

## Welcoming Singapore Chair for ASEAN and AICHR

(Bangkok/Jakarta, 26 January 2018) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) welcomes Singapore as the Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) 2018. During the 26<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in Singapore on 24-26 January 2018, FORUM-ASIA reiterated its message to the Government of Singapore and the AICHR to promote and protect human rights across all pillars of ASEAN and particularly by strengthening the AICHR's ability to realise its mandate.

During the handover of the ASEAN Chair from the Philippines to Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the ASEAN 2018 tag-line, 'resilience and innovation' as a driving force to improve and strengthen regional collaboration through the promotion of innovation in managing and harnessing digital technology amidst growing uncertainties in the global landscape.<sup>1</sup> While noting Singapore's aspirations to promote e-commerce, build smart cities, and develop a 'deeper and more substantive co-operation' between ASEAN and China, including the negotiations on a Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea, its vision and commitment to address the deteriorating human rights situation in the region are still lacking.

2017 marked five decades of ASEAN, but still not much has been done to promote and protect human rights as an integral part of efforts to advance the region. In spite of attempts to promote and protect human rights, intolerance, stigma, and discrimination persist in the region against people of ethnic and religious minorities, refugees and internally displaced people, people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, and other marginalised groups. The intergovernmental body has yet to show any efforts to halt the deteriorating human rights situation and the overall shrinking civic and democratic spaces in the countries of its Member States.

For example, it failed to proactively act on egregious violations in Burma/Myanmar, the mounting deaths toll from extrajudicial killings in the Philippines' war on drugs, and shrinking democratic space in the region, including the recent crackdown in Cambodia and Indonesia. The ASEAN principle of non-interference has often been cited as the justification why the body is reluctant to criticise its Member States. As a result, many serious human rights violations remain unresolved.

Despite the establishment of the AICHR in 2009, and the adoption of ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) in 2012 as its working guideline, the body lacks independence to enforce its powers and has a limited protection mandate. The mandate, which is heavy on the promotion of human rights, should be extended to providing protection of human rights, and ensure meaningful collaboration with civil society, national human rights institutions, and other ASEAN intergovernmental bodies to build and synchronise partnership for change.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.asean2018.sg/About/ASEAN-2018>.

FORUM-ASIA's annual performance report of the AICHR and the ACWC in 2016 shows that the silence of both ASEAN human rights mechanisms continues to be a cause for profound concern.<sup>2</sup> FORUM-ASIA acknowledges the commitment of Singapore to enhance the integration of the economic and business sectors to build resiliency in ASEAN. However, FORUM-ASIA would like to remind the Government of Singapore to align its aspirations for the region with international human rights standards.

In the area of business and human rights, the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights that stipulates States' obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms and the role of regional mechanisms such as ASEAN to provide grievance mechanism and to hold the States' accountable for their obligations to respect human rights<sup>3</sup>. The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration reaffirms ASEAN's commitment to uphold international human rights standards, including the guiding principles. Singapore as the Chair of ASEAN 2018 will have to play an important role to strengthen this commitment.

Therefore, FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of Singapore as the new Chair of ASEAN to focus more on the deteriorating human rights situation in the region and to implement the promotion and protection of human rights. FORUM-ASIA further calls on the Government of Singapore to assure the safety and security of those who want to exercise their fundamental rights, particularly during several regional civil society events, such as the upcoming ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ ASEAN People Forum (ACSC/APF) to be held in the country this year.

#### **About FORUM-ASIA:**

*FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.*

#### **For further information, please contact:**

- ASEAN Programme, FORUM-ASIA ([asean@forum-asia.org](mailto:asean@forum-asia.org))

<sup>2</sup> FORUM-ASIA and SAPA Task Force, 2017. "Have They Passed the Litmus Test: A Report on the Performance of the ASEAN Human Rights Mechanisms in 2016".

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, Guiding Principle on Business and Human Rights. Available from [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf)