, to the state of democracy.

So what challenges did political parties face in 2024? In Southeast and East Asia, three issues hound political parties and how they operate, as most clearly seen in the context of elections held in the subregion last year.

ONE PARTY DOMINANCE

Japan has been dominated by the LDP for almost the entirety of its postwar history, and the 2024 elections continued this trend, although the LDP lost its parliamentary majority. The relatively poor performance of the LDP was due to the political funding corruption scandals that the party was involved in. It is said that more than 500m yen (\$3.4m) allegedly ended up in slush funds over a five-year period through 2022, resulting in high-level cabinet resignations in 2023 (Ng, 2023). Combined with an economic crisis and widespread leader dissatisfaction, the LDP entered the 2024 lower house elections highly unpopular – raising the possibility of a 2009 repeat when an opposition party took over the realms of government. When the results of the October 2024 were in, however, the LDP still won most of the seats, although it lost its parliamentary majority. Through coalition with smaller parties, however, it has been able to retain control of the government.

One party dominance has been a common phenomenon in the subregion where communist and authoritarian/semi-authoritarian states still thrive. The Communist Party, of course, dominates political life in countries like China, Vietnam and

Laos. Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) has been in power since the 1980s, and it holds on to power by either decimating or coopting opposition parties. The People’s Action Party (PAP) has been the ruling party in Singapore since its separation from the Federation of Malaya in 1965, and is certain to maintain its majority as the city-state prepares to go to the polls again in May 2025. Malaysia, until 2018, was governed by Barisan Nasional where the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) is the dominant partner. Until 2000, Taiwan was also dominated by a single party – the Koumintang (KMT) – which remains to be a political force until today.

PERSECUTION OF THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Cambodia also had elections last year -although it was an indirect one where commune leaders and members of the National Assembly elected members of the Senate. Cambodian Senate has 62 members, 2 of which are appointed by the king and another 2 of the National Assembly. Out of the 58 elected members, only three came from the political opposition. At least one of the three had to change his political party affiliation as the political party he was previously involved in was disqualified to participate in the parliamentary elections of 2023 due to a technicality which was widely perceived to be politically motivated (“Cambodia, Threats, Bribes Tainted Senate Elections”, 2024).

The Candlelight Party (CLP) was prevented from participating in the July 2023 parliamentary elections due to recent changes in the registration requirements. Prior to this, CLP officials and members were routinely harassed, intimidated and even imprisoned during the campaign – most likely as a result of CLP’s strong performance in the preceding commune elections the year before. The ruling party, the Cambodian CPP, unsurprisingly, eventually won the July 2023 elections

by landslide – facilitating the transition of the prime minister post from Hun Sen to his son, Hun Manet. Hun Sen now serves as president of the Senate, while his youngest son, Hun Many, assumes the deputy prime minister post.

In 2024, Thailand’s constitutional court also dissolved the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP). The MFP gained the most number of seats in the House of Representatives in the 2023 election, but not enough to form a government. The leader of the party faced (and was eventually cleared of) a case in the constitutional court for breaching election laws, but the same court ruled that the MFP’s proposal to amend the royal defamation law can be considered an attempt “to overthrow the democratic regime of government with the king as a head of state” (Saksornchai, 2024). MFP suffered the same fate as its predecessor, the Future Forward Party (FFP), which was dissolved due to allegations of receiving an illegal loan.

PRESIDENTIAL BANDWAGONING

In 2024, Indonesia, the world’s third largest democracy, had its general election. It was the world’s biggest single-day election with over 200 million voters in Indonesia (and 1.75 million overseas) electing the country’s next president and vice president, as well as legislators and councilors at both national and regional levels.

The results showed the victory of Prabowo Subianto, a former army general with a questionable human rights record. His candidacy was boosted by the assumed support of his predecessor, Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, whose son was able to run as Prabowo’s vice president through a tailor-made change in the age requirement to run for such position.

Indonesian elections manifests the significant power of the presidency and the impact it can have on the elections and democracy in general. By politicizing the courts and election regulatory bodies, using state funds and personnel for campaigning, and promising positions and government largesse (Idrus, 2024), Jokowi was able to facilitate the creation of a super-parliamentary majority for Prabowo. All the political parties with seats in parliament, except one, joined Prabowo’s Advanced Indonesia coalition. According to Murdoch University’s Ian Wilson (*An Election*

to End All Elections?, 2024), such grand coalition approach is meant “to remove parliamentary opposition and curtail the emergence of rival power bases. This is done not by overt repression but co-optation into large ruling coalitions managed via negotiations and inter-elite deals.”

Presidential bandwagoning is not only true in Indonesia, but also in the Philippines where the weakness of political parties and patronage politics provide a fertile ground for the abuse of presidential power. Kasuya (2009), for example, observed that in the Philippine context, legislative aspirants usually align themselves with viable presidential candidates. For this reason, party-switching is quite common, and it can happen either before elections or after the elections. Such trend is due to the significant power of the president to dispense political favors and government resources. As observed by Arlegue and Coronel (2003: 218):

Observers of Philippine politics note that the president’s extensive control over discretionary funds encourages legislators to switch to the party of the president. These legislators have greater access to state funds and can provide rewards and other perks to their constituents. Party switching results from and contributes to the lack of strong ideological party affiliations. Because political parties lack firm ideological bases and clear party platforms, politicians do not develop strong ties to parties and will change their party affiliation in order to advance their careers. In turn, parties are unable to develop a clear mandate and platform because their membership is frequently changing.

WAYS FORWARD

One party dominance, persecution of the political opposition, and presidential band wagoning make

the operational environment for democratic political parties in Southeast and East Asia extremely difficult.

Taiwan, however, was able to demonstrate that these challenges can be overcome. The country, which also held presidential and parliamentary elections last year, is considered a “democratic bright spot” in this part of the world (Marjar, 2021). It has its own set of problems, of course, but the strides it made since it transitioned to a competitive democracy have been significant.

Its experience can also serve as guideposts in terms of addressing the challenges faced by political parties in the subregion today.

POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL REFORM

That Taiwan was ruled by a single party for half-a-century could not be separated from its political history. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized the mainland and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the KMT-led Republic of China (ROC) relocated to Taiwan and justified its authoritarian policies by the “belief that wresting the mainland away from the Communists was a sacred mission” (Rigger, 2011).

Taiwan achieved phenomenal economic growth during the KMT rule, and this provided another layer of legitimacy for its dominance of the political system. The same economic growth, however, planted the seeds of democratization by creating a segment of the population that demands greater social inclusion and political representation (Li, 1996). This culminated to the formation of the opposition party – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – in 1986 and the lifting of martial law the year after. Throughout the 1990s, a number of constitutional revisions were made to open up the political space – including allowing the direct election of the president, which took place for the first time in 1996 (Rigger, 2011).

Four years after, in 2000, a historic milestone took place when the opposition DPP won the presidential elections, ushering in a period of competitive party politics which we still witness today. Now, Taiwan has a vibrant multi-party system, characterized by the dominance of two political parties – the DPP and KMT – although in the 2024 elections, the Taiwan’s People’s Party (TPP) emerged as a significant third force.

In terms of electoral system, each voter in Taiwan receives three ballots: (1) for president/vice-

president tandem; (2) for single-member district representatives or indigenous representatives; and (3) for party-list. The 113-seat unicameral legislature is divided into 73 single-member districts, 6 reserved seats for indigenous people and 34 party-list seats – allocated through proportional representation to political parties which meet the 5 per cent threshold (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

In accordance to the Political Party Act of 2017, political parties in Taiwan can be eligible for state funding of 50 NTD/vote provided they secured at least 3 per cent of the party-list votes in the legislative elections. Together with Political Donations Act of 2004, which imposes a cap on how much (and from whom) donations can be received, this is meant to level the playing field among political parties.

SAFEGUARDS TO ENSURE THE RULE OF LAW

Taiwan has a high ranking on the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index. The WJP Index measures the extent to which a country adheres to the rule of law across various dimensions. In 2024, World Economics reported that Taiwan’s overall score is 81.4, placing it 23rd out of 150 countries and jurisdictions (Taiwan, n.d.).

The WJP Index considers nine dimensions of the rule of law, including: limited government powers; absence of corruption; order and security; fundamental rights; open government; regulatory enforcement; access to civil justice; effective criminal justice; and informal justice (WJP Rule of Law Index, n.d.).

The high ranking of Taiwan in terms of the rule of law indicates that there is less likelihood for the law to be weaponized against political opponents. To a large extent, the state of the rule of law in Taiwan cannot be separated to its economic and political evolution. Its strong economic performance in the post-war era hinges on a working judiciary that can authoritatively settle disputes and inspire business confidence.

When Taiwan transitioned to democracy, separation of powers and rule of law became the cornerstone of the country’s governance, ensuring transparency and accountability. Moreover, Taiwan’s legal system is committed to protecting fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression and assembly.

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Hence, the BertelsmannStiftung (BTI 2024 Taiwan Country Report, n.d.) observed that “judicial independence is well-established in Taiwan, and court trials are generally fair. There are regulations governing the appointments of judges and they were not subject to political considerations. While there are past allegations that courts are too closely allied to the KMT, they have not been substantiated by legally relevant evidence.”

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CHECKS-AND-BALANCES

Taiwan’s government system can be described as semi-presidential. The government system is “structurally handicapped” by the constitutional relationship between the president and parliament based on the principle of divided government (BTI 2024 Taiwan Country Report, n.d.)

The directly elected president appoints the premier and the cabinet without legislature’s approval, even though they must regularly report to the latter. Moreover, the legislature approves the budget, so it is also important for the executive to get the legislature’s nod to roll out government programs.

The legislature has the authority to dismiss the cabinet by a vote of no confidence against the premier, but the president can dissolve the legislature in such a case. Hence, there are almost no institutional guards against political stalemate when the president and the legislative majority belong to different parties (BTI 2024 Taiwan Country Report, n.d.)

This has been the case in Taiwan after the 2024 elections, when the DPP-led Executive Yuan is being challenged by the Legislative Yuan, where the alliance between the KMT and TPP has the majority and has been trying to curtail executive power and block government initiatives (KMT-TPP’s “Political Chaos Trio of Laws”, 2024).

In the case of Taiwan, therefore, while checks-and-balances between executive and legislative branches of government lessens possible abuse of power of one branch, it can also result in an institutional paralysis

when political parties which control these institutions are highly polarized.

CONCLUSION

In Southeast and East Asia, the elections held in 2024 largely failed to advance democracy.

The circumvention and revision of existing laws and regulations in Indonesia to favor the administration-backed candidates raises doubts on whether the 2024 elections were held on a level playing field. Combined with the use of state resources and politicization of state agents, there appears to be grounds on the observation of election watchdogs questioning the fairness and credibility of the elections, even if Prabowo won majority of the votes in the first round. The subsequent moves of Prabowo to coopt opposition parties and change the rules of regional elections may signal a bleak future for Indonesian democracy.

The Senate elections in Cambodia were much worse, as they were meant primarily to institutionalize CCP dominance and the Hun Sen family dynasty. With Hun Manet as prime minister, Hun Many as deputy prime minister, Hun Sen as senate president, and with the CCP controlling 120 out of the 125 seats in parliament, the one-party/family domination of the Cambodian political system is complete. Combined with a pliant judiciary and a partisan election commission, a space for political opposition is almost non-existent.

Japan’s parliamentary elections offered a glimpse of hope, as it resulted in more seats for the opposition parties – although division among them prevented them from taking over the realms of government. Hence, the LDP remains to be in government, although significantly weakened by the election results.

When it comes to advancing democracy, Taiwan elections last year are probably the most important. It has its own set of issues, particularly allegations of foreign interference, but the vibrant campaign atmosphere and the engaged citizenry lend credence to the description of Taiwan as a bright spot for

democracy in this part of the world. The Taiwan experience also highlights the importance of working political parties to make elections meaningful. Elections, on their own, do not necessarily advance democracy, especially if they are conducted under highly restrictive circumstances as in the case of Cambodia, or in an uneven political field dominated by personalities, like that of Indonesia.

The political and electoral reforms that Taiwan has undertaken ensure that political parties are stable, issue-based institutions which cannot be eclipsed

by larger-than-life personalities. Combined with independence of the judiciary and separation of powers, Taiwan appears to have met the institutional requisites necessary for the consolidation of democracy. Problems remain, as in any democracies, but Taiwan democracy appears to be strong enough to address these challenges.

Sadly, the case of Taiwan appears to be an exception to the rule in Southeast and East Asia. In this regard, the subregion has its work cut out for it in terms of institutionalizing multi-party democracy.

03

OUTLOOK ON CSOS' STRUGGLE AGAINST DIGITAL REPRESSION, FALSE INFORMATION AND DEMOCRATIC AWARENESS

Navigating the Digital Battleground: Repression, Resistance and the Fight against Digital Repression in Asia

By **NANDEN SEKAR ARUM**

for Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFENet)

In 2024, the fight to defend democracy in Asia is increasingly taking place in the digital world. More and more Asian governments are implementing cutting-edge tactics to carry out digital repression, from censorship and surveillance to using draconian regulations. However, digital freedom stakeholders also demonstrate their resilience in fighting for digital rights and pushing back against the symptoms of digital authoritarianism through various strategies.

THE STATE OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN ASIA

Digital repression in Asia is about controlling information and narratives. Fueling the spread of digital repression is the unholy alliance between autocratic governments and influential tech companies, which shapes our current digital landscape, and not for the better. The region's digital democracy faces increasing threats, both through strict regulations that limit freedom of expression, the use of AI technology for disinformation, and the strengthening of digital authoritarianism. With the increasing development of surveillance and information manipulation technologies, the challenges to digital freedom in the region continue to increase.

In Southeast Asia, several countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have experienced leadership transitions that have not improved human rights, especially digital ones. The new regimes continue to suppress freedom of expression through strict regulations for media and digital platforms. Independent media and citizen journalism are also under threat, while pro-regime

media continue to thrive. Meanwhile, Myanmar continues to cut off the internet and tighten controls on online expression, which, of course, will erode democratic space.

Meanwhile, the 2024 election period in South Asia also presents political and digital challenges, in the crucial elections in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, as well as Sri Lanka, which is forming a new government, and Bangladesh, which experienced massive student protests that overthrew the government. Social media plays a significant role in the political narrative, with major parties in several countries exploiting misinformation and using AI for campaigning. Digital repression is getting stronger, with internet cuts in Bangladesh, content restrictions in Pakistan and mass blocking of websites in India. The Online Safety Act in Sri Lanka also limits freedom of expression, showing how increasing authoritarianism controls the digital space.

Several political events and technological developments in 2024 also significantly impact digital democracy in Asia. At least, three main aspects reflect this condition:

1. Elections and Digital Manipulation

The first is the elections and digital manipulation experienced by several countries in the region. This election was marked by disinformation campaigns, propaganda using deepfakes, and various state-sponsored cyber disruptions. In Taiwan, several beauty and fashion influencers allegedly spread false claims about election fraud ahead of the election. These claims reflect an influence campaign originating from China to prevent voting in Taiwan.

In Bangladesh, pro-government bloggers launched

a disinformation campaign that portrayed the opposition as a tool of foreign interests, especially the United States. Similar tactics were used in South Korea, where President Yoon Suk-yeol and the People Power Party attacked independent media outlets for spreading “fake news” to undermine criticism ahead of the 2024 legislative elections.

Technological advances have also changed the way disinformation is spread. Generative AI is now being used to create false political narratives in several Asian countries. However, the depth and lasting impact of AI-based disinformation on election results is yet to be fully grasped. Some AI campaigns fail to impact due to a lack of user engagement significantly, or while others use AI mostly for troll and not information warfare which can “turn off” voters. The challenge for fact-checkers is growing as AI technology continues to advance at a rapid pace.

2. Rising digital authoritarianism

Digital authoritarianism in the region is also expanding. Governments and non-state actors in Southeast Asia restrict rights online. This includes blocking access, putting limits on content, and violations of the right to privacy along with legal and extralegal repercussions for online speech. In addition, internet shutdowns continue to occur and surveillance technology is also used using technology purchased from global companies, making digital activism even more risky.

The election has also prompted governments in several countries to tighten laws related to censorship to control election-related information. For example, the Indonesian government launched a policy to remove illegal content online through cooperation between Bawaslu, Kominfo and the police. Unfortunately, the transparency in the implementation of this policy is questionable given its potential for abuse of power to silence criticism of the government.

In India, the government is using the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to control the narrative on social media ahead of the 2024 general elections. The ministry is pressuring platforms like X and Instagram to restrict access to accounts critical of the government and supporting the opposition.

Further concerns are being raised over the growing use of artificial intelligence and mass surveillance technologies to track, monitor and suppress

criticism. China, a leader in digital authoritarianism, is increasingly exporting its surveillance model to other countries in Asia, equipping regimes with sophisticated tools to control the narrative. This leads to an erosion of privacy and increased self-censorship among journalists, activists and the public.

3. Failures of social media platforms

Social media platforms remain central to political battles, but their response to state-sponsored manipulation has been inconsistent. Tech companies are also reducing access to data on their platforms, hampering the work of fact-checkers and independent researchers to study the information space. For example, in August 2024, Meta shut down Crowdtangle, a key tool that enabled real-time content analysis on Facebook and Instagram. In September 2023, X banned nearly all data scraping on its site, cutting off a major data source for researchers.

COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE AGAINST DIGITAL REPRESSION

The pushback against digital repression in the region has been largely uneven. While stakeholders in countries like Indonesia and Taiwan are able to mount sustained responses, territories such as Hong Kong are not able to witness the pushback manifested elsewhere in the region. This unevenness may be caused by available resources and capacity, and the openness of civic space. In many countries, governments have introduced broad and ambiguous cybersecurity laws, criminalizing online dissent and tightening controls on digital content. Such laws often target various stakeholders such as human rights activists, independent media and political opposition, creating a climate of fear that hampers free expression.

3. Strengthening digital security capacity for activists and journalists

As the risk of digital surveillance and attacks increases, various organizations have invested heavily in digital security training for activists, journalists and other vulnerable groups. This training covers encryption of communications, use of VPNs, secure password management and strategies to evade online surveillance.

The report “Digital Security Perceptions and Practices among Journalists Active in Myanmar”

Navigating the Digital Battleground: Repression, Resistance and the Fight against Digital Repression in Asia

By **NANDEN SEKAR ARUM**

for Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFENet)

highlights that journalists face significant threats from low-tech surveillance. It emphasizes that a universal security approach is ineffective and urges a holistic strategy. Security training should enhance digital skills while also addressing physical and psychological well-being, implementing organizational protocols, and involving journalists in the training design.

While this training has increased activists' digital resilience, challenges remain. Governments are increasingly adopting sophisticated surveillance technologies, including spyware that can infiltrate personal devices. In addition, cyberattacks on journalists and human rights organizations are on the rise, demonstrating that efforts to protect digital freedoms must continually adapt to evolving threats.

4. Fact-checking campaigns and countering disinformation

Disinformation has become a primary weapon for authoritarian governments to control the political narrative. In response, some organizations have developed fact-checking networks that work to identify and debunk false claims, especially during election periods.

With the legitimization of fact-checking work over the past decade, fact-checkers have proven to be successful in dispelling lies, rumors, and disinformation over critical election periods and through ongoing public health crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, a major challenge in the fight against disinformation is the scale and speed at which it spreads. The massive production of fake news and social media algorithms that amplify sensational content means that verified information often loses out to misleading narratives. In addition, many fact-checkers are subject to online attacks and intimidation, further hampering their work and there are practical concerns of funding and sustainability of the fact-checking effort.

5. Challenging repressive regulations

through strategic litigation

Among the important efforts organizations engaged in is challenging repressive laws through strategic litigation. In several countries, digital advocacy groups have filed lawsuits against overly restrictive censorship laws, criticizing provisions that allow websites or social media accounts to be blocked without a transparent legal process.

For example, in India, stakeholders challenged a regulation that allowed the government to arbitrarily conduct internet shutdowns, online censorship, invasive media regulations, threats to end-to-end encryption, and the unchecked deployment of facial recognition technology.

However, the success of these legal efforts has been highly variable. Some Asian courts remain subject to political pressure, so lawsuits often rule in favor of the status quo. Nevertheless, strategic litigation remains an important tool to pressure governments to be more careful in implementing repressive policies.

6. Promoting accountability for digital platforms

Many stakeholders have also begun pressuring large tech companies such as Meta, X (Twitter), and TikTok to be more transparent in their content moderation policies. This includes advocating for stricter regulation of the spread of disinformation, demanding transparency in content removals, and demanding that digital platforms not simply bow to censorship requests from authoritarian governments.

In Vietnam, for example, Facebook has been criticized for censoring human rights activists and restricting content critical of the government. In Indonesia, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok faced public criticism for a lack of transparency in content moderation policies, the effectiveness of algorithms, and responsiveness to complaints.

While there has been some success in pushing tech companies to be more transparent, the results are far from ideal. Many platforms prioritize business

interests over democratic integrity, making them reluctant to resist government pressure to curtail free expression.

ADJUSTING THE STRATEGY

The year 2024 is a pivotal point in Asia's digital freedom dynamics. With increasing regulation of censorship, manipulation of information, and pressure on civil society actors, the challenges of maintaining a free and democratic digital space are increasingly complex. However, the responses emerging from civil society groups (CSOs), journalists, and the technology community show that collective efforts can still be a counterweight to increasingly aggressive digital authoritarianism.

Reports from digital freedom monitoring organizations, such as Access Now and Freedom House, show worrying trends in internet access restrictions during elections, increasing cyberattacks on journalists, and the use of AI-based surveillance technology by governments. Amid these pressures, digital resistance strategies are evolving. The following steps are part of the response taken by Asian pro-democracy actors.

7. Strengthening regional and cross-sectoral collaboration

In the face of digital repression, close collaboration between civil society organizations (CSOs), legal experts, journalists, and technologists is crucial. Regional coalitions, such as the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), Open Government Partnership (OGP), and ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) can expand networks to share resources, expertise, and advocacy strategies, enabling a more coordinated response to state-led digital authoritarianism.

8. Advancing proactive legislative advocacy

Rather than simply reacting to repressive laws, democracy advocates should proactively push for strong legislation on digital rights. This includes

advocating for data protection laws, transparency requirements for AI-driven surveillance, and stronger protections for free expression online.

Building digital resilience at the grassroots level

Increasing digital literacy campaigns is critical to empowering citizens to recognize and counter digital oppression. This includes educating the public on identifying disinformation, enhancing their digital security, using encrypted communication tools, and protecting their privacy online. SAFENet, for example, consistently advocates for victims of digital rights violations and engages in human rights-based internet policy advocacy.

9. Holding big tech accountable

CSOs should pressure tech companies to improve content moderation, prevent the algorithmic spread of misinformation, and be more transparent about their engagement with governments. This could involve strategic litigation, advocacy for stronger regulation, and consumer awareness campaigns.

10. Leveraging of decentralized technologies

As the digital space becomes more centralized, activists should look into decentralized platforms, such as blockchain-based communication tools and federated social media networks, to create alternative spaces for democratic discourse that are free from government and corporate control.

CONCLUSION

2024 has shown that challenges to digital freedom in Asia are growing, but the responses are also increasingly diverse. From cross-sector collaboration to exploring new technologies, efforts are being made to defend the digital democratic space.

However, the challenges are not over. As governments' surveillance and information manipulation tools become more sophisticated, strategies to defend digital freedom must continue to evolve. If civil society, academia, and the technology community can strengthen cooperation and innovation, there is hope that digital democracy can survive amidst increasing pressures.

The Struggle against disinformation: Dissecting the Ecosystem

By **SUNGHACK LIM** (*University of Seoul*)
for the Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN)

Disinformation is becoming an increasingly significant challenge in Asia, with its prevalence expected to intensify in the coming years. This trend is driven by several key factors that contribute to the region's vulnerability to disinformation and its spread.

First, Asia continues to have a large population of social media users, many of whom operate within closed networks due to privacy concerns, the desire to connect with like-minded users, and other information security considerations. This ecosystem remains particularly susceptible to the rapid dissemination of disinformation, as information tends to circulate within echo chambers with limited external fact-checking.

Second, the political exploitation of disinformation has been a persistent issue in many Asian countries, with a notable escalation during election periods. Asian countries are especially vulnerable given persistent issues on weak electoral administration and campaign regulations. This pattern is expected to persist and potentially worsen in Asian nations scheduled for elections in 2025 given growing political divides and instability the region is experiencing. Furthermore, foreign electoral interference on social media discourses, particularly from actors such as China and Russia, continues to be a concern as these nations leverage disinformation to advance their geopolitical interests.

Third, the emergence of AI-powered disinformation campaigns in Asia presents a worrying trend. The sophisticated use of artificial intelligence in creating and spreading false narratives poses new challenges to information integrity and democratic processes.

Last, the generally low levels of media literacy among Asian populations exacerbate the issue. Many citizens lack the critical skills necessary to differentiate between reliable information and disinformation, making them more susceptible to

manipulation.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the rapid proliferation of social media and advancements in AI technology across Asia have also yielded positive outcomes, such as enhanced information accessibility and increased civic engagement. This presents a complex dilemma: stringent regulations aimed at curbing disinformation might inadvertently suppress these beneficial aspects of digital communication. Consequently, finding an effective solution that balances the mitigation of disinformation with the preservation of digital freedoms remains a significant challenge.

DISINFORMATION'S FERTILE ECOSYSTEM

The widespread adoption of social media platforms has led to exceptionally high usage rates of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp across most Asian countries. A recent study evaluating internet usage in Southeast Asia revealed that adolescents aged 16-24 spend an average of 10 hours per day online (Kemp 2021). This extensive engagement with digital platforms significantly amplifies the risk of exposure to disinformation in the region. In 2023, the Asia-Pacific region accounted for approximately 60% of the global social media user base. With a steady annual growth rate of 2.7%, this region was projected to add over 59 million new users in 2024, surpassing the combined global user growth. The trend of increasing social media subscriptions and usage time is expected to continue into 2025, further exacerbating the potential for disinformation spread.

According to DataReportal's survey of internet users aged 14-64 in the Asia-Pacific region during the fourth quarter of 2023, significant variations in social media usage patterns were observed across different countries [Figure 1]. The study, which

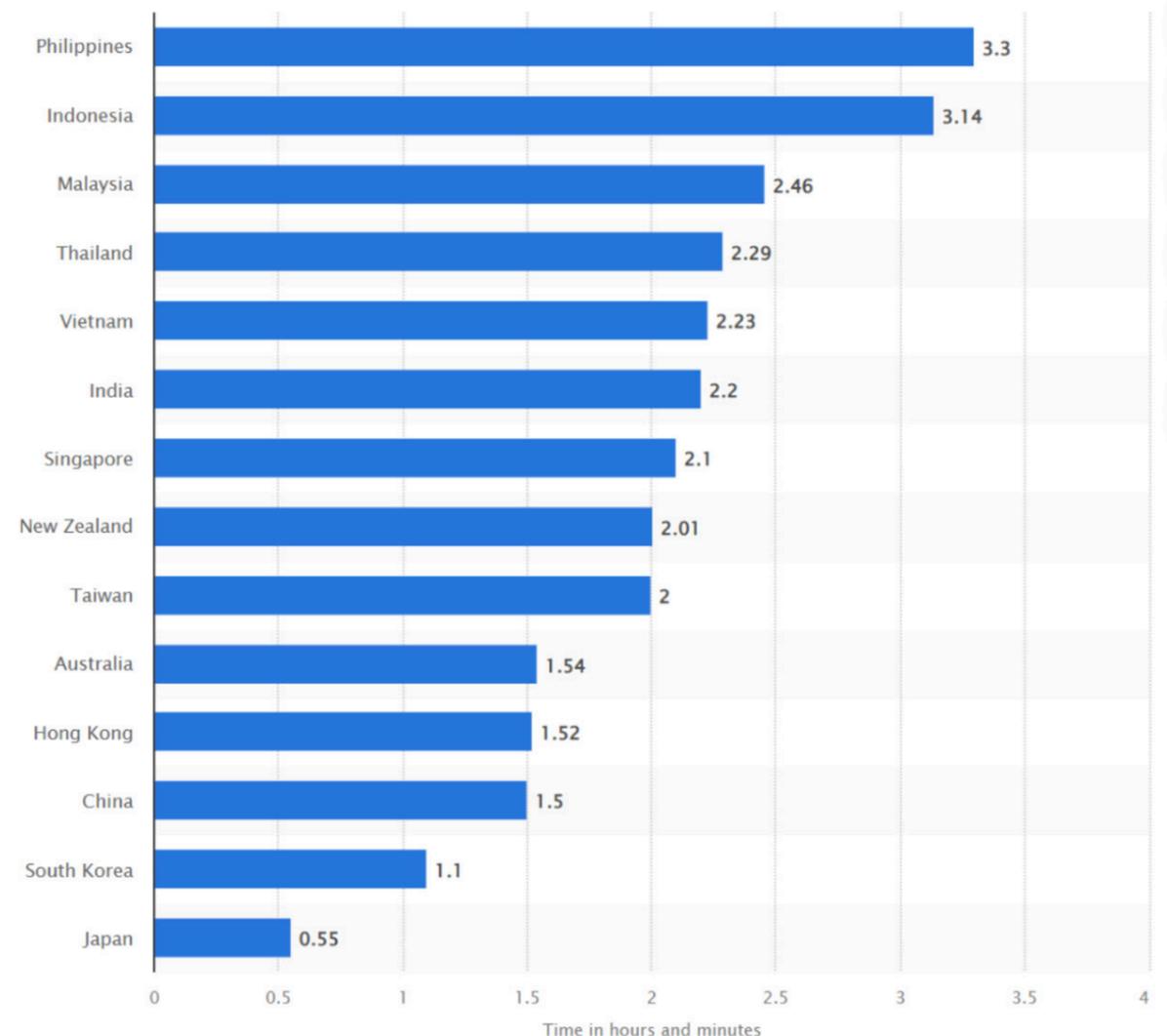
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examined the average daily time spent on social media platforms, revealed that the Philippines led the region in social media engagement. Internet users in the Philippines demonstrated the highest average daily social media usage, spending three hours and 30 minutes per day on these platforms. This finding underscores the substantial role that social media plays in the daily lives of Filipino internet users. Following the Philippines, Indonesia emerged as the second most active country in terms of social media usage. Malaysia and Thailand also exhibited

notable levels of engagement, ranking third and fourth respectively in the survey. The data suggests that social media has become deeply embedded in the daily routines of internet users in these countries, potentially influencing various aspects of social interaction, information dissemination, and consumer behavior.

[Figure 1] Average daily time spent using social media in the Asia-Pacific region in the 4th quarter of 2023, by country or territory (in hours and minutes)



The Struggle against disinformation: Dissecting the Ecosystem

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Beyond the issues of subscriber numbers and usage time, the network structure of social media platforms presents an additional challenge. Popular social media and messaging apps in Asia such as Facebook, Tiktok, WhatsApp and X (formerly Twitter) predominantly feature closed networks known as “walled gardens.” Information disseminated through these networks tends to resonate strongly, as recipients place greater trust in groups sharing similar perspectives. These “walled gardens” are characterized by restricted user groups, where users primarily connect with individuals holding similar viewpoints. This structure facilitates trust-based information sharing, leading users to place higher confidence in information circulated within their intimate networks. Consequently, this closed network structure creates an environment conducive to the rapid spread of fake news, allowing it to gain credibility without proper verification, thereby increasing vulnerability to the proliferation of false information (Yee 2017). For instance, in the Philippines, disinformation spread by supporters of President Rodrigo Duterte through Facebook pages and groups have been instrumental in shoring up support for the administration’s bloody “war on drugs”.

THE PROLIFERATION OF POLITICAL DISINFORMATION AND FOREIGN ELECTORAL INTERFERENCE

Political disinformation has emerged as a paramount concern in numerous countries, with its prevalence particularly acute during electoral periods (Kajimoto and Stanley 2018). The extensive utilization of social media platforms by politicians for voter engagement and campaign purposes has led to a significant surge in disinformation targeting sensitive issues such as religion and ethnicity during election seasons. Organized dissemination of false information by cybertroopers has been documented (Iannone 2022). Various political actors and parties have employed digital campaign specialists and engaged entities such as ‘buzzers’ (Indonesia), ‘trolls’

(Philippines), and ‘IO’ (information operators, Thailand) to propagate manipulated narratives aimed at discrediting political opponents. Some politicians have resorted to exacerbating religious (Indonesia/Thailand) and ethnic tensions (all three countries) within communities in desperate attempts to secure votes. Concurrently, technology platforms, journalists, and fact-checkers are struggling to keep pace with the sophisticated innovations of disinformation architects. Notably, state actors and government legislators in these countries have been implicated not only in failing to mitigate disinformation but also in directly producing political falsehoods. This involvement of official entities in the creation and spread of disinformation presents a significant challenge to information integrity and democratic processes in the region.

Elections in Asia have transcended domestic concerns, evolving into a matter of international significance. Recent evidence has revealed that nations such as Russia, China, and Iran are actively intervening in foreign electoral processes to advance their own geopolitical interests through various means, as a response to the West’s pivot to Asia, and in an effort to assist local allies more sympathetic to their cause. Among these, the dissemination of disinformation has emerged as the most prevalent form of foreign electoral interference. The content of this disinformation is strategically crafted to exacerbate existing societal tensions, targeting fault lines along racial, class, religious, and generational divides. This deliberate amplification of polarization poses a significant threat to democratic institutions and processes. Foreign electoral interference, particularly through disinformation campaigns, represents a complex challenge to the integrity of democratic systems. These interventions exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in open societies, leveraging digital platforms and social media algorithms to maximize their impact.

According to Wang Chan-Hsi of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research, China’s influence operations are increasingly leveraging

The rise of AI presents a complex dilemma for democracies across Asia. Governments and politicians from the Philippines to South Korea are grappling with AI’s dual potential: its capacity to improve voter engagement, streamline campaigns, and enhance election administration, juxtaposed against its ability to propagate misinformation and potentially undermine the integrity of democratic processes.



algorithms on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok to disseminate a high volume of short videos laden with messaging favorable to the Chinese Communist Party. Researchers from Princeton University have found that this content is finely calibrated to target specific demographics, including elderly voters who may be more susceptible to misinformation and younger viewers whose political identities are not yet fully formed. These sophisticated tactics exploit the algorithmic curation of content on social media platforms, which may exacerbate political polarization by amplifying content consistent with users’ existing beliefs while suppressing contradictory information (McCartney 2024).

Strengthening vertical accountability mechanisms is critical to addressing these threats. In this context, vertical accountability refers to citizens’ efforts to hold their governments accountable through elections, political parties, media, and civil society organizations (CSOs). By equipping citizens, media, and civil society organizations with tools to scrutinize government actions and electoral processes, democratic resilience against disinformation can be enhanced. ADRN has been actively advancing vertical accountability as a key pillar of democratic governance in Asia by, conducting regional research and policy discussions on how informed citizen participation can counter political manipulation and uphold electoral integrity.

AI-DRIVEN DISINFORMATION

OpenAI’s recent disclosure of five covert influence campaigns utilizing its artificial intelligence (AI) technologies for deceptive manipulation of public opinion worldwide has brought to light the growing concern over AI’s role in disseminating disinformation, particularly during election periods (Metz 2024). This revelation underscores the potential for AI-generated misinformation to significantly impact voter trust, distort perceptions of candidates and issues, and potentially manipulate electoral outcomes. The increasing sophistication of AI tools has facilitated the production of fake news, deepfakes, and misleading narratives with unprecedented ease. Globally, there has been a 245% year-on-year increase in deepfake incidents, with some Asian-Pacific countries experiencing even more dramatic surges: South Korea (1625%), Indonesia (1550%), and India (280%). This trend is particularly alarming given the numerous elections scheduled for 2024 and 2025 across various nations. Indonesia’s recent experience exemplifies the challenges posed by AI-generated misinformation in electoral contexts.

Deepfake videos featuring presidential candidate Anies Baswedan speaking fluent Arabic and the late president Suharto endorsing a Golkar Party candidate garnered millions of views. The Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society reported a doubling of

AI-related disinformation compared to previous elections (Beltran 2024). The rise of AI presents a complex dilemma for democracies across Asia. Governments and politicians from the Philippines to South Korea are grappling with AI's dual potential: its capacity to improve voter engagement, streamline campaigns, and enhance election administration, juxtaposed against its ability to propagate misinformation and potentially undermine the integrity of democratic processes.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY IN COMBATING DISINFORMATION

In the contemporary digital landscape, the proliferation of disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic processes and social stability. To effectively address this challenge, the development of robust media literacy capabilities among citizens is paramount. Media literacy, defined as the ability to critically analyze, evaluate, and create media content, serves as a crucial defense mechanism against the spread of false or misleading information.

The importance of media literacy is particularly pronounced in Asian countries, where the rapid digitalization of information ecosystems has outpaced the development of critical media consumption skills among the general population.

The OECD's 2021 report "21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World" provides valuable insights into the media literacy capabilities of students across different countries. This study, released in May 2021, offers a comprehensive assessment of 15-year-old students' ability to navigate and evaluate digital information, with a particular focus on their capacity to distinguish between facts and opinions. The results of this assessment revealed significant disparities in digital literacy skills among OECD member countries. Notably, South Korean students, despite their generally high performance in reading skills, demonstrated a surprisingly low proficiency in distinguishing facts from opinions. Only 25.6% of Korean students successfully

identified factual information from opinions, a figure substantially below the OECD average of 47% (OECD 2021).

To address these challenges, a concerted effort to enhance media literacy education across Asia is imperative. This endeavor should encompass formal education systems, from primary schools to universities, as well as adult education programs and public awareness campaigns. Curriculum development should focus on critical thinking skills, digital literacy, and the ability to verify information sources. However, Governments and civil society are taking various measures, including legislation, fact-checking, and media literacy education. However, effective measures have been hampered by concerns about infringements on freedom of expression (Kajimoto and Stanley 2018).

In response to these challenges, ADRN and its members have undertaken several initiatives to enhance information integrity. In 2024, EAI, in collaboration with ADRN, conducted a study on disinformation's impact on democracy in South Korea. The findings highlighted the need for stronger media literacy efforts over punitive measures.

Beyond research, ADRN has taken steps to translate findings into practical strategies. In May 2024, ADRN hosted its 15th regional workshop, co-organized with Hitotsubashi University Institute for Global Governance Research (GGR), where researchers and activists explored ways to counter disinformation and authoritarian narratives. The session, titled 'How to Bring Disinformation Research into Practice,' facilitated discussions on implementing experimental research findings in ADRN's broader efforts. Such initiatives emphasize the importance of bridging academic research with real-world applications to enhance media literacy and democratic resilience.

Additionally, ADRN fosters partnerships between civil society organizations, academic institutions, and fact-checking networks to strengthen regional responses to disinformation. These initiatives aim to equip both policymakers and the public with critical tools to assess information, reducing susceptibility to manipulation.

04

OUR STATE OF SECURITY AND PEACE IN THE AGE OF AUTOCRATIC EXPANSION: HIGHLIGHTING EFFORTS TO BUILD PEACE AND RESPONDING TO SECURITIZATION

A quick take on militarization, securitization, and authoritarianism

By **TUAN NGUYEN-M**

Initiatives for International Dialogue



and securitized responses to anti-colonial, liberation movements. Postcolonial national governments replicate these tactics to maintain concentrated power to the political and military elites. In fact, military dictatorships dominated many parts of 20th century Southeast Asia, from Myanmar to the Philippines. Most of the ongoing armed conflicts across the region originated from heightened militarism and oppressive governance, and remain intertwined with authoritarian rules and historical injustice.

The currently dominant concepts and practices of top-down security and militarism are inherently exclusive, elitist, macho, and undemocratic. Hard security discourses require threat identification that demands policy intervention. ‘Threats’ are most often conveniently designated by political elites to the most vulnerable elements of society, be it the homeless, migrants, those in extreme poverty, queers, or ethnic minoritized individuals and communities. Designating vulnerable groups as security threats not only denies their right to safety but also excludes their participation in democratic political processes. In the Philippines, for example, drug users are problematized as a security threat by elite politicians, championed by the Duterte political dynasty, and provide ammunition to a militarized war machine against the Filipino people. The interlinks between abuse of security and rising authoritarianism are explored at length in our publication, [“An explosive cocktail – Counter-terrorism, militarisation and authoritarianism in the Philippines.”](#)

Securitized and militarized discourses masculinize politics and society. In Malaysia, for example, the draft P/CVE national action plan classifies all LGBT+ individuals as “extremists.” The dominating patriarchal framing of the government and the armed forces as top-down ‘caretakers’ and ‘security providers’ of the society promotes militaristic approach as the default response to conflicts. Meanwhile, other forms

of bottom-up conflict resolution, such as community dialogues, indigenous reconciliation processes, and transitional justice, are considered too lengthy or too ‘soft’ to yield results.

Autocratic governments manufacture threats and cultivate fear in the public sentiment to maintain the role of the armed forces as the necessary ‘stabilizer’ and ‘peace guarantor’. ‘National security’, ‘social harmony’, and ‘political stability’ are often used as a pretext to vilify agents of social change and to silence dissent. [The Asia Pacific regional consultation on the impact of counter-terrorism on civil society and civic space](#), conducted by the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights, found that, in the region, “law with sedition and terrorism grounds has been used systematically to silence democracy advocates and human rights defenders, all but eliminating the presence of civil society”. Meanwhile, the discourse and formulation of a national security agenda is kept out of sight from the public eye and often evades scrutiny from elected members of parliaments and various accountability processes.

Hard security discourses, either on migration (i.e. ‘securing borders’), on gender norms (i.e. ‘safeguarding traditional social values’, or on civic space (i.e. against ‘foreign interventions’ or ‘subversion’), play conveniently into the hands of populists. They offer an oversimplified analysis of social issues and offer a quick fix using direct intervention from the highest political offices and the security elites. As a consequence, hard security normalizes emergency politics and polarizes society, bypassing community-led, sustainable processes that address the root causes of societal issues, processes including community mediation, social healing, community-led development, conflict transformation, etc.

Zooming in on 2024, trends of securitization and

militarization continue, contributing to the democratic backsliding of the region. Armed forces assert increasing dominance in civilian politics, shaping policy discourses and popular cultures. The people of Myanmar are going into the fourth year of revolution against the brutal military dictatorship, with a unified revolutionary goal of eradicating the relevance of the Myanmar armed forces from civilian politics. The Myanmar military has so far held on power partly through its oligarchic economy, and partly because neighboring governments with similar hard security governance mindsets share the sympathetic sentiments with the Myanmar military and refrain from supporting the people’s revolution.

A culture of impunity and abuse of public insecurity engenders the rise of militaristic governance in more advanced democratic countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. Meanwhile, Vietnam saw a dramatic securocratic turn with the rapid rise of a career security official to the highest position in the country’s political system, paving way for the security bureaucracy to overtake key government and Party positions.

Civil society in the region needs to better understand the trends of securitization and militarization in the region and their impacts on our respective work, be it democratic promotion, criminal justice reform, migrant and refugee protection, environmental rights defence, climate activism, or independent journalism. Social movements should carve out space to develop their own analysis on security, understand what it means to be safe from different perspectives, and propose our visions of security as viable alternatives to the dominant top-down security framework that is the root cause of many social issues we are confronting.

Democratic Progression and Regression: Women's Role in Peace and Security in Asia

By **RUBY KHOLIFAH**

for Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN)

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in Asia faces mounting challenges, with significant implications for women's rights and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. This article examines the interplay between democratic regression, militarization, legal restrictions, and the persistent underfunding of gender equality initiatives, drawing on recent developments and data from across the region.

Drawing from the experiences of grassroots organizations, peace processes, and civil society actors especially AMAN Indonesia it explores the barriers and breakthroughs shaping women's leadership in fragile democracies. While setbacks are widespread, regional resistance, feminist organizing, and multilateral commitments offer glimmers of hope.

DEMOCRACY IN PERIL

Democratic institutions in Asia are under threat from electoral manipulation, political dynasties, and shrinking civic space. The 2024 Indonesian documentary *Dirty Vote*, directed by Dandhy Dwi Laksono, exposes how electoral fraud, money politics, vote-buying, and bribery undermine public trust and democratic integrity. The film highlights the manipulation of political instruments during elections, with constitutional law experts pointing to the consolidation of power within elite families, exemplified by the Constitutional Court's decision favoring Gibran Rakabumingraka. Weak electoral oversight enables fraud, intimidation, and procedural violations, fostering impunity. Media bias and disinformation, especially through social media influencers, have been used to rebrand President

Jokowi's administration and undermine opposition narratives.

Similar challenges are evident in other Asian countries. In the Philippines, political dynasties dominate, limiting the emergence of new leadership. Both Indonesia and the Philippines experience widespread vote-buying and money politics, undermining electoral fairness and public trust. Thailand, like Indonesia, struggles with military influence over politics, raising concerns about the impartiality of elections and manipulation of outcomes. These shared issues underscore the need for electoral reforms, stronger oversight mechanisms, and better public awareness to ensure democratic integrity across the region.

Myanmar's military coup and Afghanistan's Taliban regime have institutionalized the systemic exclusion of women, while in South Asia, patriarchal laws in India and Pakistan and discriminatory local regulations in Indonesia continue to undermine women's rights and legal protections.

Global policy decisions for example, the USAID ban under the Trump administration hindered humanitarian aid to conflict-affected areas, cutting critical support for gender-based violence prevention, reproductive health, and economic empowerment. This policy withdrawal directly impacted women and girls in countries like Syria and Afghanistan, weakening efforts to uphold their rights and security.

The shrinking of civic space and rise in authoritarianism directly affect women peacebuilders, who are surveilled, harassed, and excluded from decision-making. The rollback of democracy is not gender-neutral it strengthens structures that seek to silence feminist resistance and marginalize women's leadership.

GLOBAL SECURITY CONTEXT

Global peace and security face an unprecedented crisis, with a growing portion of the world's population experiencing multiple, overlapping threats. The United Nations Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace highlights key global security challenges, including shifting conflict dynamics, persistent violence beyond war zones, the weaponization of emerging technologies, widening inequalities, shrinking civic space, and the climate emergency.

Asia and the Pacific are particularly vulnerable, grappling with frequent climate-induced disasters, economic instability, and humanitarian crises. According to UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced and stateless people is projected to reach 130.8 million by the end of 2024, with 15.6 million in Asia and the Pacific. Ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Myanmar remain the primary drivers of displacement, while worsening climate-related disasters continue to force internal migration across the region.

WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA: PROGRESS AND REGRESSION

Since the adoption of the WPS agenda in October 2000, 110 countries have nationalized the framework into National Action Plans (NAPs) or integrated it into gender equality frameworks. However, the United Nations Secretary-General's report on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) dated 24 September 2024 highlights the detrimental effects of democratic backsliding on women's rights and their participation in peace and security processes. The report underscores that the erosion of democratic institutions often leads to the suppression of women's rights, limiting their involvement in decision-making and peacebuilding efforts. This not only undermines gender equality but also impedes the achievement of sustainable peace, as inclusive participation is crucial for effective conflict resolution and long-term stability.

In 2023, women and girls continued to face grave challenges in conflict situations, with a significant rise in violence against them. The number of women killed in armed conflicts doubled, while cases of conflict-related sexual violence increased by 50%. The number of girls subjected to grave violations

in conflicts rose by 35%. Despite these alarming statistics, there is a lack of public awareness about these issues. Media coverage of conflicts has increased, yet only 5% focuses on women's experiences, and a mere 0.04% highlights their roles as leaders. Women and girls facing intersecting forms of discrimination are particularly vulnerable and need more attention.

LEGAL GENDER RESTRICTIONS

Legal frameworks across Asia continue to perpetuate gender inequality, particularly in conflict-affected areas. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 marked a major setback for the WPS agenda. Since then, over 118 decrees have been issued restricting women's rights, according to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Women and girls have been barred from secondary and higher education, prohibited from most forms of employment including in NGOs and excluded from public spaces like parks and gyms. These policies, enforced through strict dress codes and movement restrictions, have effectively erased women from public life, leaving them vulnerable to violence and without recourse.

In South Asia, gender inequality remains embedded in legal systems. In India, despite reforms like the 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act, personal laws around marriage, divorce, and inheritance continue to favour men especially in rural areas where customary practices dominate. Similarly, in Pakistan, restrictive family laws, weak inheritance rights, and inadequate protections from domestic violence reinforce gender disparities, particularly in underserved regions.

In Indonesia, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) reported 305 discriminatory local regulations still in effect as of 2022, down from 421 in 2016. These laws target women and minority groups, undermining their rights and reinforcing structural discrimination. Komnas Perempuan continues to call for the review and repeal of these measures to ensure equal protection under the law.

MILITARIZATION AND SHRINKING SPACE FOR WOMEN

Militarization poses a serious threat to women's rights and participation in peace processes across

Democratic Progression and Regression: Women’s Role in Peace and Security in Asia

By **RUBY KHOLIFAH**

for Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN)



Asia. In Myanmar, following the 2021 military coup, the junta violently suppressed civilian resistance, curtailed political freedoms, and marginalized women in peace efforts. The crackdown on ethnic minorities, including women, has exacerbated insecurity and human rights abuses, entrenching gender inequality and impeding WPS agenda implementation.

In the Philippines, militarized peace and security policies, particularly under former President Rodrigo Duterte, undermined women’s roles in peacebuilding especially in conflict-affected areas like Mindanao. The Philippine Commission on Women (2020) and the Philippine Human Rights Defenders Alliance (2021) highlighted how counterinsurgency operations led to harassment, displacement, and shrinking civic space, limiting women’s participation in negotiations and political processes. These reports emphasize how the continuation of militarized policies not only led to human rights violations but also risked marginalizing women’s contributions to peace and security, undermining the achievement of the WPS agenda in the country.

In Papua, Indonesia, militarization has profound implications for the WPS agenda, particularly due to the militarized presence that undermines women’s rights and participation in peacebuilding. According to a report by the Papuan Women’s Association (2020), the continuous security operations in Papua have contributed to an environment where women are vulnerable to violence, including sexual violence by security forces, and face intimidation that suppresses their active participation in local peace processes. The militarization not only exacerbates physical threats but also affects women’s economic independence, social mobility, and access to education. Additionally, the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras, 2021) underscores the deepening inequality and human rights violations, highlighting that Papuan women are often excluded from decision-making spaces, especially in peace and security matters. This exclusion and the pervasive militarized climate prevent the realization of gender equality and sustainable peace, which are core components of the WPS agenda. As long as the military continues to

play a dominant role in Papua’s political and social life, the efforts to integrate women into peace and security processes will remain severely constrained.

FEMINIST ORGANIZING FROM THE GROUND: AMAN INDONESIA

Against this backdrop of repression, AMAN Indonesia offers a model of feminist organizing rooted in progressive faith, local leadership, and movement-building. AMAN has played a pivotal role in advancing the WPS agenda in Indonesia and beyond by integrating gender, peace, and religious reform through community-based strategies.

AMAN’s advocacy was instrumental in shaping Indonesia’s National Action Plan on WPS. Through workshops, consultations, and training programs, the organization has worked with hundreds of government officials and CSO leaders in provinces including Aceh, Lombok, Semarang, and Ambon. These efforts fostered inclusive approaches to peace and security policymaking and created a multiplier effect as trained officials passed on knowledge within their communities.

AMAN also supported the creation of the Indonesia Congress of Women Ulama (KUPI), a groundbreaking movement to reclaim religious authority from patriarchal control. Through fatwas grounded in lived experience and social justice, KUPI has helped secure the 2022 Sexual Violence Crime Law and raise the legal marriage age for girls. KUPI’s teachings have entered academic spaces, influencing curricula and expanding intergenerational engagement.

In rural areas, AMAN’s Women’s School of Peace operates in 45 villages, nurturing a new generation of feminist leaders. These women are challenging deeply embedded patriarchal norms, promoting SDG-aligned local development, and engaging in policymaking. Their leadership proves that the most transformative peacebuilding is often led from below—by women building power from the grassroots up.

AMAN’s experience also inspired a formal mechanism of civil society engagement on violent extremism. Through the Working Group on Women and P/CVE, AMAN helped catalyze the creation of Pokja Tematis—a 36-member body monitoring implementation. These contributions illustrate how feminist actors can shape not only discourse but also institutional architecture.

ASEAN AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

ASEAN has made significant strides in institutionalizing the Women, Peace and Security agenda in South-east Asia. The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security, adopted in 2022, mobilizes all member states to advance WPS implementation and promote sustainable peace and security for all citizens. ASEAN’s approach is comprehensive, addressing not only women’s participation in peace processes but also issues such as violent extremism, disaster management, and climate change. Recent initiatives include the launch of a Localisation Toolkit and Guidelines to help member states adapt WPS policies to national contexts, with countries like Indonesia and the Philippines already implementing national action plans. Regional forums, such as the Central Asian Women’s Dialogue, also highlight the importance of cooperation and women’s leadership in addressing cross-border peace and security challenges.

WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IN PEACE TALKS

Despite regional and global commitments, women’s participation as negotiators, mediators, and signatories in peace processes across Asia and the Pacific remains limited. In most major peace negotiations, women are underrepresented, and their perspectives are often absent from final agreements. However, evidence shows that when women are meaningfully included, peace processes are more likely to result in durable and inclusive outcomes. Regional initiatives, such as the Central Asian Women’s Dialogue, aim to strengthen women’s leadership in peacebuilding and ensure that their voices shape both formal negotiations and local conflict resolution efforts.

FUNDING GAPS AND GLOBAL DYNAMICS

Despite their critical role in conflict-affected contexts, women-led organizations receive less than 1% of global peace and security funding. This persistent gap reflects the broader devaluation of care work, prevention, and gender equity. Most women’s organizations rely on short-term, project-based aid and face bureaucratic hurdles that limit their impact.

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Although official development assistance (ODA) for gender equality is growing, only a small fraction reaches women's organizations. Between 2012 and 2013, just 2% of aid in fragile states targeted gender, and only \$130 million supported women's groups compared to \$31.8 billion in total aid. Within the UN, only 24% of entities tracked gender spending, and UNDP's funding for gender remained stagnant at 4.2%.

Donor efforts such as Canada's Women's Voice and Leadership Programme and the Netherlands' SDG5 Fund offer promising models, but access remains limited for grassroots movements. While countries like Belgium, Sweden, and the UK allocate significant portions of ODA to gender equality, implementation remains inconsistent and often symbolic. In 2024, the OECD committed to scaling support for feminist movements, and 16 countries in Asia and the Pacific have adopted National Action Plans on WPS—some with intersectional approaches.

To close the gap, donors must treat the UN's 15% target for gender-focused peacebuilding as a baseline, not a ceiling. Funding must be predictable, flexible, and long-term to realize the WPS agenda's transformative potential.

CONCLUSION

The state of democracy and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in Asia presents a complex picture of challenges and opportunities. Democratic backsliding, militarization, legal restrictions, and persistent underfunding continue to hinder progress on gender equality and inclusive peacebuilding. The erosion of democratic institutions often leads to the suppression of women's rights, limiting their involvement in decision-making and peacebuilding efforts and impeding the achievement of sustainable peace.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the interconnections between democratic governance, gender equality, and sustainable peace. Strengthening electoral integrity, increasing funding

for women's organizations, repealing discriminatory laws, and demilitarizing security approaches are essential steps for creating an enabling environment for women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes. As the region faces multiple crises, from political instability to climate change, the full implementation of the WPS agenda is not just a matter of women's rights but a fundamental requirement for building inclusive, resilient, and peaceful societies across Asia.

SOME RECOMMENDATION

Defend Civic Space and Protect Feminist Peace Activists

- Governments in the region must repeal restrictive laws that criminalize activism under the guise of national security.
- ASEAN and Pacific Islands Forum should establish a regional mechanism to monitor and respond to state repression of women peacebuilders.
- International donors must prioritize flexible funding for grassroots feminist organizations resisting authoritarianism and democratic backsliding.

Counter Gender Backlash with Intersectional Feminist Strategies

- Governments must integrate a gender perspective into countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs, ensuring women's rights are not compromised in security policies.
- Women's organizations should build coalitions with progressive religious scholars and Indigenous groups to counter fundamentalist narratives.
- Regional institutions must recognize and address the growing influence of anti-gender movements that undermine WPS efforts.

Guarantee Meaningful Participation of Women in Peace and Political Processes

- Governments should mandate gender quotas in peace negotiations, political structures, and security institutions.
- International peace efforts in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and the Philippines must ensure women's organizations are part of all negotiations, not just as observers.
- National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS must have clear accountability mechanisms to track women's inclusion in decision-making.

Shift from Militarized Security to Feminist Peacebuilding

- National budgets should reallocate military spending to community-based conflict prevention and gender-responsive security sector reforms.
- ASEAN should establish a Feminist Security Framework to prioritize human security, conflict prevention, and women-led mediation.
- Peacekeeping missions in the region must be reformed to integrate gender-sensitive approaches and recruit more women.

Ensure Protection and Support for Women Peacebuilders Facing Violence

- Governments must provide legal and security protections for women human rights defenders, including safe reporting mechanisms for threats and attacks.
- International organizations should strengthen emergency relocation and asylum pathways for women activists at risk, particularly in Afghanistan and conflict zones.
- Digital security initiatives must be expanded to protect women peacebuilders from online harassment and state surveillance.

Integrate Climate Justice into the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

- National policies on climate adaptation must recognize climate displacement as a gendered security issue and provide protections for affected women.
- Governments should increase funding for Indigenous and women-led environmental movements fighting extractive industries that fuel displacement and conflict.
- Pacific Island nations should lead efforts to push global climate financing mechanisms to prioritize gender-responsive disaster response and resilience-building.

Increase Sustainable Funding for Women-Led Peace and Security Initiatives

- Governments and international donors must commit at least 50% of peace and security funding to women-led organizations.
- Long-term, flexible funding must replace short-term project-based grants to enable sustainable feminist peacebuilding.
- Private sector actors should be held accountable for supporting gender justice in conflict-affected areas, ensuring corporate social responsibility aligns with WPS goals.
- Donors should adopt the UN's 15 percent target (the percentage of funds which should be earmarked for programmes that further gender equality and women's empowerment in peacebuilding contexts) within their own aid flows to conflict-affected contexts, with this percentage being the first, not final, target.
- Increase predictable, accessible and flexible funding for women's civil society organizations working on peace and security at all levels, including through dedicated financing instruments such as the new Global Acceleration Instrument on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action.

The Youth Movement as Agents of Change for Sustainable Democracy in Asia

By PHILUS GEORGE
Malaysia

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From the People, By the People, For the People

“From the People, By the People, For the People.” This phrase continues to echo across Asia, reverberating through civic squares, digital platforms, and protest movements, shaped by the energy and ideals of its youth. In this changing political terrain, the struggle for democracy is increasingly being shaped by young people—those who face significant barriers to engagement yet continue to push boundaries to protect and redefine democratic values.

This article explores how youth across Asia are navigating and shaping the relationship between democracy and sustainable development, not as separate themes but as interlinked forces. Youth led movements, whether on the streets of Myanmar or in decentralized networks like the Milk Tea Alliance have shown that democratic action is often driven by the urgency of issues young people face, including shrinking civic space, political exclusion, and access to timely, accurate information. However, their agency is often undermined by dismissive attitudes, generational hierarchies, and authoritarian resistance, raising questions about how legitimacy is constructed and contested when youth demand change,

Against this backdrop, young people grapple with questions like: What constitutes democracy in a time of digital authoritarianism? Can sustainable

development be achieved without democratic participation? Are these ideals foreign impositions, or can they be reclaimed within Asian value systems? These reflections aren't abstract, they play out in real struggles where young people fight to make space for their voices while confronting narratives that they are either too inexperienced or too idealistic to lead.

Yet, even as youth participation in formal spaces like elections appears to decline in parts of the region, they remain at the forefront of political imagination using creative, disruptive, and localized strategies to advocate for justice, accountability, and inclusion. These efforts are closely tied to broader regional and global agendas, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the 2024 People's Pact for the Future, which emphasized the role of future generations.

This article captures the views, strategies, and priorities of youth across several Asian countries highlighting the possibilities for democratic renewal when youth are not just included but empowered. From these stories emerge key insights and potential models for collective action across borders. While implementation remains uneven and early-stage, the cases explored here offer a glimpse into how youth are sustaining democratic action even amid deep constraints—and how solidarity, innovation, and shared learning can shape the region's future.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS FROM YOUTH ACTIVISTS ACROSS ASIA

South Asia (Pakistan & Afghanistan)

In Pakistan, youth activists continue to navigate a complex democratic landscape marked by military influence, political instability, and recurring threats to civil liberties. Despite a vibrant history of student unions and civic organizing, youth participation today is constrained by increasing state surveillance, crackdown on protests, and restrictive laws governing assembly, and speech. Financial insecurity faced by NGOs and CSOs further limits youth led initiatives, particularly those advocating for transparency and human rights. The shrinking of civic space through digital censorship, harassment of activists, and regulatory restrictions has created an environment of disempowerment and disengagement among many young people, even as others persist in funding new, often digital, avenues of resistance and organizing.

In Afghanistan, with the surrender of the democratic government to the Taliban in 2021, the political landscape shifted, causing democratic movements to halt their activities within Afghanistan. The leaders of these movements have fled due to fear of the Taliban, and the few individuals who remain in Afghanistan are either hiding out of fear of the Taliban or unable to speak about the democratic system. This posits a question of the nature of advocacy and rights held by humanitarian organisations in their pursuit of free speech and civic space for activism. This also posits a question of “who” has a say in deciding what is and what is not democracy in national politics? Surely it’s the citizens. With the Taliban regime, civic space and human rights have been severely harmed, and even the mention of civil activities has become difficult. Under such conditions, the activities of NGOs and civil institutions within Afghanistan have decreased due to the factors including: (1) Legal restrictions, (2) Surveillance and control by the Taliban, (3)

Lack of financial support from donors due to the absence of legal pathways, (4) Suppression of freedom of expression, and (5) Lack of trust between civil institutions in Afghanistan and those abroad. Challenges the youth of Afghanistan face are built upon a lack of trust between the young people and the government with an absence of opportunities for building trust. [1]

East Asia (Mongolia)

Post the transition from the socialist regime in 1990, over the years, Mongolia has seen the active participation of citizens in protests and demonstrations in pursuit of strengthening democracy through accountability and transparency of governance. [2] One recent example is the “Steppe Youth” movement, a youth led protest against corruption and abuse of power, which gained momentum in 2022 in response to a major coal theft scandal involving high-level officials. These demonstrations underscored the role of young people in demanding integrity from political leaders and institutions.

Despite such activism, a [poll](#)[3] conducted by the International Republican Institute noted an above average percentile of laypeople who felt unlikely to influence decisions. The youth make up a significant percentage in the electorate in Mongolia, and the turnout of youth[4] in elections are a concern for Mongolia. Youth activists also noted that civic spaces face challenges such as limited funding for NGOs, government-imposed restrictions on certain advocacy activities, and societal mistrust due to the politicization of some organizations. Additionally, the rural-urban divide limited the participation of citizens from remote areas, leaving their voices underrepresented in key national discussions.

Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar)

In the case of Indonesia, the democratic movement[5] most notably revitalized around the 2019-2020 period was recently characterized by the participation of student and youth groups, labor unions, and civil society organizations. One highlight was the lawsuit filed with the Constitutional Court challenging the presidential threshold rule, which requires parties or coalitions to have 20% of seats or 25% of the vote in past elections to nominate a candidate. Youth activists welcomed [6] the lawsuit as a move to broaden democratic access, arguing it could allow for more inclusive political competition and reduce elite dominance—sentiments echoed by large sections of the public frustrated with restricted political options. This initiative came at a time when concerns were mounting about democratic backsliding, especially following the election of Prabowo Subianto in 2024. Within civic spaces, civil society organisations also faced challenges such as forced dissolution, activity bans, and intimidation. Despite this, youth have remained vocal, particularly on social media platforms, using them to raise awareness, critique government actions, and mobilize public opinion.

In Malaysia, the endorsement of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) was a key moment in recognising the importance of bipartisan cooperation and localized engagement. The formation of the “Kerajaan Perpaduan” (Unity government) following the 2022 general election brought together previously opposing parties, reshaping the country’s political terrain. A major youth-led achievement was the passage of the Undi18 bill, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. This reform, advocated by youth groups like Undi18, expanded the electorate by over 1.2 million new young voters, significantly shifting campaign strategies and political messaging. The APPGM-SDG initiative, supported by parliamentarians and community partners, enabled grassroots movements to localize the UN SDG’s reaching 115 of 222 parliamentary constituencies by 2024 and implementing over 1000 solution driven projects based on local issues. However, despite these successes, youth civic engagement has seen a gradual decline, hindered by persistent stigma around politics as corrupt or ineffective, which discourages deeper participation beyond elections.

In Myanmar, the ongoing military crisis continues to severely restrict civic space and

endanger activists. Youth activists have responded through a range of adaptive strategies, including underground networks, digital advocacy, diaspora lobbying efforts, and decentralized mutual aid initiatives. Their advocacy continues to spotlight critical issues such as: (1) stigmatization and discrimination of activism within the nation; (2) limited access to humanitarian aid and essential services; (3) the collapse of public healthcare infrastructure; (4) internet and communication blockages; (5) statelessness and displacement of marginalized groups; (6) education poverty, and the wide gap between the government and the people; all of which illustrate the near-total absence of democracy governance. Additionally, the military’s manipulation of ethnic and religious divisions, alongside the creation of border ground forces, has not only fragmented resistance efforts but also complicated international diplomatic responses, revealing the multi-layered crisis facing Myanmar today.

Central Asia (Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Iran, Palestine)

Youth activists from West Asia have raised the banner of youth led initiatives, particularly in the wake of mass mobilizations since the Arab Springs in 2011. These movements re-emerge through waves of protests, including the 2019-2020 Lebanese Revolution sparked by economic collapse and corruption, the Iranian Women’s Movement (notably the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests) demanding gender equality and regime accountability, and the Palestinian Youth Movement, which organizes both locally and in the diaspora for liberation and democratic rights. In Lebanon, youth activists noted a shift in government leadership with the appointment of a new independent president and prime minister, which was seen as an opportunity to break away from entrenched sectarian politics, though reforms remain slow. Similarly, Jordan and Morocco have experienced gradual, top-down reforms such as the expansion of civil liberties, decentralization efforts, and inclusion of youth in policy consultations, though these are often constrained by monarchy or centralized control.

However, restrictions such as limited funding, intense government oversight, and periodic

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crackdowns on free speech remain pressing issues. Furthermore, international involvement, such as donor-driven reform agendas or geopolitical interventions, often complicates domestic dynamics, as some local actors perceive this as external interference, which can lead to backlash and more civic space restrictions. The threat of security and livelihood with the war in Palestine and Israel showcases a major disengagement from democracy and international security, providing a pavement for external forces to involve in local politics. The nature of youth advocacy and leadership has also been affected, as constant instability and repression have led many young people to operate anonymously, use underground networks, or shift to online advocacy, limiting visibility and collective momentum. These conditions also undermine values of civic trust and long-term organizing, as young people face burnout, censorship, and emotional exhaustion.

Central Asia (Turkmenistan)

In the context of Turkmenistan, the nature of the political landscape and the civic space, the room for activism and democratic advocacy is slow, however the governing party expresses well in adapting and adopting best-practices within the state. Within the context of the civic spaces being highly controlled by the government, and rigid frameworks that reduce democratization in the state, youth activists are contending the narrative in light that their initiatives and the NGOs/CSOs are receiving great support from the government, international organizations, and foreign entities. There are different projects in a number of areas, from humanitarian aid and inclusivity to climate change and water resources management. The youth are also noted in enthusiasm and actively involved into CSOs including the National Red Crescent Society of Turkmenistan, Yenme, Young SDG Ambassador of Turkmenistan. The youth of Turkmenistan are now passionate about personal development and getting new skills,

and volunteering is a growing trend in the state; participating in different types of events and gaining experience and knowledge.

Across Asia, youth continue to push the boundaries of civic space whether by confronting authoritarian regimes head-on, as in Myanmar and Iran, or by navigating softer forms of control through development-focused engagement, as seen in Turkmenistan. Despite operating under varying degrees of civic space restriction, from hard repression to subtle constraints, young people are finding ways to remain active in shaping their societies.

Youth Priorities in the Promotion of Sustainable Democracy

It is opportune to address the relationship between sustainable development and democracy, or more specifically, the evolving concept of “sustainable democracy”, and the extent to which democratic action can be sustained when the boundaries of democracy are subjective and vary across contexts. This discussion is relevant to the core theme of this piece: youth movements as agents of change. Youth are not only responding to democratic deficits but also proposing new models that connect democratic principles with long-term development goals.

Youth activists are placing democratic action within the broader framework of sustainable development, drawing from the 2030 Agenda’s principle of “leaving no one behind,” especially in relation to SDG 16 on peace and justice, and SDG 17 on partnerships. Democracy anchored in freedoms of expression, assembly, opinion, and association is a key enabler of these goals. Frameworks like the Democracy Matrix offer tools to assess civic and institutional strength, helping embed democratic values in long-term development planning. In this context, sustainable democracy is increasingly seen as a model that prioritizes long-term development, ensures inclusive governance, demands accountability, and promotes multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Across Asia, youth activists have been vocal in shaping this agenda. Their priorities reflect a holistic approach. A key area has been the demand for increased political representation and access to formal political institutions- evident in calls for more youth seats in parliament, support for youth-led initiatives, and equitable participation in political processes without systemic gatekeeping. Another major focus is educational and civic empowerment, especially in the form of educational reform, access to quality learning, and civic and human rights education in Malaysia, for example, youth initiatives have promoted political literacy as a pathway to democratic participation.

Freedom of expression and safety continue to be cross-cutting concerns. Young democracy advocates consistently push for environments where they can voice dissent without fear of repression. At the same time, youth emphasize the need for a local-to-global approach that recognizes and elevates youth-led action in community spaces, connecting their efforts to broader democratic narratives. Transparency and accountability remain central themes, as does the need to break through political silos and tokenism. Young people have been advocating for more inclusive and competence-based partnerships rather than symbolic participation.

Finally, youth continue to assert that democracy advocacy must be locally grounded and culturally relevant. In Asia, where societies are often deeply shaped by tradition and high-context communication, youth emphasize that democracy building cannot follow a top-down or “one size fits all” model. Rather, their priorities and strategies are shaped by lived experiences—reflected in regional consultations, youth declarations, and local initiatives—that call for contextual, grounded approaches to democratic reform.

Opportunities Toward a Shared Democratic Future in Asia

Building upon the Democracy Matrix, youth are not only stakeholders but active agents who must shape democratic narratives within their national and regional contexts. A localized perspective paired with cross-border learning and best practices is essential to advancing democratic values. Three emerging opportunities where Asian youth can contribute to building a sustainable democratic culture include: (1) integrating Social Solidarity Economy (SSE)

principles into democratic advocacy, (2) aligning democratic efforts with sustainable development goals (SDGs), and (3) establishing bipartisan and multi-stakeholder platforms for collaboration.

SSE, grounded in principles of equity, participation, and sustainability, presents a practical framework for youth-led democratic innovation. In countries like South Korea and the Philippines, youth-run cooperatives and social enterprises have advanced community goals while modeling participatory governance. These initiatives encourage resource sharing, cultural respect, and equitable decision making aligning democratic values with everyday economic practices.

Integrating youth-led civic and democratic initiatives into the SDG framework especially SDG 16 and 17 can enhance their visibility, legitimacy, and policy relevance. In countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia, youth groups have connected their civic education and electoral work to SDG targets, reinforcing the interdependence between democratic participation and sustainable development.

Finally, national and regional mechanisms that bring together diverse stakeholders are critical. In India and Nepal, All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) have created space for civil society dialogue with parliamentarians, advancing issues like digital rights and youth inclusion. At the regional level, youth platforms like the ASEAN Youth Forum have helped surface local priorities while creating channels for engagement with institutions. Institutionalizing such efforts through youth offices or advisory boards can ensure that youth perspectives remain integral to policy and reform efforts.

The future of democracy in Asia rests on intergenerational leadership and inclusive systems. Youth across the region continue to shape the democratic future through organizing, innovation, and sustained civic action. In the 21st century, sustaining democracy will require dynamic, youth-driven solutions.

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At the Frontlines of Democratic Protection and Promotion in Asia: Critical Spaces for Advocacy

By **KAREL JIAAN ANTONIO GALANG** (Senior Program Officer) for the Asia Democracy Network Secretariat



The 2024 Democracy Overview: Asian Democracy from the Eyes of Democracy Advocates and Grassroot Movements presents us an opportunity to look at the trends from the perspective of grassroot actors and regional democracy advocates.



The year 2024 is a witness to the ever-shifting landscape of democracy in Asia. It is continuously influenced by human actions – on one side democracy advocates attempting to expand the civic space; and on the other, autocratic forces trying to expand draconian control which negatively impacts fundamental freedoms. The 2024 Democracy Overview: Asian Democracy from the Eyes of Democracy Advocates and Grassroot Movements presents us an opportunity to look at the trends from the perspective of grassroot actors and regional democracy advocates. The discourses covered a wide gamut of democratic issues – from the state of freedom advocates, the integrity of our political processes and institutions, the health of our public discourses and information sphere, to peacebuilding efforts. The Overview provides us a comprehensive look at how the year 2024 played out. It aims to give us an insight into the state of our democratic institutions, culture, processes and the actors which shape democratization, and what they have done to promote and protect democratic spaces and cultures, for a specific slice of time.

Compiling these articles also enabled us to identify battleground spaces which require further attention

and reinforcement of democratization efforts. We hope that through this effort, stakeholders can consolidate efforts and intensify discourses that would enable creative solutions. Here are some of the countries of concern we have identified and the various pernicious issues plaguing them.

The Democracy Overview 2024 highlights some of the most pressing challenges facing our democracies over the past year. As advocates for democracy, we hope it serves as a navigational tool that advances inclusion, transparency, justice, and the protection of rights and freedoms in the year forward. Through this work ADN hopes to amplify calls for global collaboration among pro-democracy actors as they tackle issues presented in the articles. This is the first iteration of the initiative and, we hope in the years to come, it offers the advocates a benchmark for assessing the progress and achievements of democracy across Asia.

Ultimately, the initiatives presented in the work stands as a testament to the unwavering commitment of democratic forces in Asia to resist authoritarianism and build a more just and inclusive future. It marks a renewed pledge by regional stakeholders to advance and defend democracy across the region.

At the Frontlines of Democratic Protection and Promotion in Asia: Critical Spaces for Advocacy

People's Republic of China (PRC)	The most powerful autocratizer in the region, China has been at the forefront of supporting autocratic forces in the region, including in Myanmar and Cambodia. PRC's stakeholder-to-stakeholder operations have also muddled discourses in various democracies such as the Philippines, through disinformation and propaganda. Furthermore, repression of Hong Kongers, Uyghurs and Tibetans have only intensified over the past year.
South Korea	South Korea was able to protect the integrity of its democratic institutions after the declaration of martial law by ousted President Yoon Suk Yeol. While the impeachment of President Yoon will most likely stabilize the country's political climate, the country continues to be a hotbed of political division between pro-democracy and autocratic forces in the country.
Philippines	The Philippines will hold a mid-term election in May 2025, which will serve as a referendum on the Marcos Administration's leadership, but also a possible relaunch of the Duterte Dynasty's political aspirations. The elections come at the context of former President Duterte's ICC cases, and the rift between President Marcos and Vice President Sara Duterte. The country's political discourse continues to be plagued by disinformation, historical revisionism and anti-human rights rhetoric, with human rights violations against journalists, political opposition and democracy activists remaining unresolved.
Indonesia	In 2024, President Prabowo took office as the President of Indonesia. His regime intensified fears of a return to a militarized governance. The President managed to clinch the presidency through disinformation and propaganda. Given his close connections with the military, as the Minister of Defense under former President Jokowi, Prabowo is expected to expand the military powers amid the country's compromised system of checks and balances.
Myanmar	The Tatmadaw continues its repression of pro-democracy forces in Myanmar. Through the coordinated actions by pro-democracy forces in the country, the military controls around 21% of the territory as of December 2024. As a response, the military started a program of forced conscriptions, and attacks on civilians have only intensified, causing more than 6,000 civilian casualties and incarcerating more than 28,000 individuals as of 2024. Around 3.4 million civilians have been displaced, and around 20 million in need of humanitarian assistance. The year 2024 proved to be the bloodiest since the attempted coup started.
Bangladesh	Following Bangladesh's historic political shift in August 2024, the interim government under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus established six commissions to propose key institutional and constitutional reforms amid intense political debate. The discourse centers on whether elections should be held promptly or delayed to implement reforms. Years of authoritarian rule and institutional erosion have sparked concerns about the state's capacity to ensure credible elections. While most agree on the need for reform, views diverge—some fear delays may entrench power, while others warn that premature elections could legitimize a broken system. Though Chief Adviser Yunus has proposed elections between December 2025 and June 2026, mixed government signals continue to fuel uncertainty.
Afghanistan	Afghanistan under the Taliban has institutionalized systemic exclusion of women, with around 118 regulations put in place to regulate women's rights as of 2024. The Taliban's takeover has effectively displaced around 3.2 million Afghans inside the country, while around 5.8 million are refugees within the region. The presence of CSOs have deteriorated given the severe legal restrictions, surveillance and control by the Taliban, lack of financial support from donors due to the absence of legal pathways, suppression of freedom of expression, and the lack of trust between civil institutions in Afghanistan and those abroad.
Cambodia	Democracy in Cambodia remains to be repressed. The Cambodian Government under CPP enforces surveillance, restrictive financial limitations and audit regulations which hinder CSO operations and resource generation. This was aggravated by the funding shortage felt globally. As such, Cambodian pro-democracy organizations are not able to effectively respond and defend themselves against SLAPPs filed against human rights defenders and journalists, hindering campaigns to expand civic space and fundamental freedoms. This puts already vulnerable sectors such as environmental, youth and LGBTQIAN+ activists in greater peril.

The 2024 Democracy Overview

Asian Democracy from the Eyes
of Democracy Advocates and
Grassroots Movements

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