

# Defending Rights: Understanding and Confronting the Context in Southeast Asia

November 2019

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INITIAL REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

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**URGENT ACTION FUND**  
FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS





## **Defending Rights: Understanding and Confronting the Context in Southeast Asia**

November 2019

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank everyone for an inspiring, informative and provocative gathering. Moving forward, we will produce an adaptive interactive web page to share key learnings from this gathering, which will inform our ongoing cross-regional and global program (power and protection of activists and movements) and shape the tools and methodologies we are developing and refining for feminist leadership schools and dialogues in different contexts.

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# Overall

Given the growing hostility of our contexts, how can we make our movements safer and stronger? This was the central question which brought together frontline activists, regional and international NGO's and donors, working in Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines. The three-day convening, **Defending Rights: Understanding and Confronting the Context in Southeast Asia**, was the fourth in a series of convenings in different parts of the world designed to enable collective knowledge sharing, analysis and re-thinking in light of shifting political trends that threaten activists and civic space. Each of these is designed to build on the others but also to explore the specific nature of its regional context.

Over 3 days we spent time analyzing what makes our different country contexts hostile and identifying the trends and power dynamics driving that hostility. We then explored the strategies and ways of organizing that activists, movement organizations and their allies are creating to both continue their work and increase their safety. The following are some of the key insights and questions that emerged in our time together. The intention of the convening was not to build a regional initiative, but rather to create a rare space for open-ended dialogue across sectors to explore our reading of the context, common trends and power dynamics and to discuss tactics – all with the aim of enabling **a shared analysis and creative thinking about strategies for organizing and safety**.

The convening left participants with a collective sense of inspiration and urgency: to continue to rethink strategies, integrate collective protection and self-defense into our organizing, deepen our analysis of the private and elite actors exercising influence in our countries, find ways to foster more understanding and connection across organizations, build collaboration among movements, sectors and geographies, explore cultural and creative strategies for change and much more.

On the following pages you will find insights, quotes and other observations gleaned from the Convening.

# What is making our contexts hostile?

- **Rise in authoritarianism and militarism:**
  - *"The government is waging three wars: 1) a war on drugs – 30,000 deaths mostly from slum areas; 2) a war against communist insurgency – used to attack indigenous communities and their land; and 3) a war on women – Duterte is unrelenting on his attacks on women to gain traction in his circles"*
  - *"After 2013 election - when the opposition gained ground... There were lots of community demands, this was seen as an attack on the economic control and power of the elites."*
- **Impunity for repression and violence:** Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines are military-police states, declared or undeclared.
  - *"Some institutions, some people are above the law... And the police and military are above the law, untouchable."*
  - *"They want us to be scared, to be silent... We told the police and they don't do anything because I am a lesbian and an activist."*
- **Rise in nationalism** – this is mobilized as an expression of support for the authoritarian state and for 'social order':
  - *"What you wear as a symbol of patriotism is enforced at community level. People feel that they have to conform, be silent."*
- **Rising inequality and poverty:**
  - *"The government is not addressing people's needs. But they do have the capacity, but aren't doing it"*
  - *"We are the number one country in the world for inequality. And the establishment of special economic zones are displacing thousands of people, under forced evacuation"*
  - *"There is a 'race for resources' – land, minerals, etc – driven by profit-hungry business and state interests at the expense of communities."*
- **Criminalization and attacks on activists** of all kinds - "farmers, activists, opposition leaders, indigenous, LGBTI, lawyers, HRD" – "in response to the growing power of movements demanding economic, social and cultural rights."
  - *Activists named as "anti-development, anti-progress, terrorists" or "serving the interests of the foreigner"*
  - *Increased surveillance: "It is impossible to work with women, local communities without being watched."*

- *“The reason why they (defenders) are being attacked is that there are economic policies that they disagree with. The government does not want to have those forms of opposition.”*
- **Laws to restrict progressive NGO’s and grassroots organizations**
  - There are new restrictions on registration of the organizations, freedom of expression and assembly in all three countries. There is a ban against any gathering that exceeds five people.
  - *“Even peace groups are perceived as the opposition.”*
  - *“Beyond 3 people you cannot organize a meeting to discuss anything”*
- **More collaboration between governments for economic and security agendas, as well as the surveillance and tracking of activists.** We can see this in blocking each other’s opposition leaders from traveling, in enforced disappearances (in Laos from Thailand or Thailand to Vietnam), in arrests of activists, in blocking activists from entering or seeking asylum in certain states, and in surveillance of activists – wherever they go.



## How does this affect us? – “We can’t forget the human part of this context”

- *“I feel a sense of hopelessness and anger about how the world can change or how I can change it.”*
- *“Many people are now getting used to keeping silent. It is very scary; now young people don’t speak out.”*
- *“It is a daily barrage of bad news...my colleagues being killed, being put in jail. I can’t even bike in my country because you never know where the death squads are. It gives me a sense of constant insecurity.”*
- *“We worry for our friends at the front lines...if we are doing the right thing to help.”*
- *“We are tired, very tired. We work weekends but you can’t keep working all the time. Women have a double burden and need help with the children too.”*
- *“It is hard to mobilize people because of distrust and fear.”*
- *AND – The personal is political – “we need to address this as a systemic level impact not just individual.”*



# “It is about power”: What does the power analysis help us understand about our contexts?

- *“Why is this happening? It is about power – how to maintain power, how to dominate what happens. The power is very concentrated, so changing that political landscape is going to be very challenging.”*
- *“Power is both positive and negative... There are negative forms of power that are used against us, to violate us; violence and the threat of violence is so critical to maintaining power.”*

## JASS on Power

*“We know a lot about power. Intuitively we know power, we have experienced power, even if we never talk about it.”*

### 5 observations about power

- Power is not static. Power is always contested.
- Power is defined by relationships, is relational.
- Power is inside us, in our family, in our organizations, in our communities and in the public arena.
- Power is held by groups but is also systemic – e.g. patriarchy, capitalism, etc.
- We are living in a moment of heightened power struggle.

### Power is manifest and contested in many ways:

- Who decides and makes the rules
- Who and what matters most
- Who gets what
- Who does what
- What is normal
- What ideas and beliefs count

We used JASS' framework for power analysis to see how different forms of power are affecting our contexts:

### Power Over

- **Visible Power** – formal authorities and structures that are authorized to make decisions
- **Hidden and Shadow Power** – those who influence and control the agenda and what happens
- **Invisible Power** – Beliefs, norms and fears are both internalized and manipulated through political narratives to create fear and doubt, to silence and divide us and to deflect criticism.

(You can see more about **Power Over** on our [Power and Protection resource platform](#))



# Our collective power analysis of our contexts and key issues revealed some overall patterns:

**Increasing collusion between state (visible) and non-state (hidden) actors.** In many cases the extent of collaboration and overlap among corporations – local and global – local elites and national governments is so tight that it is hard to discern where one interest begins and the other ends. Power is highly concentrated in the hands of a few. And together they control many sectors, and manipulate social norms/beliefs to legitimize themselves and **discredit and isolate movement leaders** and HRD's, especially ethnic minorities, environmental defenders, LGBTQ activists, and women.

- *"This increased authoritarianism has allowed for increased corporate – government partnerships while community groups are seen as "trouble makers."*

**An intensifying race for natural resources driving violence:** Economic development in the form of extractive projects (energy, mono-agriculture, etc.) are accelerating and increasingly accompanied by violence. The state is deploying the police and military to repress community resistance and "protect" the economic interests of the government, elites and corporations.

- *"The extracting of resources is going to maximum level."*
- *"The ASEAN community is pushing for greater investment in extractive industries, dams. This group is also a cause of greater exploitation and impacts on local communities."*
- *"Indigenous communities have been taking care of forest, waters for centuries and now someone wants to exploit the resources."*

**The contestation over development models:** Development projects are often extractive and not designed for community benefit. In many cases, communities are not consulted or informed even when the project will displace them or pollute their environment. Countries in the global north push ASEAN countries to conform to an economic model driven by international global investments and the interests of local and global elites.

- *"Even with China's investment in sustainable energy it is 'maladaptive', it is not congruent with community needs...When communities say what they want, and there is no money in it."*
- *"There is a divide and conquer strategy to overcome resistance especially in indigenous communities. They privatize everything... eliding economic elite's power with that of these large economic powers. Both enrich the 1%."*

- “Development is always portrayed as a zero sum. You are either for it or against it”

The use of **political narratives (a form of invisible power) to promote and justify extractive and economic projects** as positive “development” and to portray resistance as backward.

- *“The narrative is so strong around development – we want development so let them (local indigenous communities) be displaced. And even more so if the actors are women.”*
- *“The narrative of capitalism has given us growth combined with individualism. Everything is monetized. They have commodified everything that is out there.”*

The convening affirmed the importance of understanding the specific drivers and interests behind authoritarianism, militarism, economic exploitation, and misogyny, and how these power dynamics affect different people and identities in distinct ways (e.g. women, LGBTI, indigenous, rural, urban, ethnic minorities)

The strategic use of narratives and disinformation to orchestrate public opinion and delegitimize activists or rights-justice agendas:

- **“Invisible power” (socialization, norms, ideologies, and prejudice) is manipulated in the form of political narratives** to mobilize existing prejudice, sow fear and division, silence dissent and legitimize repression and violence.
  - *“We say we are at war. War against terrorists, women, drugs. But is the word ‘war’ only a cover for the government to justify its actions by controlling the narrative? The victims have no weapons, no arms. The term war is really problematic and needs to be revisited. It is a cover for the exploitation of resources, of the poor.”*
  - *“We feel we must self-censor because of the conditions here.”*
- The presence of social media is both an opportunity for us to get information out but there is also **much government effort to counter our information and win over public opinion:**
  - *“The strategy of disinformation is strongly organized, to impact the poor especially because they don’t have resources to go online so only get disinformation.”*
  - *“China is also using strategies to win the hearts and minds of the people and government: huge pledges of investment packages in infrastructure - not poverty alleviation – in the form of mining, dams, transit – all threatening to dislocate thousands of peoples. There are cultural events, training, cultural exchanges all designed to win over the support of the Philippine people to China.”*

## The Role of China and the US in the Region

- There are great differences between the US and China but some of the economic impact in the region is very similar.
  - *“China and US are not the same but if you unmask them, they are the same. It is capitalism rules and policies in practice. The tool they are using is the same. For profit mechanisms. If you are from China you look like you are from the region, but you are doing the same.”*
  - *“It is a continuum between US and China/Russia...we see investment shifting toward China but it is really just a change of face and tactics including cyber- attacks and infiltration.”*
  - *“The line between the foreign investors and local economic players is blurred. Most of the profits are flowing back to the foreign power. It gives more power to the national elites but even more to foreign interests”*
- There is a dangerous convergence of economic tools and foreign policy by US – both in trade and in what is happening in the West Philippine Sea which is explosive.
  - *“We are in a dangerous moment with US where there is an obsession with defeating China at any expense including our own.”*
- There are close ties and an integration of US military bases into Philippine bases including recent joint military exercises. The US facilities are stockpiling arms under the heading of humanitarian missions. And now China is creating bases as well including on fragile coral reefs.
  - *“We need to understand our history, the trends and partners to understand what is happening now...for example Cambodia and China have had a relationship, both social and commercial, for 1000 years.”*
- In some cases, countries play the US and China off of each other – for instance to dodge human rights accountability. In Cambodia, civil society and the opposition has been neutralized so it is a very different dynamic. Cambodia owes 22% of its GDP to China. Whereas Philippines and Thailand is less than 1%.
  - *“If you (from US) give us a red card for human rights we will just go trade with China”*
  - *“Cambodia doesn’t feel like a country anymore, just a small city of China.”*
  - *“Six countries are affected by China’s actions on the Mekong River. Millions of people are impacted, yet the regional governments didn’t have any say.”*
- What should we do about China? We identified more opportunities for impact than we often realize:
  - *Because of internal contradictions within the Chinese Communist Party and the emergence of public criticism demotes political leaders, public criticism could be effective.*
  - *Need to push back against the narrative of wealth and growth at expense of environment and human rights*
  - *Need stronger CSO’s in regional level and in countries*
  - *Develop allies in Japan who are major investors in the region, bigger than China in many countries*
  - *Develop linkages and solidarity with CSO’s and HRD’s in China*
  - *Document the negative impact of Chinese investment and use this as advocacy leverage.*

# Resistance and Strategies – “We are not sitting ducks!”

## Implications for Organizing Strategies

- We see more people speaking out against the violence. But there is also a **deep impact of the state’s efforts to silence people** (Thai example of self-censorship and keeping to “safe zones”.)
- There is fear and anger over what is happening. But this **fear and anger is also fueling resistance**. We see more organizing and opportunities for democratic forces to fight back through loose cross movement networks, coalitions, alliances.
  - *“The Cambodian people are looking for opportunities to rise up. The government fears this and we can see it in their actions to control the people”*
  - *“The beauty of the situation if you could call it that is that we are becoming a more unified LGBTI movement. And more unified among social movements in the Philippines.”*
  - *“We are on the brink of disaster. But there are also opportunities. There are spaces, there are communities organizing from the ground up. Duterte is a culture. But there is also a counter culture emerging.”*
  - We need to challenge the “myth of development” and insist that we get “real economic benefit” for communities.
- The increasingly hostile context has also prompted movements in all three countries to be **more creative, more strategic, and more community-centered**.
  - *“We are using more creative way to counter narratives of the government using arts, concerts, fashion shows, exhibits, music and more”*
  - *“We have to go beyond what we know about, to move forward in these times.”*
- We need to **rethink our strategies and tactics** in the face of the crackdown on activism
  - *“All spaces are closing down so we need to invent our own actions - extra legal actions as we see in Chile and Hong Kong – to express this culture of change”*
  - **“Our organizing became stronger after we as an NGO were erased from the ministry. Now we have declared ourselves as a movement instead. We do our work as a citizens. As an NGO we had to inform the ministry where we go, get permission. Now as a movement we can go to a community and meet with people in a coffee shop as a friend or family.”**

## Organizing Strategies

- We need to be more critical and reflect more on the way we are organizing. And yet the context sharpens the way of working. *“Organizing in difficult situations brings out the best in everyone.”*
- There are many solidarity groups and alliances now being formed. There are many global spaces are being opened to grassroots rights defenders. The youth, in most cases, are stepping up. There are more political youth groups being formed, even in traditionally conservative schools and locations.
- Dealing with conflict internally is critical as a practice for movement building. *“Within groups and alliances, it is okay to have differences. What is crucial is how we manage those differences to further our cause.”*
- *“More people is better, more diversity is better if we are challenging authoritarianism. But we don’t always trust each other. We have to build trust overtime.”* The role of political education is key and how that holds people together.

## Challenging and changing the narrative

- There is a need to look deeply at our own narratives – are they transformative or are we falling into the trap of using their same narrative? For example: The concept of an ‘evil enemy’ gives legitimacy to a dictatorship/ police state. The question of “war” framing - “Is there really a war? In a war, there are two three or four opposing sides. Here there is the government and there are the victims. The victims have no weapons. It is really a massacre.”
  - **Our own narratives are important**
    - *“We are interested in HUMANIZATION. To bring back humanity. We counter creeping authoritarianism with creative resistance, radical empathy and disruptive kindness.”*
    - *“We use films to de-normalize violence – we share counter narratives that open audiences to discourses on human struggles, to identify with shared values and concerns. It turns data into a real person. It builds empathy.”*
  - We have to **pay attention to fault lines that are used to divide us** – who is being “othered” and “dehumanized”? Who is being made the scapegoat? This means if we don’t pay attention to the possible fault lines (e.g. gender/ sexual identity, race/ethnicity/indigeneity and/or class then this could be used to divide us.
  - **Narratives can empower. They can also disempower.** Presently, how do we counter the narratives of capitalist culture that fuel an individualist culture? *“The harm of capitalism is to put forward one dominant narrative of the economy: economic growth along with individualism.”*

- We cannot disregard **the importance of memory and learning from history. Political violence, autocracy, misinformation and resistance are not new.** Narratives are used to obliterate the past:
  - *“We should always maintain a memory of the past so that we can have a better understanding of the present.”*
  - *We have a legacy of **community rights that exists still in community memory.** There is a sense of urgency that this was something we had that is being eroded.”*
- Organizing that embodies our narratives is powerful- A **narrative is only one piece, it can't be disconnected from organizing strategies.** We need to embody the narrative not just say it. *“There is a need to popularize the narrative of change and resistance, with continuing organizing.”* We heard numerous examples of creative uses of tactics to embody and communicate narratives.
  - *“We were protesting the law banning political gatherings of more than five people, and on any kind of petitioning of officials. We marched in small groups...We walked 450 km to demand a constitutional amendment...We made the case that people have the right to march and should be protected by law...We worked to counter the negative narrative and lifted up the constitution, and to show us as peaceful and not a threat. We worked to show that democracy is a common ground not destabilising.”*

## Alliances, Conflict and Alliance Building

- **Building our cohesion**
  - *“We forged alliance among diverse women – we create **joint analysis** about what we are facing, we talk about women’s rights beyond just one sector... tensions arise and we allow it to happen so we can address it...It is okay to have differences. But we harness our commonalities to have an effective movement... we have **tough political debates** too.”*
  - *“We need to recognize each other’s’ distinct positions and realities and then find common ground from there.”*
  - *“Previously we have some internal attacks, but slowly we have learned...**We are careful now not to say something that that hurts others.** We have a policy against discrimination against women. We try to create an **open space for women to come forward** who experience discrimination.”*
- **Outreach and solidarity**
  - *“We have much **solidarity** with many groups – urban, LGBT, working classes, indigenous women...**We reach out** to scientists, churches, professionals and other movements so they give us their support.”*

## Tactical Allies

- **Religious groups** play conflicting roles – sometimes an ally, sometimes an opponent
  - *“The Catholic Church has traditionally been supportive of many human rights in the Philippines and in fact priests active on this have been killed.”*
  - *“When Duterte lashes out at the Catholic Church, he also weaponizes the other churches to bolster his power. Religion is also a battle ground about who holds the power.”*
- Local governments – Some local authorities are places we can still engage and impact positively. In Thailand some local governments have defended their activist residents as not “terrorists.”



# Collective Protection is vital

- Strategies for collective protection are emerging organically at grassroots level. Given the increasingly hostile context in the region, the best protection strategy is still collective protection. But this context demands a much higher degree of preparation.
  - *“More people is better, more diversity is better if we are challenging authoritarianism. But we don’t always trust each other. We have to build trust overtime.”*
- Collective protection is about trusting your life to others in community to protect one another. *“We can be safe within communities with whom we trust our lives.”*
- And any support of collective protection needs to **build on that locally anchored organizing**. Donors need to be cautious about producing solutions, but rather to understand what is emerging in the context, and support that.
- We need time to **take care of ourselves and heal** – if not we are more vulnerable. The hostile context sometimes gives a sense of hopelessness in some activists. It is important to address that some activists have lost confidence, so we should look into how we can regain confidence as activists within movement. *“There is a sense of insecurity. But if you are within collectives, that’s where you derive protection.”*

## Building Collective Protection

Marusia Lopez Cruz of JASS spoke to us (see video [here](#)) about strategies for building collective protection and highlighted five key ingredients:

- **Safe spaces** where women can be completely themselves. Spaces also of collective care. And bringing that safe space into networks and organizations.
- Constant and continuous power analysis – formal, hidden and the way narratives are being used to silence and criminalize activists
- An **adapted approach to risk and safety analysis** – a popularized approach to risk tools and steps
- Building **collective leadership** that values diverse forms of leadership
- Influence the **way that donors understand and support WHRD**



# Reflections for the future

- *“We are up against a culture that teaches people to think a certain way...how can we strategically reach out and build shared analysis? Until we can build that kind of analysis with people it will be hard to overcome the challenges.”*
- *“We need to look at past practices in our movements. Learn from them...We are thinking about creating a progressive strategy blueprint to prevent another coup and the loss of the rule of law.”*
- *“We need to include a gender analysis to bring that into our agenda. This has to be part of our invisible power.”*
- *“Initially we talked about finding common ground. We haven’t found the solutions yet. There are points of convergence as a starting point...Going beyond our own echo chambers – using cultural memes that are broader rather than framed antagonistically– as a unifying factor...and most of all going back to the basics – movement building.”*
- *“We need funders to support grassroots organizing.”*
- *“Movement-building that incorporates collective protection is long-term, deep work that requires sustained funding and support.”*
- *And one comment that seemed to sum up our conversation: “We have to go beyond what we know about, to move forward in these times”*





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