

Appendix I: Commentaries

Commentary

South Asia remains a challenging geopolitical part of the world with 25 per cent of world population and 4 per cent of the world's economy. It has witnessed decades of insecurity, conflict and continued poverty. The countries in the region have struggled to catch up with the steady progress of other regions in Asia and have been partially successful in developing their economies and societies. However, despite everyone's hope that a functioning regional cooperation for economic development could help the region for greater economic integrity and prosperity, the political dispute and social and structural challenges unhinged the prospect of a better region for its populations, in particular the vulnerable minorities. Key elements to stability in the region therefore would not be found in greater regional cooperation and economic relations but rather should be sought and traced back to the cohesiveness of internal democratic political, social, economic and cultural structure where it allows for vibrant civil society, and respect for minorities and their rights and freedoms.

In a region that encompasses 25 per cent of world population and only contribute to 4 per cent of the world economy, it is very much telling us why we have not been successful as other regions are in the other part of the world. The problem and issues related to our region is rooted to our lack of understanding of the importance of adhering to the principle of human rights and freedoms, regional cooperation, respect and protection for minority rights and expanding and freeing spaces for civil societies.

While in the face of growing population, decaying infrastructure, degrading environments our governments in the region do little and lack the resources and capacities to address challenges arising from these issues, they always find ways to securitise the civic space and blame others, often vulnerable minorities, and minority rights activists and civil society organisations for

pointing to these structural problems and consequential failure in our region.

In the past decade, a prominent team of human rights activists, scholars, women rights leaders, and I have tried to advocate for a regional human rights mechanism. Unfortunately, such a mechanism will remain a dream to be materialised in the future. However, we are benefiting from the strong network and coalitions of civil society in the region who place much of their focus and efforts on our problems, human rights issues and challenges both at the national level and across our unstable region.

The current report that sheds light on the situation of civic space for minorities in South Asia is an interesting and credible example of how our civil society and human rights networks in the region have been trying to fill the gap that exists in the absence of a regional intergovernmental system of cooperation and a regional human rights mechanism. I am thrilled to see the findings of the team in the region which points to the importance of a free space for civil society and respect, promotion and protection of minority rights. Though I must express my appalled sense of worries and concern over the findings of the report, I hope these findings which are well researched, fact based and informative are used by the states in the region to correct the poor course of their actions towards minority rights and civic space. I also hope that this report provides a tool and venue for discussion between the international organisations, civil societies, human rights and civil and democracy and minority rights activists to educate and raise awareness among publics and inform policies and programs in the region.

I strongly believe that our region will benefit from greater freedom provided to our civil society and better protection, respect and support for minority rights. This report clearly indicates that our countries' approach has been closing civic space for minorities and weakening or damaging the state capacity to fulfil its obligation under the international human rights law and international obligations.

I advocate and join my voice strongly with our human rights activists, civil society leaders, NGO and minority rights advocates for a better region for minority and their rights and freedom. This

report places a good list of recommendations that should be taken into consideration and a clear description of the current state of affair that must be improved. It is my genuine wish to see a change in the situation in our region so the people living in our region will live in liberty, dignity, prosperity and free from want and free from fear.

Dr Sima Samar
Chairperson
Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission

Commentary

The South Asia Collective's *South Asia State of Minorities Report 2020: Minorities and Shrinking Civic Space* in the countries of the region invites the attention of human and civil rights activists of the region, international watchdogs and UN bodies to the increasing authoritarian, discriminatory and repressive tendencies in almost all the countries of the region, with a notable exception of Bhutan. From the world's largest democracy, India, to relatively more democratic Nepal, ethnically divided Sri Lanka, to censoring Pakistan and war-ridden Afghanistan to 'secularising' Bangladesh, most countries of the region compete in terms of discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, majoritarian rule bordering fascism and decimating civil and human rights, suppression of freedom of expression in particular. Be it Tamils in Sri Lanka, Muslims and Kashmiris in India, Baloch and religious minorities in Pakistan, Hindus and Urdu-speakers in Bangladesh, the minorities continue to be repressed and expropriated.

With the rise of ethnic-religious nationalism and authoritarianism across South Asia, except in Nepal and Bhutan, the deteriorating state of human and civil rights is crossing all alarming proportions. Still worse, unscrupulous state and non-state actors are enjoying a rabid culture of immunity putting life and security of human rights activists in perpetual jeopardy. The intra and inter-state conflicts reinforce a jingoistic environment as media tied to national markets become a tool in fanning chauvinism, nationalism and cross-border tensions. In an adverse environment, freedom of expression and media is the principal casualty with Pakistan leading the censorship regime in the region.

While providing historical background, the 2020 Report rightly points out the major deficits of rights and freedoms in the countries of the region. It offers remedies and recommendations to save

the situation from getting bad to worse. On behalf of myself and South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), I laud the efforts of authors of this illuminating report for their valuable contribution to the cause of human and civil rights in South Asia.

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