

[Statement] India: Government must stop using repressive laws, and ensure that 2024 General Elections remain free and fair

(Kathmandu/Bangkok, 18 April 2024) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over India's forthcoming six-week-long 2024 General Elections scheduled to begin on 19 April 2024. The troubling pattern of diminishing democratic freedoms has heightened assaults against human rights defenders (HRDs), journalists, civil society organisations (CSOs), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This has also led to the widespread erosion of people's freedoms of association, expression, and peaceful assembly.

Under the current leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), repressive laws are increasingly being used to quash dissent and silence critical voices. Journalists face raids, arrests, and online intimidation. Meanwhile, NGOs endure heightened scrutiny and financial restrictions aimed at impeding their operations.

The concurrent rise of Hindu nationalism and populism has exacerbated the regression of democracy. Minority communities—including Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, and Christians—are disproportionately targeted as evidenced by discriminatory legislation and rising communal violence.

In Indian-administered Kashmir, civil society and media organisations encounter intensified crackdowns following the revocation of Article 370 in August 2019. Furthermore, attempts have been made to weaken the opposition before the elections, with its leadership subjected to arrests and their bank accounts frozen, casting doubt on the fairness of India's electoral process.

'FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of India to uphold its international human rights commitments by ceasing the use of repressive laws, safeguarding the rights of journalists and CSOs, ending discriminatory practices against minorities, and ensuring a level playing field for all political parties and candidates,' said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

We call upon the international community, including the United Nations, to closely monitor the elections and to help ensure that democracy is preserved in India.

About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 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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