

East Asia Democracy Forum Statement: Democracy and Civil Society Vital to Addressing Pandemic

Preface

This statement was adopted by the Steering Committee of the East Asia Democracy Forum (EADF) following its online meeting on June 15th, 2020. The EADF hopes to highlight and raise global awareness of the common challenges to democracy that COVID-19 has brought, and to emphasize that democratic values and institutions are indispensable, especially under the pandemic.

I. The Challenges of Democracy Brought by COVID-19 in East Asia

All countries in East Asia have been severely impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the many lives lost and burden of sickness, the region is suffering under a severe economic crisis, due to the combination of domestic lockdowns and collapsing international trade.

Anti-democratic forces throughout the region have not only taken advantage of the crisis to secure additional power, but have also asserted that authoritarian regimes are better equipped over democracies in terms of protecting public health.

Authoritarian forces in the region are thus using pandemic prevention as the reason to suppress freedom of speech and the press. Some countries have gone as far as to impose laws to silence, conduct surveillance, and threaten journalists, dissidents, and civil society, which lead to further shrinking civic spaces.

Vulnerable groups have been most seriously suffering from the impact of COVID-19. Residents and refugees in conflict zones across Asia are at higher risk due to the lack of a comprehensive health and social welfare system. City lockdowns have also led to a rising number of gender-based violence cases. These incidents are threatening the three decades of hard-won gains of democracies in the region.

II. Key Democratic Principles Contributing to Positive Outcomes

However, experience in East Asia demonstrates that the strength of democracy correlates closely with better results in addressing the challenges mentioned above. Stronger democracies have also proven to more effectively manage both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, while weaknesses in democratic institutions have hampered responses.

When addressing a public health crisis, better outcomes are seen when the level of mutual trust between the people and the state is high. In East Asia, three major democratic principles have been key factors in building and sustaining mutual trust.

The first is the principle of transparency. In the best-performing countries in terms of COVID-19 management and prevention, government bodies actively shared their data and explained their decision-making processes. At the same time, an independent media, the legislative branch, and civil society closely scrutinized their efforts. This raised confidence among the public that they were receiving correct information, and that the measures adopted were indeed necessary for the general welfare.

The second is democratic legitimacy of governmental actions. In particular, emergency measures should be firmly grounded in laws adopted by legislatures in accordance with constitutional practice, and when necessary, subject to judicial review. In the current crisis, both Taiwan and South Korea exemplified this approach, having enacted comprehensive epidemic management laws following the earlier SARS and MERS crises that empowered professional public health authorities and established clear chains of command. Furthermore, urgent economic relief packages in these two countries have also been subject to public and parliamentary scrutiny, enhancing trust between governments and the people.

Third, the role of an active and independent civil society is critical. Throughout the region, civil society has been in the forefront of highlighting the plight of marginalized and vulnerable communities, which have suffered most grievously during the pandemic, such as the poor, migrants and refugees, and Indigenous peoples. It has also taken the lead to highlight gender inequalities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, such as a rise in domestic violence during lockdowns.

Finally, civil society has vigorously scrutinized and challenged arbitrary or dangerous government measures, such as excessive limitations on freedoms of speech and assembly, and also raised important questions about how public health data and new surveillance techniques might be misused.

III. Looking Ahead

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EADF calls upon our friends in the region to redouble our advocacy for democracy, as upholding the universal principles of democracy and human rights are imperative when managing public health crises. The nontransparent measures adopted by authoritarian regimes in combating COVID-19

have led to many lost lives and undermined global collaboration in public health, and the threats their measures impose on our societies will persist. We must work harder to promote solidarity and experience sharing among civil societies throughout the region, and continue to assert and demonstrate that democracy is still the best system of governance.

