

III. What we do/ Why we do it

Connecting Human Rights Movements across the Region

Over the years, FORUM-ASIA has positioned itself as a leading and credible human rights organisation in the region. Its strength lies in the expertise of its 47 member organisations across 16 countries who are leading actors on a wide range of human rights issues. FORUM-ASIA connects its members to regional and international forums by providing a platform in which to advocate; build capacity and foster strategic partnerships with civil society organisations and movements in the region and elsewhere.

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Navigating the region

In the 16 countries that FORUM-ASIA is represented almost all have ratified the principle human rights treaties. Nevertheless the record of human rights protection and promotion in the region leaves much to be desired. Given that 60% of the global population resides within its borders and its growing economic and political influence, the direction and future of the human rights movement will be greatly influenced by the Asia region.

Regional Challenges

While the countries that FORUM-ASIA is represented are marked by great diversity, the contextual challenges that pervade are common

Illiberal democracies - Many of the countries in Asia claim to be democratic, but barring a few exceptions, implementation of the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights are significantly lacking. Civil society participation in policy processes in supposedly stable democracies such as India, South Korea and Taiwan is limited. Freedom of speech and expression and freedom of assembly and association are routinely violated in the name of internal security and law and order, particularly in Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka. Worse still, gender and sexual based violence is all too prevalent throughout the region.

Authoritarian resurgence - The relapse of Thailand into military dictatorship in May 2014 is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of democratic institutions in the region. Burma will have little incentive to speed up its frustratingly slow democratisation process when its influential neighbor has institutionalized its authoritarian rule with little condemnation. Laos will have a new ally to help justify its curb on basic freedoms and liberties. Even Indonesia, on

a relatively promising path to liberal democracy, will have an excuse for inaction. Thailand's situation will thus have grave repercussions for the promotion and protection of human rights for Southeast Asian States.

Impunity - Impunity cuts across the region. Whether it is conflict-related violence, as in the case of Nepal and Sri-Lanka, or non-conflict related extrajudicial killings and torture in Cambodia, custodial deaths in Malaysia and killings by death squads in the Philippines, those responsible are rarely if never investigated and held to account. The call for accountability and reparations for past and current rights-violations are routinely ignored in the name of peace and stability.

Weak national and regional protection - National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are responsible for investigating rights-violations, including those the national judiciary have failed to address. In reality however, NHRIs are often inhibited by a lack of independence or capacity to effectively monitor and document human rights violations. The ASEAN human rights mechanisms also struggle to offer any meaningful protection at the regional level due to a limited mandate and lack of independence from its Member States. South Asia conversely lags behind all other regions of the world with the absence of any regional protection.



FORUM-ASIA Priorities

In light of these contextual challenges, FORUM-ASIA has identified the following priorities that are of particular concern to its membership

Promoting and protecting freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly- Increasingly under threat through the use of draconian legislation that threatens the existence of civil society in the region by controlling registration and funding or which seek to limit the ability of communities and people's movements in Asia to defend their basic rights or who seek to challenge the abuse of power by States.

Developing effective and independent accountability mechanisms - At the national level, in particular national human rights institutions as a potential ally for civil society in promoting and protecting human rights in Asia. This also includes other accountability mechanisms that foster an environment for accountability and an end to impunity.

Protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) - Responding to the increased persecution by state and non-state actors of defenders supporting victims and communities affected by human rights violations is a recurring theme throughout FORUM-ASIA's work.

Developing and strengthening regional human rights mechanisms in Asia - While the establishment of the ASEAN human rights mechanisms was a welcome development, its lack of independence and effectiveness since its establishment in 2009 has

necessitated oversight by civil society actors. Conversely discussions amongst civil society actors in South Asia have galvanised a call for a regional mechanism that would address human rights challenges across the sub-continent.

Utilising UN Human Rights mechanisms and other forum - The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and its mechanisms are crucial tools in the promotion and protection of human rights. The UN HRC and the mandate of the Special Rapporteurs in particular, is an important platform for civil society to engage with States on human rights issues pertaining to Asia and influence Asian diplomacy on human rights. At the same time, FORUM-ASIA utilises cross-regional groupings such as ASEAN, SAARC, the Non-Aligned Movement and the OIC, who are increasingly asserting their influence on the diplomatic position of Asian States at both the UN and beyond.