Navigating Our Future, Together:

Evidence-based Policymaking for Human Rights and Peace at the Center of ASEAN

The Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in ASEAN/Southeast Asia (SHAPE-SEA), welcome the convening of the 49th ASEAN Summit in Manila from 15 November. Yet, as research and evidence across the region show, commitments to a "people-centred" community will mean little unless we confront the structural realities that shape the lives of Southeast Asian peoples.

Recognise the regional realities. The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement promises integration, but the data reveal a stark digital divide. Internet adoption ranges from over 97 per cent in Malaysia to roughly 41 per cent in Timor-Leste, ASEAN's newest member.[1] Within countries, rural, Indigenous and remote communities remain the least connected. We caution that digitalisation without inclusion risks deepening existing exclusions. Without enforceable safeguards for privacy and expression, it may also expand capacities for surveillance and control. Our region is also home to protracted conflict-affected societies, from Myanmar and Mindanao to southern Thailand and West Papua. In Myanmar alone, UNHCR estimates that some 4 million people were internally displaced and 1.6 million were refugees and asylum-seekers as of mid-2026.[2] We understandably clear that peace cannot be reduced to the absence of interstate war. It requires attention to human security, transitional justice and the voices of affected communities, where violations are experienced and lived.

Move beyond the limits of non-interference on Myanmar. We regard the continued exclusion of Myanmar's military leadership as a principled position. Yet more than five years on, the Five-Point Consensus remains largely unimplemented. Scholarship has identified the tension between non-interference and the enforcement of regional norms as the core dilemma of ASEAN's response.[3] We urge ASEAN to develop measurable benchmarks, engage inclusively with democratic and civil society actors, and protect refugees from forced return. Dialogue partners, including China and Russia, bear responsibility for supplying arms to the junta and for shielding it at the UN Security Council.

Uphold international law and the UN human rights system. A Code of Conduct in the South China Sea will contribute to peace only if it is legally binding, consistent with UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award, and attentive to the small-scale fisherfolk affected by coercive maritime practices. Research also documents how China and like-minded states have worked to constrain scrutiny and civil society participation within UN human rights mechanisms.[4] At the same time, other partners, including the United States, have retreated from these institutions. We call on ASEAN member states to reinforce, not dilute, these mechanisms.

Affirm why the academic community matters. Universities and researchers produce the evidence that sound policy requires. They document violations, analyse conflict, preserve memory and educate future generations. Yet the evidence on academic freedom is alarming. In the 2026 Academic Freedom Index, the Philippines fell to 0.589, its lowest score in over four decades.[5] Cambodia scored 0.21 in 2024, and Myanmar ranks among the bottom 10 per cent of countries worldwide.[6] Those who document abuses face grave risks. Between 2012 and 2023, 248 land and environmental defenders were killed in the Philippines, accounting for 64 per cent of all such killings in Asia.[7] A region that silences its scholars and defenders weakens its own capacity to understand and resolve its problems. We call on ASEAN to recognise academic freedom as integral to its human rights commitments. We also urge it to strengthen AICHR's protection mandate and to institutionalise meaningful engagement with academia and civil society in regional policymaking.

As the Chairship passes to Singapore, SHAPE-SEA reaffirms its commitment to ensuring that critical enquiry and research on human rights and peace inform regional policies, institutions and agendas, in collaboration with academic institutions, civil society and, most especially, underrepresented stakeholders. We stand ready to further engage with ASEAN, its sectoral bodies and its partners so that evidence, not expediency, guides the region toward a just and peaceful shared future.

References

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2. UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, Myanmar Situation Update (June–July 2026). https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/123886
3. Muhammad, Oktaviani & Panorama (2025), see Further Reading.
4. Inboden (2021; 2024), see Further Reading.
5. Kinzelbach et al., Academic Freedom Index – 2026 Update (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg & V-Dem Institute). https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2026.pdf
6. V-Dem/Academic Freedom Index data for Cambodia (2024); Academic Freedom Index – 2023 Update, as cited in Nwet Kay Khine, Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies. https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/HRPS/article/download/277634/187684/1239142.
7. Global Witness, Missing Voices (2024). https://globalwitness.org/documents/20688/Global_Witness_Land_and_Environmental_Defenders_2024_report.pdf

Further readings

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