



**SUBMISSION TO THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION  
OR BELIEF TO INFORM THE THEMATIC REPORT TO BE DELIVERED  
TO THE 55TH SESSION OF THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

**Introduction**

This submission provides an overview of initiatives driven by civil society in Southeast Asia aimed at mitigating and tackling hatred, discrimination, and religious rights restrictions targeting religious minorities in the region. These are often rooted in religious beliefs and amplified by government authorities. The document first provides the situational context of the region. Secondly, it assesses existing efforts by civil society organisations to address these challenges as well as their limitations. Thirdly, it reviews the strategies proposed by civil society actors in the region to properly address the challenges.

This document is based on a needs assessment research of civil society actors (NGOs, INGOs, religious actors, etc.) working in six target countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam) on issues related to religious violence, discrimination and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). More than 200 individuals were involved in the process. For more information regarding the findings, please refer to [\*Strategic Development for SEAFORB Network: Needs Assessment Report\*](#) (2023).

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## Background

Southeast Asia is a historically diverse region along ethnic and religious lines. Colonialism led to the establishment of new borders that displaced traditional communities and heralded mass labour migration, changing the ethnic and religious makeup of the region. In the anti-colonial struggle, the region's nationalists appealed to and mobilised ethnic and religious identities in the push to build the nations.<sup>1</sup>

Continuing this, post-independence governments embarked on nation-building projects which saw governments introducing homogenising strategies to synthesise ethnic and religious minorities into a nation with a dominant ethno-religious group. As a result, in many countries, efforts were made to enshrine the superiority of the dominant group/s over others. This included the designation of national races (Myanmar), state religions (Myanmar, Brunei, Indonesia and to a lesser extent Thailand) and the indigenous group (Malaysia in the case of Bumipetara). Secularisation in Singapore, the Philippines and communist countries, on the other hand, resulted in the diminishing of the status of certain religious groups.<sup>2</sup>

While governments continued to systematise this disparity among diverse religious groups, intergroup tensions and animosity rose. In many cases, with the tacit endorsement of government actors. As a result, there is ongoing intolerance through the spread of hatred, discrimination and violence across countries in the region. In Buddhist-dominant countries, minority Muslims are the target of hatred, as is the case in Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> In Muslim-dominant countries such as Indonesia, for another example, religious hardliners regularly attack Islam minority sects' and Christians' places of worship.<sup>4</sup>

## Existing Civil Society Efforts

As a result of such intolerance attacks, within the region, several ongoing initiatives by civil society actors strive to foster religious harmony and advocate against religious violence and violations of rights.

One emphasis of such activities lies in the context of building interreligious harmony at the community level. The target of these efforts is youths in diverse regions with latent religious conflict. Education curriculums, interreligious engagement, media literacy and similar activities are regularly implemented towards the aim of reducing animosity between groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Asia Centre (2020) *Hate Speech in Southeast Asia: New Forms, Old Rules*, Bangkok: Asia Centre, at: <https://asiacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Hate-Speech-in-Southeast-Asia-New-Forms-Old-Rules.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Asia Centre (2021) *Harmony Laws in Southeast Asia: Majority Dominance, Minority Repression*, Bangkok: Asia Centre, at: <https://asiacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/Harmony-Laws-in-Southeast-Asia-Majority-Dominance-Minority-Repression.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Asia Centre (2023a) *Burmanisation and Buddhisation: Accelerating the Decline of Religious Rights in Myanmar*, at: <https://asiacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/Burmanisation-and-Buddhisation-Accelerating-the-Divide-of-Religious-Rights-in-Myanmar.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Asia Centre (2023b) *The-Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia*, Washington, DC: USCIRF, at: <https://asiacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Bureaucratization-of-Religion-in-Southeast-Asia.pdf>.

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Senior religious leaders often engage in interreligious dialogues to find common ground. In many cases, they form inter-religious councils – mediated by civil society organisations and government authorities – to find peaceful solutions to the conflict. In countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, there are religious NGOs dedicated to fostering a moderate comprehension of religions and leveraging their influence to counteract religious-based hate speech. In Thailand and the Philippines, programs have been designed to promote cross-sector civic engagement in matters beyond their religious differences, such as local social problems like pollution and poverty.

Humanitarian and legal aid projects were also found to be common. Humanitarian support is pivotal in Myanmar (particularly in the context of Rohingyas, both before and after the coup) and Vietnam (for those fleeing government-perpetrated persecution). They include frontline service provisions to religious minorities who are attacked and relocating them to safer areas. In many cases, local organisations collaborate with those residing in Thailand to provide refuge. Legal clinics and legal NGOs also appear as a major area of work in Malaysia and Indonesia, where laws related to religious manifestation and expression restrict religious minority groups. For example, religious conversion laws in Malaysia.

Civil society actors engage in advocacy across various levels, with national-level advocacy being the most prominent. In Thailand and the Philippines, for example, these are mainly focused on the country's respective Southern regions as areas with heightened religious conflict. These focus on minority groups to build a body of knowledge on their rights; while other advocacy efforts are targeted at interfaith leaders with the aim of reducing inter-religious conflict. However, in Myanmar and Vietnam, these are rendered effectively non-existent due to restrictions imposed by the government.

Advocacy by civil society with duty-bearers on issues related to religious freedom is not prominent, primarily due to its perceived ineffectiveness and the risks it poses to advocates; while only some advocacy on religious rights and religious-based hatred is directed at the public. The limited support for advocacy stands in contrast with the proliferation of hate speech and religious-based intolerance, as seen in Myanmar (against Rohingyas) or against minority Islam sects (such as Shia and Ahmadiyya) in Indonesia.

At the international level, advocacy by civil society organisations is directed at diplomatic missions and foreign services of countries such as the US and the UK, whose roles are seen as proactive in raising their concerns with relevant stakeholders. In some cases, these concerns are relayed to pertinent UN experts and mechanisms. The aim of international-level advocacy is for these actors to exert pressure on regional governments. There are no substantial advocacy efforts at the regional level due to a lack of supporting mechanisms, for example, in ASEAN or a lack of a regional network on this topic.

Regarding such activities and advocacy efforts, a significant issue is the limited capacity-building for protection against religiously oriented violence. The assessment found that only in Vietnam, and to a lesser extent, Myanmar, were civil society-led programs implemented to a significant extent to provide training for community leaders to report rights violations by state actors and establish connections with relevant international stakeholders. This is the case despite the occurrence of violence in other countries within the region. Similar limitations also apply to building the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs). Concerns have been raised

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that frontline actors lack the technical skills necessary to provide support to individuals at risk or to properly document violations.

Furthermore, the Asia Centre also found that while there are various activities on building intercommunal and religious harmony – a key aspect of reducing societal violence, discrimination and hatred – there is nevertheless a deficiency in advocacy based on religious freedom. NGOs throughout the region often refrain from promoting this issue through a human rights perspective due to concerns about potential government backlash and the risk of intolerant attacks from religious hardliners. Often, FoRB efforts are only positioned within the wider human rights network/coalition in the region, where issues related to FoRB are not prioritised. This leads to an advocacy strategy that fails to effectively highlight systematic religious discrimination, restrictions, and rights violations.

In terms of collaboration, national/subnational networks and coalitions play the most significant roles; however, they vary heavily from country to country. This inhibits the impact of civil society organisations. Yet, even within countries with a strong presence of religious-based civil society, there is no nationwide network that systematically connects actors; and there is a lack of intersectional networking, with different actors and NGOs focusing on their specific sector. Limited communication among stakeholders further compounds this issue.

International partnership is another avenue for collaboration. However, in general, substantive international partnerships are not prevalent. CSOs rely on support and resources from INGOs and international faith-based organisations to carry out their programmes. While they recognise the key role of these organisations, international partnerships can, in many instances, elevate the risk of being viewed as a form of foreign interference by regional governments, religious organizations, as well as the public.

Meanwhile, there is a lack of a network at the Southeast Asian level. While respondents may have connections within their own countries or with international partners outside the region, there is no platform or mechanism for different types of actors to connect with each other at the regional level.

## **Needed Intervention & Support**

Civil society actors, upon assessment, indicated a range of needed interventions to aim to advocate against hatred and discrimination. In general, programmes are observed to be the most effective should they be created from a bottom-up, community-led approach led by organisations from the region. They also emphasise the importance of adopting a FoRB-based approach that would effectively address and offer solutions to issues rooted in hatred and entrenched restrictions tied to religious identity.

Advocacy is necessary to drive policy changes. Sustained advocacy with UN human rights mechanisms or foreign governments can exert pressure on regional governments. Being in close visibility with these actors also provides some at-risk individuals a layer of protection, as authorities might refrain from harming civil society actors with international connections. Additionally, some highlighted the potential for governments to advocate for FoRB with their

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counterparts from other countries. Civil society can also engage ASEAN bodies such as AICHR to provide complaints.

Public advocacy is also crucial to ensure that the general public comprehends the ongoing persecution of religious minorities; particularly, the consequences of hate speech, which can radicalise individuals and lead to harm inflicted upon religious minorities.

Existing capacity-building has yet to properly target civil society actors. As noted above, training to effectively monitor and report rights violations remains a priority. Support can also be provided to build their knowledge of the regional situation and facilitate/mediate interfaith dialogues. One example was a comment from a Myanmar respondent who indicated that representatives of CSOs and INGOs lack an understanding of the context of the ethno-religious conflict and therefore could not advocate on their behalf effectively. CSOs also see training for managing project grants as a key priority. Such training is crucial to ensure that the civil society can efficiently secure and utilise funding to support their initiatives.

Underlying these advocacy and capacity-building efforts is the needed research. This includes the development of an annual index cataloguing rights violations throughout the region, pinpointing areas where tensions are on the rise. Additionally, it entails the creation of a regional actor map and a study of best practices with regard to building peace.

Civil society actors also raise the need for regional-level strategy-making and advocacy coordination. To address this issue, a possible solution can involve establishing a mechanism for collective funding or a shared resource pool that bolsters the sector's ability to undertake impactful initiatives and sustain activities in the long term. Additionally, a regional level, civil society network would serve as a platform for enhanced collaboration across the region. A reporting mechanism can also be established within the region by a focal point which can then share concerns with appropriate stakeholders at the international level.

## **Conclusion**

In Southeast Asia, civil society actors are actively engaged in initiatives aimed at promoting religious harmony, essential for reducing societal violence, discrimination, and hatred. However, challenges stem from limited capacity-building to address violence, particularly in reporting rights violations and providing support to at-risk individuals. There is also a lack of advocacy centred on religious freedom which could effectively address rights restrictions – often a product of religious discrimination. Meanwhile, collaboration efforts at both national and international levels are hindered by the lack of systematic networking, further limiting the impact of civil society work.

In this context, for the civil society sector in the region to better address the issue of religiously-based discrimination and hatred, several interventions and forms of support were identified, which include more comprehensive advocacy with diverse stakeholders and targeted capacity-building initiatives for civil society actors. Overall, the region also requires strategy-making and advocacy coordination efforts.

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