

In 2020 ASEAN must continue to strengthen its human rights mechanism and integrate peoples' interest in its agenda

(Bangkok/Jakarta, 15 January 2020) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) welcomes Vietnam as the Chair of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2020. FORUM-ASIA calls on the association and its Member States to prioritise addressing the struggles of its people, particularly the most marginalised and oppressed, and to generate solidarity across the region to become one community as envisioned in the ASEAN Agenda 2020.

In remarks made by H.E. Mr. Nguyen Xuan Phuc, the Prime Minister of Vietnam, the country committed to lead ASEAN toward becoming a 'cohesive and responsive' region by focusing on five priority areas: peace, security and stability; regional integration and connectivity; raising awareness about the ASEAN community and identity; partnerships for sustainable development; and enhancing the capacity and operational efficiency of the ASEAN.¹

While acknowledging these issues as key, FORUM-ASIA would like to draw your attention to the absence of any reference to concrete actions to address the deterioration of civic space and violations of human rights as key priorities this year. This is all the more worrisome as these have been happening consistently and remain unaddressed over the past decades.

Southeast Asia has suffered numerous longstanding human rights issues in past decades. They include: shrinking civic and democratic space; deteriorating ecological sustainability; the devastating impact of free trade, investment, and activities of large corporations; the complete disregard for the rights of refugees and indigenous peoples; threats and harassment of human rights defenders; and the crackdown on the freedom of expression.²

The ASEAN has been widely criticised for its persistent silence on these issues, as it fails to provide timely responses on various crisis in comparison to other international and regional intergovernmental organisations. This has contributed to the erosion of public trust in the ASEAN, particularly from those who are vulnerable and marginalised at the grassroots level.

As Vietnam takes the chair of ASEAN and, as such, should lead efforts to promote and protect human rights in the region, we would like to point to the fact that Vietnam has a lot to do at home to prove that it is able to take human rights leadership on the regional level. There are serious concerns of human rights organisations from across the region, which were highlighted during the Universal Periodic Review process in 2018 that Vietnam has systematically attempted to silence human rights defenders and bloggers through: the implementation of vague national security laws; physical attacks; restrictions on the freedom of movement; torture; and ill-treatment in detention.³

¹ https://asean2020.vn/web/asean_en/thong-diep-cua-thu-tuong

² <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=30291>

³ <https://civicus.org/documents/JointCIVICUSUPRSubmissionVietnam.pdf>

ASEAN as a region will never be a solid community if the oppression of any of its people persists. The longstanding human rights crisis in the region will only further hinder the people of ASEAN to participate and enjoy the development of the region.

Entering the new decade, FORUM-ASIA calls on the ASEAN to direct its effort to address the various issues mentioned above. This should start with continuing the process of strengthening its human rights mechanism, particularly the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and the ASEAN Commission on the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). This will be a test for Vietnam as the Chair to prove where their commitments lie.

We appreciate the commitments that the ASEAN has made in 2019 to strength the AICHR by conducting a review process of its Terms of References (TOR). We hope the momentum will continue unobstructed and that the ASEAN will be able to restore the people's trust in it as a body committed to the promotion and protection of the human rights of all the people of ASEAN.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 81 member organisations in 21 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.

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