

Narratives and Strategies for Democracy in Asia

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Asia Centre



Civil Society Research Institute
in Special Consultative Status
with UN ECOSOC





MEETING HUB

Phaya Thai, Bangkok



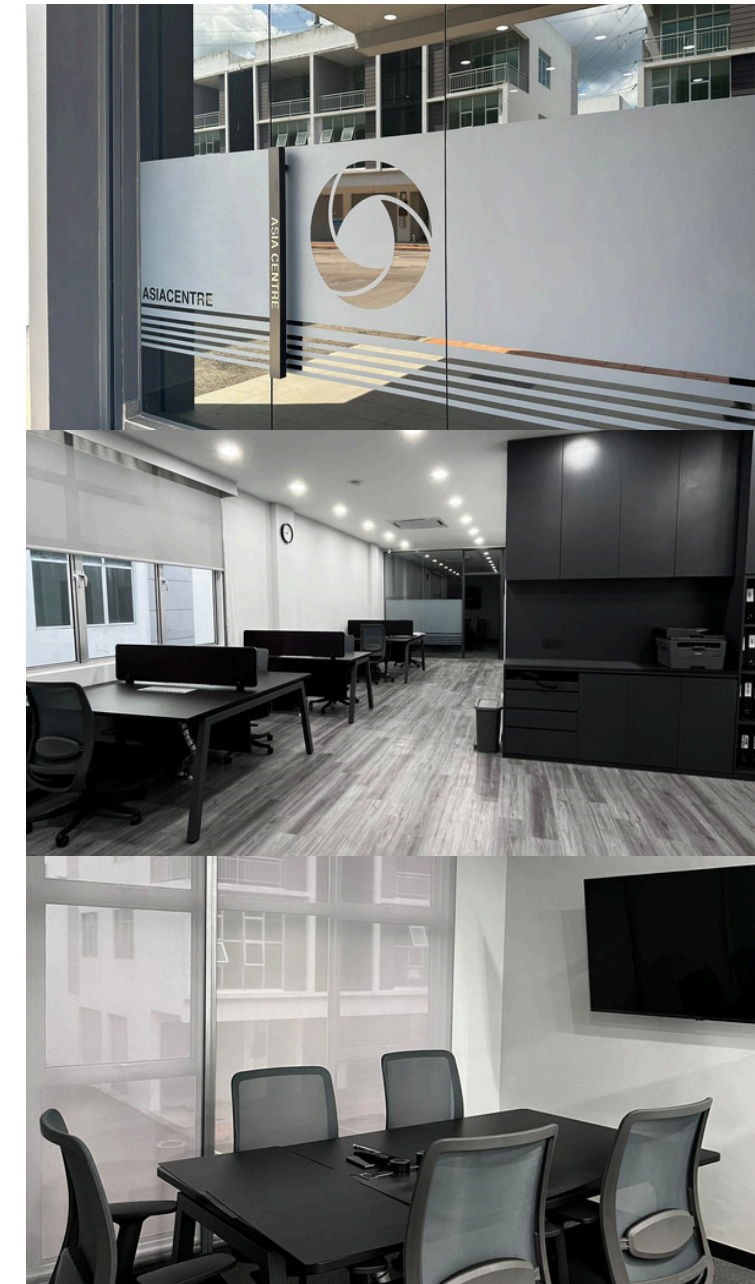
RESEARCH HUB

Phra Ram 9, Bangkok



MEDIA HUB

ION Medini 2, Johor Bahru



TRAINING HUB

Toul Kork, Phnom Penh



CORE ACTIVITIES



Research

- Baseline Studies, Policy Reports
- Strategic Plans, Programme Evaluations



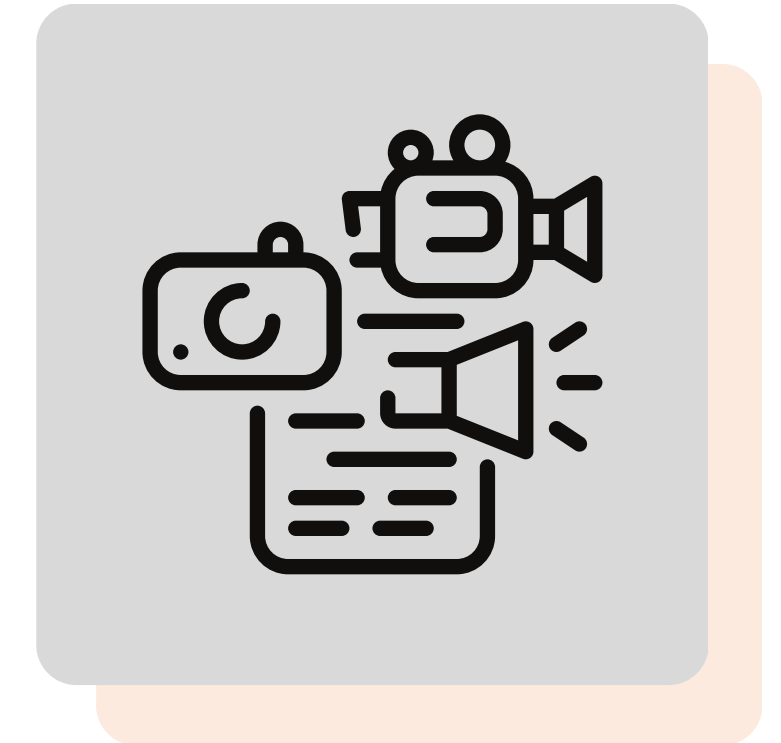
Training

- Conferences, Regional Meetings
- Seminars, Workshops
- Fellowships



Advocacy

- UN: UNHRC, UPR Submissions
- Briefings
- Speaking Engagements



Media

- News report, Interviews
- Op-eds
- Infographics
- Podcast, Infographics

PROGRAMME AREAS

*Constitutional Liberties
under Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR)*

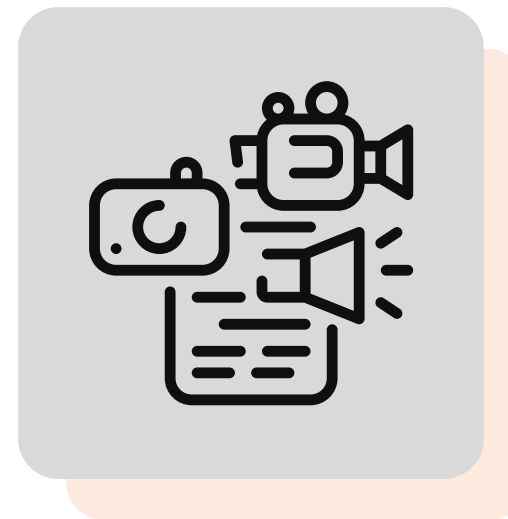
Article 18



Freedom of Religion or Belief

- Rights of Minority Groups
- Bureaucratisation of Religion
- Social Hostilities

Article 19



Freedom of Expression

- Disinformation
- Hate Speech
- Digital Rights

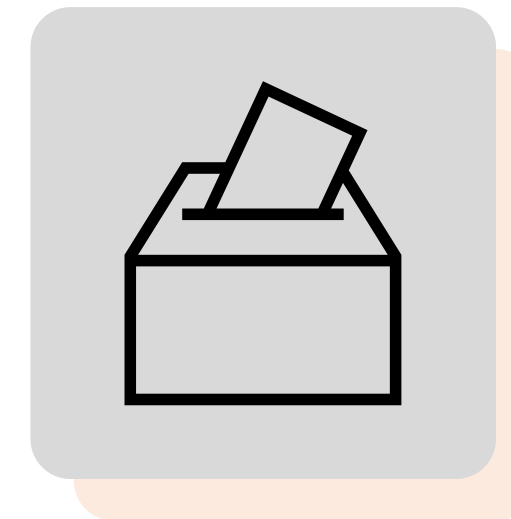
Article 20



Freedom of Assembly and Association

- Shrinking Civic Space
- Foreign Interference Laws
- Democratic Institutions

Article 21



Right to Political and Public Participation

- Free & Fair Elections
- Public Accountability
- Online Manipulation

Asia Centre strives to mainstream inclusion at all levels of the programme

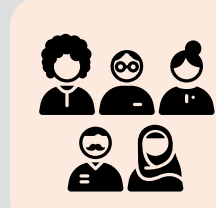
Gender



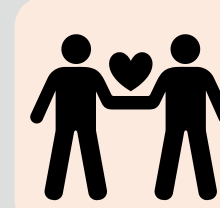
Youth



Minorities



LGBTQI+



Module 1: Political Analysis of Asia

Group Work: Political situation in the context of your country

1:30 PM – 2 PM Presentation “Narratives and Strategies for Democracy in Asia”

James Gomez, Asia Centre

2 PM - 2:30 PM Group Work: Political situation in the context of your country

2:30 PM - 3 PM Group Presentation

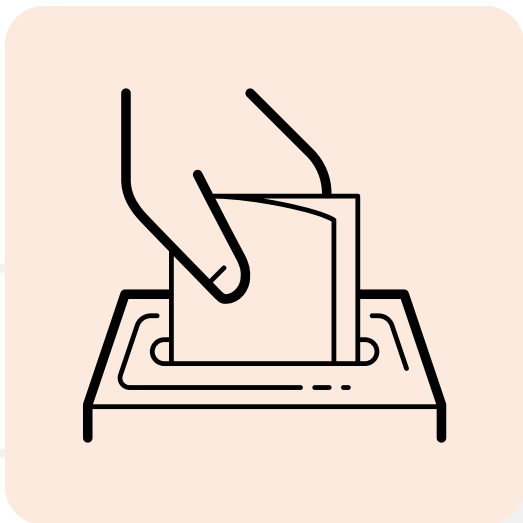
Democracy in Asia

International Scores



“In decline”

EIU (2023)	5.41/10
Freedom House (2024)	56.51/100
V-dem (2024)	0.41/1



“Electoral integrity most concerning”

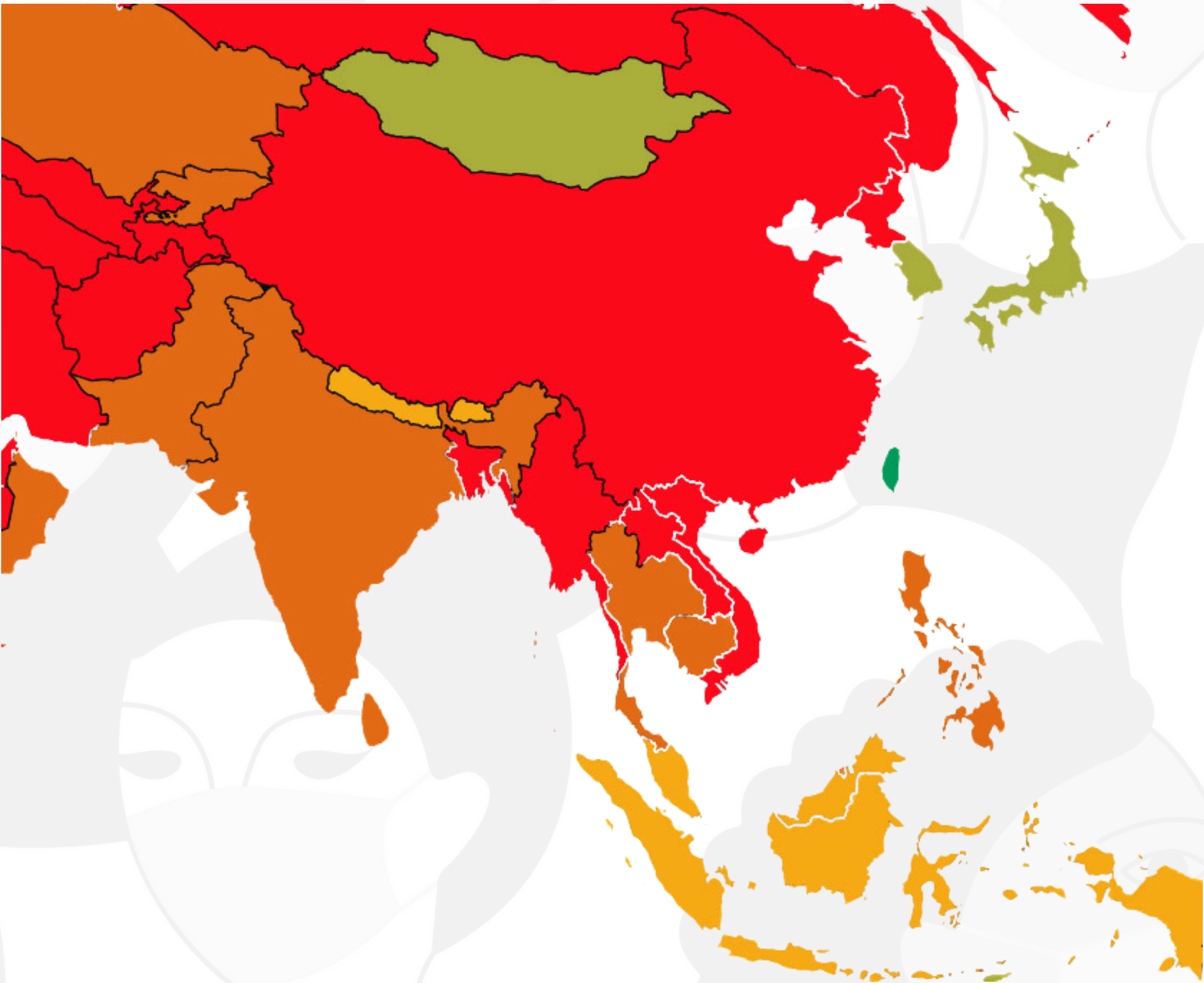
“incumbent governments and presidents have a strong advantage at the ballot box” (EIU)

“Efforts to undermine the political opposition threaten electoral integrity” (FH)

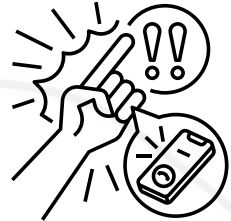
The majority of the population does not live in electoral democracies. (V-dem)

Democracy in Asia

Situation of Civic Space



Top Violations Identified



Intimidation



Censorship



Protest Crackdowns



HRDs Prosecuted



HRDs Jailed



Democracy in Asia

The Anti-Rights Movement

*“A group of some kind ... that operates in civil society space but that **actively works to restrict** a particular human right or set of rights. ... [They] often **have close links with other repressive forces**, notably states, political parties, politicians and faith leaders. Sometimes they act as the proxy of these forces, are created by them and have no real independence.”*

- CIVICUS

*“[The anti-rights movement] **denigrate people and groups** who do not wholly subscribe to, or are perceived not to fit, the static and homogeneous conceptualisations of cultural and national identity that these actors wish to impose. ... [They] **proliferate exclusionary narratives and policies** ... that are used for promoting intolerance and the othering of minorities and often-marginalised groups – including migrants, and sexual, racial and belief minorities.”*

- Humanists International

Democracy in Asia

Counter Narratives to Democracy



Guided Politics

Centralised & strong leadership ensures stability and progress.



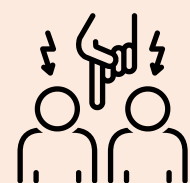
Asian Values

Religion, culture, social order and respect for authority as essential traits.



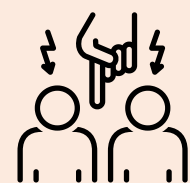
Duty over Rights

Duty to other people and communal responsibility over individual rights.



Foreign Interference

NGOs, independent media, and opposition politicians are a threat to sovereignty.



Terrorists

Opposition parties and civil society actors are terroristic threats to national security and stability.

Narratives During Elections

Economic Development



- Promote economic development over rights protection (esp. labour rights, land rights)
- Eg: Indonesia

Traditional Values



- Position as the guardian of traditional cultural, religious, and societal values
- Eg: India, Malaysia

Social Cohesion



- Threatening that social cohesion will break down without their leadership.
- Eg: Pakistan, Singapore

Foreign Actor



- Denouncing opposition parties, civil society, and media as being foreign influences
- Eg: Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan

Pre & Post-electoral Maneuvering

Annul Election Results



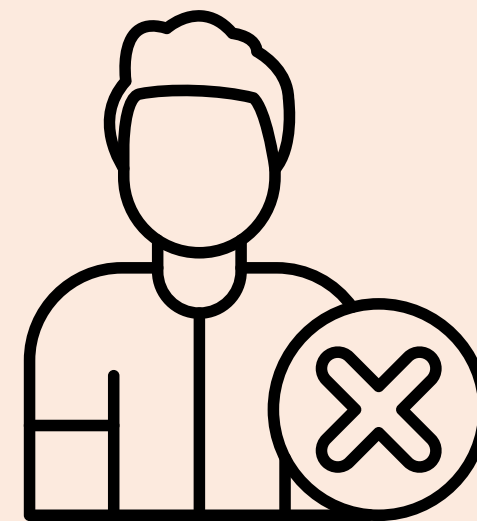
- Myanmar: with a coup
- Thailand: by court

Dissolve Parties



- Dissolve opposition (Thailand, Cambodia, Tajikistan, Hong Kong)
- Dissolve minor parties to consolidate power (Azerbaijan)

Disqualifying Candidates



- Technicalities such as documents, deadlines (Singapore)
- Unrelated charges such as fraud, laundering (Kyrgyzstan)

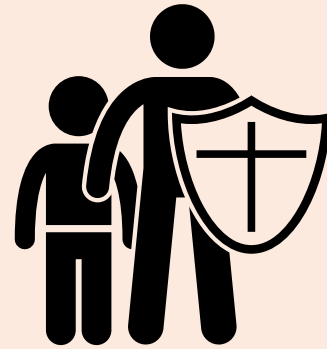
Electoral Law Amendment



- Barring candidates who have had foreign citizenship or spouse (Cambodia, Myanmar)
- Minimise direct representation (Hong Kong)

Democracy in Asia

Narratives About The Role of Civil Society



State-affiliated CSOs

- Portray themselves as partners of the government. They can also justify and protect state policies and directives.
- Address non-controversial issues like education, harmony and healthcare.
- In international platforms, they may not acknowledge their affiliation with state parties and interests. They portray themselves as being independent – supplanting the role of truly independent CSOs.



"Neutral" CSOs

- Neutral towards the ruling regime but avoids/opposes the opposition.
- Advocate for improvements and reforms within the bounds and limits set by the core power structures.
- Some are forced to engage with ruling regimes or continue their engagement in-country due to the nature of their work, such as humanitarian support.



Independent CSOs

- Watchdogs for public accountability. Emphasise connections with international human rights and democracy networks.
- Collaborate with opposition political parties and other groups challenging the status quo.
- In risk-prone countries, these CSOs would not engage with state agencies. In extreme cases, they may not recognise the ruling regime as legitimate altogether.

Shifting Narratives

Political Coalition



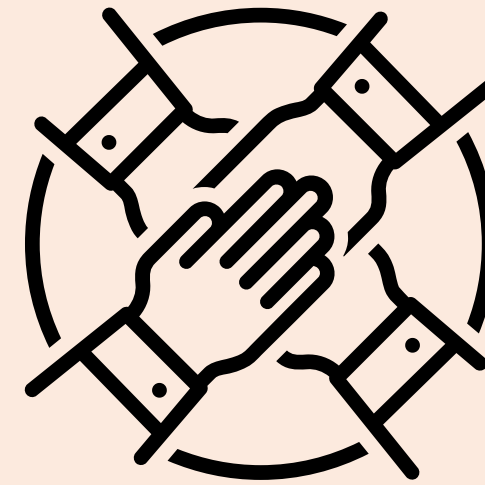
Political parties that support democracy and liberal principles should coordinate their political and messaging efforts.

Civil Society Working Groups



Independent and rights-based CSOs and advocates should collaborate to form proactive and action-oriented alliances.

Form a Broad Democracy Coalition



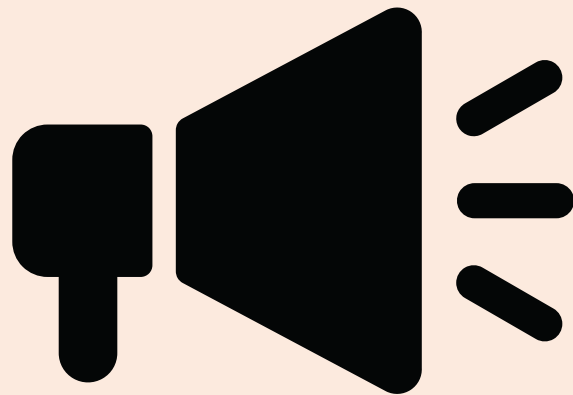
Form a broad cross-sector coalitions between political parties and CSOs.

Expand coalition to encompass other actors like diaspora communities, grassroots leaders, and media sector.

Shifting Narratives

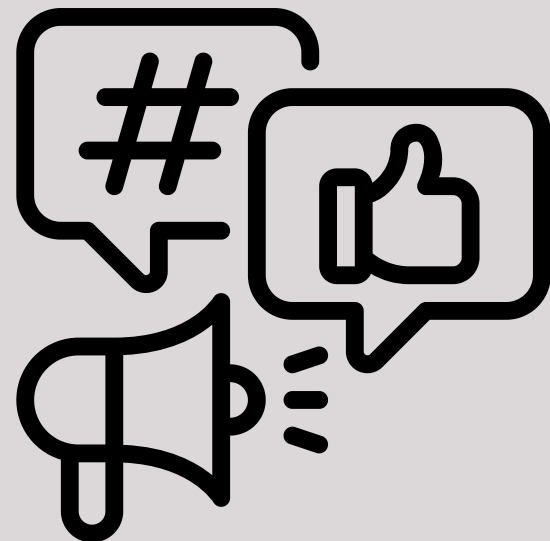
What Should the Democracy Coalition Do?

Alternative Narratives



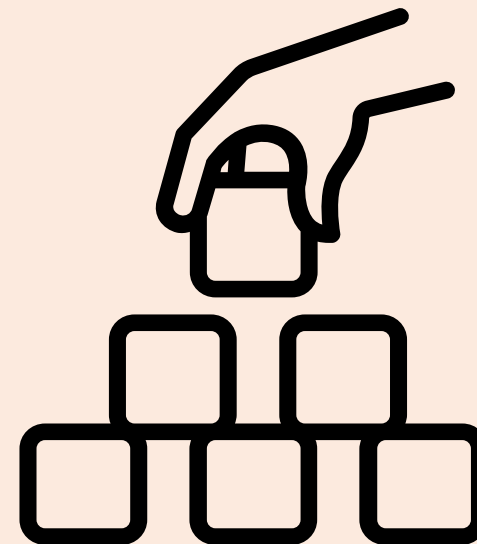
Develop alternative, democracy-based narratives through consultations with various communities and diverse voices.

Social Media Comms Strategy



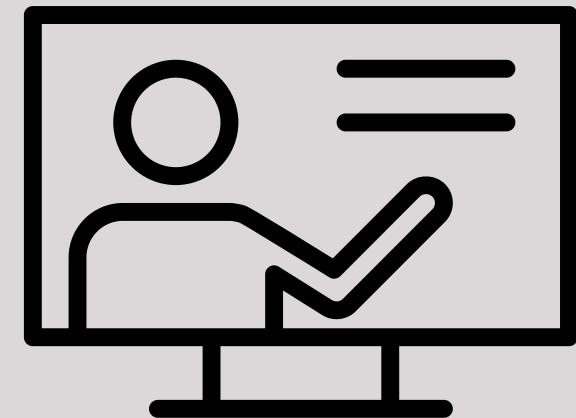
Implement a social media communications strategy to promote and amplify these narratives, particularly on platforms like TikTok.

Engage in Movement-building



Establish clear strategic plans with actionable items and ensure effective coordination among partners. Come up with resource mobilisation strategies for sustaining the coalition.

Capacity-building



Strengthen the capacity of coalition members by equipping them with the tools and training needed for effective public and stakeholder advocacy.

Exercise

Break into groups of 4-5.

Discuss the following:

- On your own, think about what are the predominant narratives on democracy and civic space in your country.
- Compare with others in your group. What are the similarities and differences regionally?
- As a group, talk about how narratives about democracy and civil society negatively or positively interact.
- As a network of liberal and democratic parties, how would you respond to the negative narratives about democracy and encourage civil society to be a partner in democracy?

Each group select 1 rep. to present their ideas (3-4 minutes)



THANK YOU!



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