

# Supporting Asia's Democratic Future

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## Introduction

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, members of the committee, thank you for holding this timely and important hearing, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. By way of background, the International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working in more than 90 countries around the world. We trace our roots back to President Reagan and his unshakeable belief that, “Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.” Senator John McCain was our chairman for 25 years, and in his spirit, we believe that support for democracy in the world is not a Republican or Democratic value but an American value that advances our national interests.

IRI’s commitment to democracy and human rights in the Asia-Pacific region is long-standing. Over the nearly three decades of our presence in Asia, IRI has had the great privilege of partnering with democrats in countries across the region in their struggles for more accountable, transparent and just governments and societies. Many countries in Asia have achieved great progress in this regard, with improved standards of living and more people than ever before living in democratic states. Yet because such progress is never a straight line, countries across the region continue to grapple with vulnerable institutions, weak democratic culture, endemic corruption, significant economic disparities, and religious, racial and cultural conflicts. While we rightly celebrate democratic bright spots in the region, from the Maldives to Taiwan, Asia’s increasingly evident democratic deficits have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further exposed the region’s faltering democracies and aspiring authoritarians.

Today, there are many causes for concern about the future of democracy and human rights in the Asia-Pacific region, but there are also reasons for optimism. And while we should be clear-eyed about the challenges, we should not lose hope or falter in our commitment to stand with the billions of people across Asia who want nothing more than to live in free, prosperous and just societies.

### **Assertive China at Home and Abroad**

Of course, we cannot talk about Asia’s democratic deficits without talking about the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is not only home to four-fifths of those still living under authoritarianism globally, but is also undermining democratic states in pursuit of its strategic ambition to make the world safe for autocracy. Within its own borders, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) brutally crushes dissent and enforces a societal conformity aimed at tamping out diversity. To that end, the CCP is carrying out a long-running and well-documented campaign of forced detention, population control and abuse against ethno-religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, depriving millions of people of their most fundamental human rights: life, liberty and the security of their person.

Never a welcoming place for independent thought or action, in recent years the space for independent civil society in mainland China has closed precipitously. Academics previously tolerated are now detained or fired for their words, and even the doctors who first began treating COVID-19 patients in Wuhan were silenced simply for sharing information about the virus with their colleagues. Perhaps the most egregious recent example of the CCP's aggressive stifling of dissent is the National Security Law (NSL) Beijing imposed on Hong Kong on June 30. The NSL gives PRC officials unprecedented authority to supervise the enforcement of the law in Hong Kong — while they themselves remain exempt from the laws governing the once-autonomous territory and operate in direct contravention of Hong Kong's constitution, the Basic Law. The NSL not only ends Hong Kong's long tradition of judicial independence and the rule of law, but its extraterritorial jurisdiction means that it is now a crime for anyone, anywhere in the world to do anything the CCP considers an offense.

Stemming from this quest for total control within its borders is the CCP's increasingly aggressive campaign for influence and control over messaging on China beyond its borders. In the Asia-Pacific in particular, Beijing seeks to use its growing economic leverage to establish greater dependency on China, help reestablish the country as Asia's preeminent power and achieve global legitimacy as a great power without democratizing. According to leaked party documents, the CCP sees itself in an ideological contest pitting one-party rule against what it deems "Western" ideals of political rights and freedoms – even though many of the most fervent advocates of those same rights and freedoms are the Chinese citizens of Hong Kong.

China uses an expanding toolkit of tactics to advance its interests in countries across the region, in the process exploiting governance gaps, fostering corruption and undermining accountability, prosperity, and open discourse in ways that corrode democracy and establish an expanding Sino-centric sphere of influence — with dire consequences for U.S. interests.

Across Asia, China bolsters the fortunes of illiberal actors and provides tools and talking points to facilitate and justify repression of democratic advocates. In Cambodia, Chinese-funded projects and financial flows prop up Prime Minister Hun Sen, insulating him from criticism and consequences of his government's dismal human-rights record and pressure to allow open political competition in the country. Hun Sen and governments like those of Thailand and Vietnam draw inspiration, if not direct technical skills and tools, from China's repressive policies and surveillance-and-monitoring technology. It is likely no coincidence that the Thai government's recent assertions that foreign interference and funding are behind the growing student-led protest movement mirror the rhetoric used by Beijing to discredit massive popular protests in Hong Kong over the past 18 months.

In other places, China's influence is somewhat more discreet, but no less corrosive to democratic institutions and principles. China's opaque infrastructure-financing deals across the region engender rampant corruption and enrich coopted elites who are more than willing to sacrifice principles like transparency for their own financial gain. Beijing's manipulation of the information space and discourse in many countries weakens institutions such as an

independent media and civil society that in a healthy democracy would expose the negative consequences of China's opaque deal making and corrupt practices.

The frequently lopsided — and often secretive — terms of China's deals with investment- and infrastructure-starved countries create a cycle of dependence on China for further credit to finance mounting debts. Increasingly reliant on China, leaders of these vulnerable countries are more likely to tamp down domestic opposition to Chinese-financed or -owned development projects, as well as support China in international fora and disputes. Just last week, in hopes of preventing a default on loans from China, Laos was forced to cede majority control of its national power grid to the China Southern Power Grid Company, which already holds an estimated \$8 billion of Lao debt. The move binds undemocratic Laos even closer to China and further raises existing concerns about Laos' stance on issues of regional strategic importance like China's claims in the South China Sea. Laos has already shown itself to be a dutiful vassal to China by jailing dozens of Lao citizens for protesting land concessions made to Chinese companies for development projects; its now virtually insurmountable dependence on China does not bode well for the democratic aspirations of the Lao people.

Certainly, we could speak at length about the damaging impact China is having on democracy in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, as well as the abysmal situation of human rights in the country itself, but I want to turn now to some of the other noteworthy trends in the region.

### **Political Change and Stymied Reforms**

The past year has seen countries once viewed as bright spots for democratic reform within the region regress as a result of upheavals driven by political infighting, personality politics and poor public perception of delivery on promised reforms, among other challenges. Such changes have stymied democratic progress and, in the cases of Malaysia and Sri Lanka, brought previous governments back into power — fostering opportunities for democratic backsliding, abuses of fundamental freedoms and corruption.

In May 2018, the unexpected victory of the reform-minded Pakatan Harapan coalition in Malaysia sent shockwaves through the country, as it peacefully transitioned power for the first time since its independence in 1957. However, the coalition's progress on democratic reforms focused on good governance and anti-corruption was abruptly cut short in February 2020 by the resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and the subsequent government collapse. While the new Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, has focused much of its attention on managing the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging trends indicate that PN is tightening its control of government institutions — raising the alarm among civil-society organizations that fear a return to the abuses of power and corrupt practices of the past. Since coming to power, PN has offered members of parliament and party elites key positions within both government institutions and government-linked companies in order to reinvigorate their patronage networks. This has been coupled with targeted attacks on prominent opposition members, government critics and independent news outlets that have made critical statements or unfavorably reported on

the government. These developments foretell a troubling departure from the standards of transparency, civil liberty and media freedom that a majority of Malaysians favor and called for when they rejected the Barisan Nasional government in 2018.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, where a reform-focused government was elected in January 2015, the past year has witnessed the Rajapaksa family's reconsolidation of power following the late-2019 political crisis that weakened former President Maithripala Sirisena beyond redemption. Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidency in November 2019 by a wide margin. And in parliamentary elections in August 2020, the Rajapaksas' grip over the country was further solidified when their party coalition won a supermajority, returning former President Mahinda Rajapaksa to the premiership. While the Sirisena-led government was ultimately unable to meet many of its reform promises, it did, with the 19th amendment to the constitution, lay the groundwork for a more balanced power structure within the government. With the Rajapaksa brothers campaigning to reverse those reforms and the family's history of brutal repression and human-rights abuses, there are fears about what their deep-rooted control over government and political institutions will mean for democracy and human rights in Sri Lanka.

### **Assaults on Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms**

Across the region, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms varies widely. I touched previously on China's brutality toward the Uyghur people in the country's far western territory, but that, sadly, is not the only place in the region where the most fundamental human rights are being completely cast aside. Over the past three years, more than 700,000 Rohingya people have fled Burma and are currently living in refugee camps in Bangladesh; an unknown number have fled by sea to other destinations in Southeast Asia, many perishing during the journey. Many of those who have remained in Burma are confined to camps without access to the most basic necessities, including proper healthcare. Just this month, two members of Burma's military confessed to razing Rohingya villages and murdering the inhabitants en masse in 2017, crimes the military has long denied but which fit with its brutal history of suppression of the country's many ethnic-minority populations.

Elsewhere, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has since 2016 waged a violent "war on drugs" in the country, resulting in thousands of extrajudicial murders, including of young children who have been caught in the crossfire and accused drug dealers who were gunned down in the streets, denying them access to any sort of due legal process. The Philippines is also one of the deadliest countries in the world for human-rights defenders. In the four years since President Duterte took office, at least 13 human-rights defenders have been murdered, many for exposing abuses by local government officials or powerful families who dominate the country's economic and political spheres.

Another disturbing trend across the Asia-Pacific is the crackdown on independent media, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. From Pakistan to Cambodia, Burma to Fiji, journalists and media outlets have been pressured, jailed, deregistered and otherwise

harassed for reporting critical of political leaders, governments or other state institutions. In the Philippines, the independent news outlet *Rappler* has been dogged by politically motivated lawsuits; its Executive Director Maria Ressa was, earlier this year, found guilty of cyber-libel and faces up to six years in prison. Likewise, the major network ABS-CBN was denied renewal of its broadcast license earlier this year after President Duterte accused the outlet of bias against him.

Several countries in the region have used COVID-19 and an expressed desire to curtail the spread of misinformation about the virus as justification for censorship and the passage of new dis- or misinformation laws that many fear will be used against political opponents or those critical of their governments. In Fiji, for example, a top military leader argued that freedom of the press and of speech should be curtailed to stifle criticism of the government's policies, while Vietnam, Cambodia, Vanuatu, Thailand and Bangladesh have all passed new laws or are using existing laws to target critics during the pandemic.

Given these trends, as well as broader stresses on democratic politics in the world today, you can see why one could despair about the prospects for democracy and rights in Asia. There are challenges, to be sure, but we at IRI nonetheless remain hopeful about this region's democratic future.

### **Youth-led Movements for Change**

With more than 1.1 billion young people between 15 and 29 years of age, youth in the Asia-Pacific region make up over 60 percent of the world's youth and more than 25 percent of the overall population of the region. In the past year, we have witnessed young people from Hong Kong to Thailand to Nepal leverage formal and informal processes to demand overarching reforms to strengthen democratic practice in their countries.

In Hong Kong and Thailand, young people are leading the way in protest movements that seek to push back on authoritarianism, restore democratic values and protect fundamental freedoms. Their unique approaches to traditional people's movements have overcome pandemic-response restrictions and united youth from different backgrounds through the prolific use of social media and leveraging of popular culture. While some prominent young Hong Kongers are veterans of democracy movements, having played leading roles in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the current protests, which began in March 2019, have seen overwhelming support from a wide swath of the population. Unfortunately, youth have also been disproportionately targeted by the Hong Kong police and have faced brutal physical assaults on top of arrest. Nonetheless, their involvement has helped to bridge segments of the population and continually win public support to their cause; it has also been crucial to the operation of a leaderless movement that remains fluid and adaptable, "like water."

In Thailand, the ongoing youth movements and protests demanding constitutional reforms, fresh elections and the end of harassment of protestors is being equally driven by new and old faces to the democracy movement. Sparked by the dissolution of the opposition Future



Forward Party earlier this year, youth-led protests around the country have expanded in scope, to include broader calls for democratic reform, and location – moving beyond university campuses to high schools across the country, iconic locations like the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, and even the gates of the Ministry of Education. Despite facing obstacles ranging from arrest and legal charges to physical and verbal abuse from educators and police officers, young Thais repeatedly demonstrate their commitment to the push for reform.

Young people in Nepal, incensed by their government’s fumbled response to the COVID-19 pandemic and allegations of massive misuse of funds earmarked for test kits and protective gear, galvanized into a vocal protest movement. Originating online on social media as Nepal’s youth spent weeks at home under lockdown orders, the movement burst onto the streets of Kathmandu in June with signs emblazoned with [its] slogan, “Enough is Enough,” demanding the government take better care of its citizens. For weeks, hundreds of young people protested in the streets, wearing masks, social distancing and at times lying like corpses on the ground to call attention to their demands. And they were successful: In mid-August, the government of Nepal agreed to procure higher-quality test kits and provide better personal protective equipment to frontline health workers, access to medicines and free treatment to all COVID-19 patients. In their victory, the young protesters demonstrated the power of ordinary citizens to effect change and their knowledge that accountability requires vigilance: they have promised to return to the streets if the government does not fulfil its promises.

Finally, in both Malaysia and Mongolia, young people are relying on democratic political processes to bring about change. During the May 2018 elections in Malaysia and the June 2020 elections in Mongolia, youth played a decisive role in the trajectory of each country by turning out in droves to vote despite hurdles of political apathy in Malaysia and COVID-19 concerns in Mongolia. Beyond elections, active youth civic engagement has also resulted in an informed, involved youth electorate. Youth in Malaysia were the driving force behind advocacy efforts to amend the constitution and lower the voting age from 21 to 18 years of age. Because of their efforts, and avid support from Malaysia’s youngest-ever minister, in 2019, Malaysia’s parliament adopted the amendment with support from both government and opposition coalition parties. As a result, Malaysia could add an estimated 3.8 million youth to its voter rolls.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the speech at Westminster that led to the creation of IRI, NDI and the National Endowment for Democracy, President Reagan said that “democracy is not a fragile flower; still it needs cultivating.” In our lifetime we have seen democratic gains in Asia that offer proof of the value of U.S. assistance in “cultivating” democracy. Congress has played a decisive role in ensuring that our tools to support democracy and liberty remain strong. The generous investments that American taxpayers make in development assistance for health

care, nutrition and infrastructure are unlikely to be successful if the governments with whom we partner lack strong, citizen-centered institutions, suffer from corruption and other abuses of power, and do not respect human rights.

To counter the negative democratic trends we are seeing in the Asia-Pacific region and support those fighting for free, prosperous and just societies there, the United States must continue to dedicate resources to bolstering the capacity of civil society, political parties and independent media. These institutions are critical to establishing solid democracies and pushing back against democratic erosion. IRI research suggests democratic erosion is often a gradual process, with incumbents first seeking to weaken checks and balances, particularly legislatures, judiciaries and election commissions. Organized pushback from opposition parties, civil-society watchdogs and independent media against these subtle first steps can help to head off more dangerous forms of repression and state capture later on. Our support for partners in these spheres is therefore proactive and preventive, not just reactive.

The United States, likewise, can play an important role in ensuring that dynamic young activists have the knowledge and skills to be leaders in their communities while embodying democratic values. We should continue to equip and support young leaders dedicated to building inclusive coalitions and increasing youth participation in decision-making processes. Alliances are critical for maintaining civic space in the face of democratic backsliding and helping young leaders pool resources and work together to take collective action for reform.

With regards to China, the United States must balance complex equities. There is no doubt that China's influence is negatively impacting countries' democratic trajectories, but especially in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. approach cannot be one of "us or them." However, we can take steps to ensure that China finds countries less hospitable to its advances and that countries in the region value and pursue closer relationships with the U.S. and other democracies, including Japan, Australia, South Korea and India. The United States and its partners must invest resources in changing the context in the countries China targets for influence. This can be accomplished through two complementary efforts: 1) offering countries alternatives to Chinese investment and assistance on how to structure future deals with China; and 2) building the resilience of developing democracies to the malign effects of CCP influence.



American support for democracy and human rights strengthens Asian countries' sovereignty, helping them make independent choices that benefit their people rather than any foreign power. Whereas Chinese assistance too often suborns countries' independence, for instance by entrapping them in debt or corrupting their political elites, U.S. support for accountability, transparency, democratic decision-making and regular elections helps ensure that we have capable allies and partners that can make their own choices, including in foreign policy, at a time when great-power competition threatens the peace that produced Asia's economic miracle.

America needs to utilize all the tools in our toolkit of leadership. China is pursuing its interests not only by projecting military power but through what the National Endowment for Democracy calls "sharp power" tools of influence: information operations, united-front tactics, and forms of political corruption and economic capture. Bolstering democratic resiliency in Asia against such forms of malign foreign influence is a U.S. national security interest. Our military strength is pivotal, and our economic depth attracts partners, but the core values of liberty, justice and equality should remain at the heart of America's regional engagement. They are universal ideals to which people across Asia and the world still aspire.