

Submission for Call for Input – Stigmatising narratives and implications on the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association: counter stigmatisation to protect rights and advance global commitments

Submitted by: Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 organisations across 23 Asian countries. Our work is centred on empowering civil society and supporting human rights defenders by promoting and protecting human rights, civic space and democracy in the region. This submission is based on our monitoring of repression against the exercise of the rights to freedom of association and assembly by civil society, as well as our observation of the narratives behind the enactment of repressive laws in the region. It aims to inform the Special Rapporteur’s report on the global patterns and trends in the spread of negative and stigmatising narratives against civil society and activists, which is to be presented in the 79th session of the UN General Assembly. This submission elaborates on the harmful narratives that have been pushed to undermine respect, protection and fulfilment of the right to freedom of assembly and association.

Introduction

In recent years, FORUM-ASIA has recorded a significant decline in the rights of freedom of assembly and association in Asia. This decline is primarily evident in the enactment of repressive laws and policies by the State under the pretext of countering terrorism, safeguarding national security and public order and preventing foreign interference to protect national interests including the unity and integrity of the state. It also involves prioritising business, investment or development initiatives for the advancement of economic growth and protecting morality and religious values. Such laws, however, are commonly prescribed as overboard and ambiguous without appropriate safeguards for those exercising the rights to freedom of association and assembly. Consequently, law enforcement is granted unfettered powers, resulting in employing excessive force and brutality when policing protests. Judicial oversight is notably lacking in such instances which allows for substandard interpretation of the laws and a culture of impunity and lack of accountability against authorities.

In addition to the enactment of repressive laws by the state, right-wing political parties and conservative or populist groups have also promoted discriminatory, hateful and dehumanising rhetoric against marginalised and minority populations often portraying them as spreading

immorality or violating religious values. This has allowed for continued social exclusion and discrimination against such groups. The prevalence of this rhetoric is due to the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination protection regulations in most Asian countries.

The enforcement of repressive laws and the perpetuation of harmful narratives have led to unjust criminalisation, arbitrary arrests, commission of violence, exclusion and discrimination against activists, journalists, human rights defenders and marginalised groups. It has further limited an already shrinking civic space and created an environment of intolerance, particularly for those fighting for the fulfilment of fundamental freedoms.

Narratives of anti-terrorism and safeguarding national security and public order

States in Asia have used narratives of countering terrorism and the protection of national security and public order to delegitimise protests. Protestors are often labelled as ‘anti-national’ or having links to terrorist organisations and causing disorder simply for their political participation. This equates peaceful dissent with violent extremism and disruptive behaviour, undermining their cause and discouraging public participation. This is also exacerbated by the enactment of laws that institutionalise criminalisation against individuals perceived to be acting under harmful narratives, often resulting in a lack of fair trials.

In the Philippines, under the [2020 Anti-Terrorism Act](#), the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) is granted broad powers to designate any individual, group, organisation or association as ‘terrorists’. However, there is no requirement of due process for the designation nor is there any clarity on procedures to remove the designation. The Act also allows for prolonged detention without warrant or charge for up to 24 days. In 2023, [four indigenous peoples’](#) leaders and advocates from Cordillera were designated as terrorists through ATC Resolution No. 41. Their financial assets were also frozen due to the designation. The activists [described](#) how the designation is being used as a method of neutralisation against dissidents as they are pushed to live under constant alarm, financial pressures and in isolation from friends and relatives. Further, the state agency, National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflicts (NTF ELCAC) has been actively red-tagging human rights defenders, communities, and civil society organisations, furthering the negative stigmas against their targets.

In Hong Kong, the enactment of the 2020 [National Security Law](#) (NSL) adopts China’s authoritarian national security framework. This has effectively created a system where individuals expressing dissent with the government could face criminal charges of subversion, collusion with foreign forces, secession and terrorism among others. These charges are

applicable extraterritorially and punishable with life imprisonment. In February 2024, [Agnes Chow](#), a youth democracy leader who participated in the 2019-2020 democracy protests was added to Hong Kong's police wanted list. She has chosen to live in exile abroad after being compelled to undergo a patriotic 'study trip' to mainland China and subjected to a travel ban under the NSL. The recently passed [Safeguarding National Security Ordinance also known as "Article 23"](#) which reinforces the NSL was employed for the first time in May 2024 to arrest [six individuals](#) including Chow Hang Tung. She had previously been a leader in organising the city's annual vigil commemorating China's Tiananmen Square protests and massacre in 1989. The individuals posted on Facebook ahead of the 35th anniversary of the deadly crackdown, which was deemed to be seditious. It is claimed that the post could incite hatred towards the government and could encourage others to organise and participate in "illegal activities" under Section 24 of the law. In May 2024, the judiciary banned the protest song [Glory to Hong Kong](#)- a song commonly chanted during the 2019 protests, to scrape and prevent anti-government/nationalist narratives.

In Singapore, under the [Public Order Act](#), assemblies are only lawful if they comply with notification and permit requirements. However, authorities are provided grounds to reject permits for assemblies which are broadly "directed towards a political end". This includes those that seek to influence policies or decisions of the government, promote opposing political views, or public conduct which has become a subject of political debate in Singapore or elsewhere. However, the law is applied excessively, even extending to a one-person protest. Rights activist Jolovan Wham faced multiple fines and [judicial harassment](#) for his solo protests including an incident where he held a cardboard sign with a simple smiley face in front of the Toa Payoh Central Community Club. The sign was meant to express support for climate activists who were arrested for calling for climate action.

In Cambodia, union leader Chhim Sithar and eight members of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld (LRSU) were [convicted in May 2023](#) of 'incitement to commit a felony or disturb social security' under Articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code. The conviction was based on a strike led by Sithar to protest against mass layoffs by NagaWorld casino and to demand better wages and the reinstatement of those unjustly terminated. However, due to authorities' focus on the strike's disruptive nature rather than addressing their labour rights, unionists are now facing [criminal penalties](#) for advocating for them.

In Myanmar, following the attempted coup in February 2021, the military junta have brutally pushed the counterterrorism narrative against those expressing dissent against its illegal attempt to take over the government, using repressive laws and systematic attacks against the civilian

population. Soon after the coup, the [Counter-Terrorism Law](#) was amended, increasing the penalties from one to three years to three to seven years of imprisonment. It grants authorities excessive power to police against any acts of exhortation, persuasion, propaganda, and recruitment of any person to participate in activities deemed as ‘terrorism’. However, the application of this law is used to target members of the legitimate government and dissidents. In 2022, a military tribunal sentenced [two pro-democracy activists](#), former ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) lawmaker Ko Jimmy and former NLD Member of Parliament Phyo Zeya Thaw to death. They were charged under the Counter-terrorism Law for high treason and terrorism acts including being accused of allegedly masterminding a guerrilla warfare campaign against the regime, purportedly to undermine national stability. In 2023, [three public school teachers](#) who participated in an anti-military strike were sentenced to life imprisonment under the same law. Ironically, the military designated the [National Unity Government \(NUG\)](#) which is a government in exile formed by NLD, its military force People’s Defense Force (PDF), and other [Ethnic Armed Organizations](#) as terrorist groups despite the NLD gaining power from winning the 2020 democratic elections.

In Thailand, following the pro-democracy protests from [July 2020 until May 2024](#), Section 112 of the Criminal Code also known as the lèse-majesté law has been used to prosecute at least 272 people, including 20 children, for their involvement in public demonstrations or political expression. The government has [deemed](#) the protests as contrary to the duty of Thai citizens to protect the monarchy which undermines national security. In September 2023, [Arnon Nampa](#), a human rights lawyer and activist, received a four-year prison sentence without parole under Section 112 for a speech he made during a 2021 protest that called for reforms to the monarchy. The authorities have frequently detained [alleged offenders](#) without trial and have rarely granted bail. Those that are granted bail are put under restrictive conditions such as being required to wear tracking devices or being prohibited from participating in political rallies or discussing the monarchy. Article 112 has further been invoked to suppress political opposition. In January 2024, the Constitutional Court [ruled](#) that the progressive Move Forward Party’s campaign to amend royal anti-defamation law was unconstitutional. Following that in March 2024, the Court accepted a [petition](#) from the Election Commission to dissolve the Move Forward Party.

The petition accused the party of undermining the constitutional monarchy by proposing amendments to Section 112 and called for the party’s dissolution along with a ten-year ban on its executives from participating in Thai politics.

In Pakistan, public protests have been effectively [criminalised](#) with laws granting the state extensive powers to control and set conditions for assemblies, ostensibly to maintain public

order. Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), also used in India, criminalises public gatherings and is frequently employed to impose blanket bans. Any protest is deemed illegitimate if permission is denied or if it violates Section 144 CrPC. A clear example of the state's stringent stance against protests occurred during the May 9, 2023 [demonstrations](#) following former Prime Minister Imran Khan's arrest. Nationwide protests by the Prime Minister's supporters led to at least eight deaths and thousands of arrests, including other political leaders from Khan's Tehreek-i-Insaf party. Pakistan's army labelled May 9 as a "[dark day](#)" and issued a stern warning of "severe retaliation" against any further attacks on military and state properties. A week later, Inter-Services Public Relations [announced](#) the military's intention to try 'arsonists' from the protests under the Pakistan Army Act and Official Secrets Act. Military courts in Pakistan, established to uphold discipline within the armed forces, lack independence. The prospect of trying protesting civilians in these courts contradicts Pakistan's obligations under international human rights law.

In Sri Lanka, in recent years, citizens have taken to the streets to express their discontent with the government's handling of the economy, corruption, and overall governance. These protests have often been labelled as disruptive and unlawful by the authorities. To suppress dissent, the government has employed various laws, including the draconian [Prevention of Terrorism Act](#), portraying protesters as agitators or threats to national security. This labelling legitimises crackdowns and a harsh approach to policing protests, which includes the indiscriminate use of tear gas and water cannons, effectively punishing citizens for exercising their right to protest. The state also has a tendency to categorise and label protests, which is both inaccurate and dangerous. For example, during the *Aragalya* movement in 2022, there were at least 240 ongoing protests of varying sizes across the country, including protests by fisherfolk, carpenters and health workers.

However, the state categorised this widespread citizen protest as a "[youth protest](#)," framing it as a narrative that the country's youth are misguided for engaging in anti-national activities and instigating violence, thereby suggesting that their actions should not be taken seriously. This infantilization of protesters ignores the decades-long struggle for civil rights by various communities, such as the Tamils, who have consistently challenged the state, particularly the Rajapaksas. These protests have been met with surveillance, intimidation, harassment, and threats by security agencies. Many protesters, including women, have been summoned for interrogation by the Terrorism Investigation Department which is notorious for its use of torture.

In India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the past decade, India has increasingly adopted the '[anti-national](#)' rhetoric to

suppress dissent in its political dialogue. This rhetoric includes terms like '*tukde tukde*' [meaning 'break (India) into pieces'], a pejorative label used to accuse groups of supporting sedition and secessionism, as well as 'terrorist'. This discourse gained prominence in February 2016 after a gathering of students at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) commemorated the death anniversary of Afzal Guru, who was executed for his purported role in the 2001 Parliament attack. During this event, several students from left-wing groups, including the then-president of the JNU Students' Union Kanhaiya Kumar, were charged with sedition for allegedly chanting "anti-national" slogans. Television channels subsequently aired video clips purportedly showing these slogans, which the government deemed seditious. Subsequent investigations found that at least three of these videos were manipulated. However, despite these findings, the narrative has persisted and garnered significant attention in prime-time media coverage, depicting JNU as a hotbed of the '*tukde tukde* gang' bent on fracturing India.

[Umar Khalid](#), a student leader incarcerated for more than three years now, is a stark example of how the state vilifies protestors. Khalid, a research scholar at JNU, was arrested in 2020 in connection with allegations of a larger conspiracy related to the February 2020 Delhi riots. These riots unfolded during extensive protests against the controversial citizenship law. He faces charges of damaging public property, engaging in unlawful activities, fundraising for terrorist acts, and conspiring to discredit the Indian government. The case of Umar Khalid underscores the [state's erosion of the distinction between constitutionally guaranteed rights to protest and actions classified as terrorism](#).

The government's attempt to equate organising protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act with rioting has led to the unjust application of repressive laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) of 1967. Under the UAPA, bail can be denied based on prima facie allegations alone. Umar Khalid's continued and unjust detention is not an isolated incident but mirrors a larger trend within India's criminal justice system, where unwarranted arrests are facilitated and bail is routinely denied or prolonged indefinitely.

The Bhima Koregaon 16 (BK-16) case also illustrates how the state conflates riots with dissent. In [Bhima Koregaon](#), Maharashtra, Dalits arriving for an annual commemoration on New Year's Day in 2018 were met with stones by a mob of Hindu supremacists. Initially, local leaders linked to the Hindu right were implicated. However, months later, police attributed the incident to an alleged Maoist conspiracy, claiming organisers of an anti-caste interfaith public meeting were involved in a plot to assassinate Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Between 2018 and 2020, 16 activists, intellectuals and artists across India were arrested for having links to Maoist groups and plotting to destabilise the government. This [manipulation of narrative](#) reflects the Modi

regime's capability to control communications and influence public opinion. Mainstream media had also amplified the government's narrative, conducting sensationalised trials that prematurely condemned the Bhima Koregaon activists based on a fabricated assassination plot. Media outlets that questioned this were targeted - facing raids, legal actions, and arrests. Any criticism of the government and its heavyhandedness risked being branded 'anti-national', while supporting persecuted groups like the BK-16 could lead to accusations of being an 'Urban Naxal', with potential detention under anti-terror laws. Since then, the pejorative term 'Urban Naxal' has been [weaponized](#) to discredit dissenting voices, portraying them as terrorists and enemies of the nation.

Narratives of preventing foreign influence and preservation of national interests

Rights-based organisations in Asian countries often rely on international funding and support. Authoritarian governments frequently invoke the principle of non-interference to justify restrictions, control and dissolution of organisations and associations advocating for democratic values. At the same time, governments are actively preventing civil societies from highlighting abuses to the international community to avoid scrutiny to preserve their 'national interest agenda. This rhetoric significantly undermines the duty of the State to fulfil its human rights obligations.

In Cambodia, after the dominant Cambodian People's Party (CPP) lost a significant number of seats to the progressive Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in the 2013 elections, there has been a sustained crackdown on political opposition, undermining the people's right to free and fair elections among other rights. Under the [Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations](#) (LANGO) passed in 2015, both domestic and international non-governmental organisations and associations are subject to the "political neutrality" clause which requires organisations to report their financial statements to the government. In 2017, in preparation for the 2018 elections, the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute, which supported civil society in advocating for electoral reforms, was [compelled to shut down](#), along with an order for its international staff to depart the country. In September 2023, when FORUM-ASIA organised a closed-door discussion¹ with civil society organisations on the situation in Cambodia, participants expressed concerns about how the LANGO has intensified the intimidation of civil societies with foreign affiliations advocating for civic space in Cambodia. In June 2023, Hun

¹ On 14 September 2023, FORUM-ASIA organised a closed-door roundtable consultation with Cambodian civil society and regional and international organisations to discuss the civic space situation in Cambodia since its last UPR cycle.

Sen, the former Prime Minister, openly [threatened to shut down](#) NGOs including international NGOs for failing to report their financial statements to the government.

In Singapore, the [Foreign Interference \(Countermeasures\) Act \(FICA\)](#) significantly undermines [freedom of association](#) by broadly criminalising the activities of organisations or individuals identified by the government as local proxies of foreign agents. This includes both written and unwritten arrangements, effectively restricting nearly all cross-border collaborations or engagements. Any organisations or individuals who are deemed to conduct political activities will be designated as ‘politically significant’ under the law and be subject to stringent requirements and monitoring. Currently, one of FORUM-ASIA members, Think Centre, is subject to this law and has been required to disclose political donations and its foreign affiliations. This effectively curtails local CSOs' capacity to conduct political advocacy in Singapore including to show solidarity on regional/international political issues.

In Indonesia, the pro-democracy civil society organised a People’s Water Forum (PWF) in Bali which was held in May 2024 in parallel with the World Water Forum (WWF). This forum was [severely repressed](#) by *Patriot Garuda Nusantara*, (PGN) a pro-government mass organisation. The PWF was intended to gather aspirations from local grassroots communities in demanding water justice from national and international governments attending the WWF. The organisers faced threats and intimidation, including pressure from the police to cancel the event. The PGN and the police also prevented Pedro Arrojo Aguado, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Water and Sanitation, from participating in the PWF. PGN stated that it was acting on behalf of the Balinese Governor, who urged people to uphold peace and harmony during the coordination meeting. The Governor, however, [denied](#) any connection to PGN. The Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) and the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), who are FORUM-ASIA members [stated](#) that PGN’s intimidation through staging a horizontal conflict is a tactic employed by the government to limit criticism against it in a multilateral forum to protect national interest and avoid international scrutiny.

In India, women at Shaheen Bagh protesting against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act were [falsely labeled](#) as paid anti-India agents by the BJP's right-wing, claiming they were paid sums ranging from INR 500 -1200 to participate in the protests. Concurrently, right-wing media attempted to vilify the protestors as anti-national, pro-Pakistani, and supporters of Jinnah. Similarly, during the farmers’ protests against new farm laws, efforts were made to [delegitimise](#) the movement by branding the protestors as extremists, Khalistanis, or simply anti-national and [andolanjeevi](#) (one who thrives on protests). The BJP's IT Cell even resorted to manipulating videos of protesting farmers, including segments where individuals referenced historical events

like PM Indira Gandhi's assassination, potentially to manipulate public perception and create fear. Additionally, there were reports, possibly exaggerated or manipulated, of Khalistan-related banners appearing at protest sites, further stigmatising the movement. This labelling and vilification not only distorts public discourse and deepens social divisions but also severely undermines the legitimacy of peaceful dissent.

Narratives of economic growth as justification for irresponsible development

Given the urgency of achieving rapid development targets in Asian states, there has been a strong narrative promoting economic growth at the expense of often irresponsible and unsustainable development projects. Human rights obligations are blatantly sacrificed for the sake of profit for both the public and private sectors and international companies. Those most affected are seldom compensated and instead often face displacement from their land or loss of livelihoods. Meanwhile, those voicing concerns over the projects become targets of reprisal by both public and private actors.

In Indonesia, Jokowi's push for investment and development under its National Strategic Projects (NSP) framework has paved the way for renewed repression against locals, including indigenous and environmental rights defenders. In early September 2023, thousands of residents of Rempang Island in Riau province [protested](#) against the government's eviction notice for an Eco-City project done in partnership with China's Xinyi Glass company. The authorities responded to the peaceful protests by firing tear gas at the protestors and 43 were arrested. The Rempang Eco-City project is listed under the NSP's 2023 list which was [promoted](#) to create thousands of jobs, especially for the island's youth. However, local residents were only given until the end of September 2023 to 'empty' the island despite authorities not providing immediate alternative housing. In another case, On 10 June, peaceful solidarity protests by a group of university students in Bali supporting indigenous Awyu and Moi communities from West Papua, who are peacefully [defending their land](#) against four palm oil companies planning oil plantations, were [violently disrupted](#) by the police. These instances only confirm the State's disregard for the rights of local and indigenous communities when developments are concerned.

In Laos, for the sake of its infrastructure-heavy economic development efforts, the government is known to sanction local land seizures to advance its development agenda and for the benefit of private sectors without affording appropriate grievance mechanisms for rights violations endured by impacted communities. In August 2019, nine villagers of the Sekong province were [sentenced](#) to two to six years in prison after being detained for two years for protesting against the rights to

their land being granted to a Vietnamese rubber company. Families of those detained reported that the villagers were beaten and tortured following their arrest.

In 2022, five local residents of the Nong Bok district of Khammouane province were [arrested](#) for protesting against a potash mine project led by Sino Agri International Potash Co. which has ties to the Chinese government. The residents were demanding compensation for the appropriation of their homes and land for the mine development. In January 2024, six out of a group of twenty protestors from Xang village in Xieng Khouang province were [arrested](#) due to their involvement in a multi-day protest against the concession of their land to the Phengxay Import-Export Company for wood processing.

In Odisha, India, the residents of [Dhinkia](#), [Nuagon and Gadakujung](#) villages are resisting the corporate takeover of 1,170 hectares of land by JSW Steel Limited, without respect for the community's right to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). This threatens the livelihoods of 40,000 villagers dependent on agriculture in the name of development. Previously, the villagers successfully opposed a similar attempt by the South Korean company [POSCO](#). The current struggle against JSW Steel Limited represents a continued fight to protect local resources, livelihoods, human rights, and the environment. Since late 2021, the Dhinkia area has faced heavy militarisation, with constant surveillance, harassment, and violent crackdowns by police during demonstrations. In [January 2022](#), a protest against forced evictions and land destruction resulted in police attacking 500 villagers, including women, children, and elderly individuals, with metal sticks. Local authorities have criminalised protest participants, with 400 pending criminal cases stemming from previous mobilisations against POSCO, including warrants issued for 700 individuals, including 300 women. Similarly, activists involved in the [Niyamgiri movement](#), a grassroots initiative against corporate exploitation, have been targeted under the UAPA for mobilising villagers and organising protests. The government's approach has been to brand these movements as Maoist is particularly dangerous, considering these regions are designated as Maoist strongholds. The criminalisation of dissent and the labelling of those questioning the government's development model as “anti-national” and even “terrorist” is deeply concerning.

Narratives of protection of morality and religious values

In many Asian countries, conservative values that reinforce patriarchal norms and religious teachings upheld by the social majority have led to narratives promoting morality and maintaining the status quo in public behaviour. These narratives are often championed by the State, right-wing groups, and the media to oppose the liberation of marginalised groups. Often,

the narrative is pushed through dehumanising rhetoric that the mere existence of such groups or those advocating for equal rights is immoral.

This narrative is often used to target women, LGBTIQ people and religious minorities significantly diminishing any advocacy efforts for equality and non-discrimination and often resulting in unjust criminalization and public scrutiny against such groups.

In Indonesia, In December 2021, Bogor City issued the country's first prevention and management of sexual deviant behaviours under [Bogor Local Regulation 10/2021](#). The regulation characterises homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgenderism as sexually deviant behaviours which will effectively institutionalise discrimination against LGBT people. Before the law was issued, there was already prevalent violence and discrimination against the LGBTIQ community. In 2023, parliament amended the [Criminal Code](#) which criminalises consensual extramarital sex, disproportionately targeting LGBT people who are not eligible for marriage. The new Code which expands the institutionalisation of criminalisation against the community to the national level will be applicable in 2026. In July 2023, FORUM-ASIA, ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and Arus Pelangi were [forced to cancel](#) a gathering for LGBTIQ+ activists in Jakarta to increase their capacity to advocate for gender equality and non-discrimination in ASEAN due to a series of systematic attacks and threats to the organisers and participants. Anti-LGBT politicians also expressed rejection of the gathering by appealing to the populist narrative and reiterated that the LGBT lifestyle is contrary to [local customs](#) and is an [insult](#) to everyone. In November 2023, anti-LGBT groups staged a protest ahead of a [Coldplay concert](#) in Jakarta demanding Coldplay not to spread LGBT propaganda.

In Pakistan, since 2018, women and gender minorities have gathered in major cities on March 8 to protest against patriarchal norms. The first Aurat March in 2018 was sparked by numerous rapes that went unpunished, leading to the powerful slogan "*Mera Jism, Meri Marzi*" ("My body, My rules"). This slogan, aimed at asserting bodily autonomy and normalising consent, caused a significant [uproar](#), with criticism from men, religious extremists and anti-feminists, accusing the movement of promoting immorality. In [2021](#), a slogan calling for freedom from patriarchal oppressors was maliciously edited to appear blasphemous, falsely implying that the protesters were challenging the authority of God and Prophet Mohammed. Such accusations can lead to severe consequences under Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws, including mob violence. The women's movement continues to face misrepresentation and vilification, with religious extremists dominating the narrative and undermining the true purpose of the protests.

Moreover, authorities have frequently failed to protect the protesters, with [demonstrations](#) often denied permits or met with excessive violence from security personnel. Additionally, right-wing counter-protesters have been [attacked](#) with stones while police did little to intervene.

Measures to protect and counter stigmatisation against civil society

The stigmatisation of protests as violent, disruptive, terrorist, and anti-national poses significant threats to fundamental freedoms, especially for dissenting individuals and organisations.

These portrayals frequently lead to decreased funding and public support, severely limiting their ability to effectively advocate for public causes. Individuals detained during protests may endure unfair trials influenced by biased public perceptions, exacerbated by politicised social media narratives. CSOs not only endure heightened public scrutiny but also contend with regulatory burdens imposed by NGO laws and foreign funding regulations, leading to operational constraints and judicial-legal harassment. Furthermore, these narratives foster social exclusion, discrimination, and intimidation tactics such as smear campaigns and harassment against defenders and supporters alike.

To counter the damaging impact of stigmatisation on and ensure the protection of Civil Society Organizations, activists, journalists, human rights defenders and marginalised communities in Asia, we recommend governments undertake the following measures:

- Abolish repressive laws that limit the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, in line with international human rights law and standards and refrain from using national security legislation, including the counter-terrorism acts, to criminalise peaceful protesters and political opposition. This should also include the abolishment of State agencies implementing such repressive laws that are instead targeting fundamental rights defenders.
- Governments should also establish comprehensive anti-discrimination laws and policies to protect against further discrimination and marginalisation of vulnerable groups. The implementation of these laws should also be supported by an independent body to ensure its proper implementation.
- Strengthen legal protections in compliance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (HRD Declaration). This involves adopting comprehensive laws to protect

human rights defenders from violence, reprisal, and adverse discrimination; ensuring judicial independence to prevent discriminated legal proceedings; and refraining from any measures aimed at subjecting foreign-funded civil society organisations and human rights defenders to stigmatising and restrictive regulations.

- Collaborate with different stakeholders, including national human rights institutions and civil society, to provide measures in countering negative narratives against civil society and human rights defenders, as well as provide remedies and further protections for all individuals affected.