



ASEAN must step up its efforts to address deteriorating human rights and civic space situation in Southeast Asia

(Bangkok/Johannesburg, 2 December 2021) – Under the Chairmanship of Cambodia in 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) must meaningfully address the regressive human rights crisis in the region, including the rapidly deteriorating situation in Myanmar, said rights groups at a webinar today.

The webinar titled ‘Cambodia as ASEAN Chair: Prospects for Human Rights in 2022’ organised by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) discussed the human rights situation in the region and how the ASEAN has responded in 2021 as well as its trajectory as Cambodia spearheads ASEAN next year.

Eleven months after the coup and eight months since ASEAN leaders adopted the five-point consensus, the human rights and humanitarian crisis continues unabated in Myanmar – [at least 1,200 people including children have been killed and 10,568 arrested](#). The deteriorating situation affects not only the daily lives of the people on the ground but also the human rights and political discourse at the regional and international level.

Questions remain as to what extent the regional bloc can effectively bring immediate progress to the situation of Myanmar or if it will just be used to legitimise the military regime.

‘While we welcome the decision by ASEAN to exclude the military junta from ASEAN Summits, we are deeply concerned about the lack of substantive actions to mitigate the Myanmar crisis. The whole country is now dealing with a multi-level crisis. It is not sufficient for ASEAN alone to tackle this crisis. Therefore, we call on ASEAN to cooperate with the UN and international mechanisms to take immediate concrete actions. Further delays in actions will allow the junta to commit more atrocities and this means more bloodshed for the people on the ground,’ said Khin Ohmar, Chair of Progressive Voice.

‘As the next chair, Cambodia has a huge task ahead to ensure that ASEAN unity and credibility is not lost. If ASEAN allows the junta to continue in this manner, the Myanmar crisis will further impact the regional stability and development. ASEAN needs to understand that it is in its best interest to work with the National Unity Government and the people of Myanmar,’ she added.

‘We want ASEAN leadership to have a strategic vision and action plan. ASEAN will not be able to implement its five-point consensus alone, particularly after the junta military has blatantly denied their commitment in the consensus. Under the Cambodia Chairmanship, ASEAN must engage with NUG, the United Nations, dialogue partners, and civil society. What is happening is not only a crisis to Myanmar but a crisis to the credibility of ASEAN and threats to security in general,’ said U Bo Hla Tint, Myanmar National Unity Government Ambassador to ASEAN.

According to the CIVICUS Monitor, fundamental freedoms in half of ASEAN Member States are rated as ‘repressed’. The year 2021 has also shown how restrictive laws have been used to stifle dissent and prosecute human rights defenders in numerous ASEAN countries and new laws passed that would curtail

civic space. Further there has been a crackdown on peaceful protests and the use of extra-legal tactics, including online surveillance and smear campaigns, as well as torture and ill-treatment. In Cambodia specifically, CIVICUS documented the arbitrary arrest of dozens of activists, judicial harassment, and intimidation of opposition party CNRP members and families, and reprisals on journalists.

‘It is difficult to see how ASEAN would meaningfully progress on human rights issues with Cambodia at the helm. It has become a de facto one-party state after dismantling the opposition. Civic space has also continued to shrink in the country and those speaking up have faced blatant judicial harassment and at times outright violence. At the same time, we need to keep the pressure on them and support Cambodian civil society,’ said Josef Benedict, Asia Pacific Researcher of CIVICUS.

Under the pretext of COVID-19, Cambodia has introduced draconian measures such as the National Internet Gateway to increase online surveillance. This adds to the long list of concerns including the arbitrary arrest and judicial harassment of defenders and political opposition in the country. Cambodia’s degrading human rights record raises concerns about whether it has the political will to take the steps needed to improve on the human rights situation of ASEAN.

‘Cambodia should strive to improve the dire human rights situation it is facing domestically – especially considering the fact that elections are fast approaching – while also seeking to ensure regional peace and stability. As ASEAN chair, Cambodia must rally its ASEAN partners to answer the calls for support coming from Myanmar, and take concrete action rather than hide behind the argument of non-interference,’ said Sopheap Chak, the Executive Director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR).

ASEAN’s prospects of human rights in 2022 remain rocky and uncertain, reflecting on the domestic situation ASEAN Member States, particularly its Chair, must deal with. Nevertheless, the panelists called on civil society and various actors to keep monitoring the progress, or lack thereof, by ASEAN in responding to the situation of human rights and civic space in the region, particularly on immediate measures to bring an end to the crisis in Myanmar.

CIVICUS is a global alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world with 8,500 members in more than 175 countries. Based out of Johannesburg, CIVICUS has offices in New York and Geneva. www.civicus.org

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 82 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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