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Resistance Against Corruption and Authoritarianism in Asia
The Role of Youth

DEBRIEF REPORT

PRABIN RANABHAT / AFP

On 15 October, the Vuka Coalition convened frontline activists from the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Indonesia alongside UN human rights representatives to examine an unprecedented wave reshaping Asia: Gen Z-led uprisings against corruption and authoritarianism.

From Bangladesh's job quota demonstrations that toppled a 15-year regime, to Indonesia's movement against elite privilege, to the Philippines' protests exposing "ghost" infrastructure projects – young people are flooding the streets in numbers not seen in decades.

These aren't isolated incidents. Across the region, youth movements share common triggers: economic crisis, systemic corruption, inequality so stark that officials flaunt sports cars on Instagram whilst citizens struggle with basic needs. Governments have responded with a predictable playbook: mass arrests, internet shutdowns, live ammunition, and legal warfare using dictatorship-era laws.

This solidarity call examined what happens when an entire generation says "enough." Four strategic insights emerged:

- **Shared triggers, brutal playbook –** Corruption, inequality, and authoritarianism are igniting mass youth mobilisation across borders. States are responding with a predictable toolkit – mass arrests and legal warfare using dictatorship-era laws.
- **The UN relevance gap –** UN mechanisms offer vital advocacy channels, but Gen Z activists often don't know they exist – or view the UN as part of the establishment they're fighting. Closing this gap is urgent work.
- **Repression as organiser –** Paradoxically, state violence is forging stronger movements. Detained protesters are building solidarity in custody, emerging organised rather than broken, and forming new alliances like the Philippines' ACAB (Alliance Against Corruption and Police Brutality).
- **Early warning systems work when connected –** The EU SEE Early Warning Mechanism issued three alerts for Indonesia between August–October 2025, documenting the crackdown in near real time, and five alerts for Nepal from September–October 2025.

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COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS

Philippines

EZRA ACAYAN/GETTY IMAGES

- **The spark:** Typhoons exposed "ghost" infrastructure projects – funds allocated, nothing built, money pocketed by officials linked to the Marcos dynasty.
- **The crackdown:** 277 arrested (91 minors), one civilian killed, torture in detention. Youth leaders served subpoenas under the dictatorship-era Public Assembly Act.
- **The resilience:** Detained protesters formed ACAB (Alliance Against Corruption and Police Brutality) upon release. Even conservative religious schools held their first-ever walkouts – a historic shift showing how deep anti-corruption sentiment runs.

COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS

Bangladesh

- **The uprising:** What began as job quota protests became a full revolution, toppling a 15-year authoritarian regime in under a month.
- **The cost:** **UN estimates 1,500 deaths (July–August 2024)**; civil society documentation suggests closer to 2,000. The government deployed internet shutdowns, paramilitary forces, and live fire.
- **The fragile transition**: Elections planned for February 2026. Student protesters have formed a political party.

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COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS

Indonesia

REUTERS/WILLY KURNIAWAN

- **The inequality flashpoint:** Public officials flaunting sports cars and jewellery on social media whilst citizens struggle – then Parliament awarded itself 50 million rupiah monthly housing allowances (USD 3,000), nearly 10 times Jakarta's minimum wage.
- **The new repression tactic:** Short-term disappearances. Police grab protesters, hold them off-the-books for hours or a day, extract information through torture, then release them. Designed for maximum fear with minimal documentation.
- **The data gap:** Police put Jakarta arrests at 1,240–1,683; nationwide, authorities said over 5,000 were detained. Civil society documented 3,337 arrests and about 1,042 injured in the 25–31 August period. Official vs. independent monitoring reveals systematic state disinformation.

Early Warning Mechanisms
What Works, What's Missing

The session's second half revealed a critical gap: powerful early warning systems exist, but movements don't know about them – and international mechanisms aren't detecting the right signals.

The Indonesia Case Study: Alerts That Documented the Crackdown

Between August–October 2025, the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) Early Warning Mechanism issued three alerts on Indonesia, documenting the government's response to protests in real time:

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- **Alert #1 (19 August):** Government banned anime-inspired protest symbol, framing it as "treason"; pattern extended to Palestinian and Papuan flags. A clear threat to Citizens' Expression.
- **Alert #2 (1 September): Police Brutality – Tragic Death of Demonstrator in Jakarta Protests** – Affan Kurniawan, a ride-hailing driver, killed by police tactical vehicle; 600 detentions reported, half of them minors.
- **Alert #3 (13 October): Mass Arrests of Protesters After the August 2025 Demonstrations** – Over 3,000 protesters arrested, including civil society leaders; sweeps conducted beyond protest sites into homes and communities.

What this proves: The mechanism works. It captured escalation patterns (from flag bans to mass arrests to deaths), documented state narratives ("provocation," "treason," "anarchism"), and flagged early signs of authoritarian consolidation under Prabowo's government.

The problem: EU SEE documented these crackdowns in near real-time through network members in each country, but frontline activists often don't know this data exists or that they can use it for evidence-based advocacy.

Beyond this session's focus

Whilst this convening spotlighted the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, youth-led protests are reshaping civic space across Asia and globally. The EU SEE Early Warning Mechanism currently tracks alerts in countries like Nepal, Malaysia, and Pakistan in the region, with Gen Z mobilisation visible worldwide – from Madagascar to Paraguay or Morocco.

REUTERS/SIPHIWE SIBEKO

Not all countries in the EU SEE network (86 total) have begun reporting yet, but the platform offers a growing repository of near real-time documentation on the enabling environment for civil society to operate. Alerts can be filtered by country, type of alert, or the six enabling environment principles, providing the ability to identify insights and trends on how states respond to youth movements across contexts. The full alerts database is available at **eusee.org**.

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The UN Diagnosis: *Missing the Gen Z Moment*

UN representatives diagnosed a critical disconnect: **mechanisms exist, but Gen Z movements either don't know about them or actively distrust them.**

The gap is structural. These mobilisations emerge outside traditional human rights NGO ecosystems. Many activists have never heard of UN Special Rapporteurs; some view the UN as "part of the problem" – propping up governments, failing on Gaza, representing the statist structures they're challenging. This isn't a communication gap; it's a legitimacy crisis.

The triggers for recent protests reveal the mismatch: parliamentary allowances in Indonesia (USD 3,000/month whilst citizens face austerity), job quotas in Bangladesh, ghost infrastructure projects in the Philippines. These aren't traditional human rights violations UN mechanisms monitor, they're governance failures, corruption scandals, and inequality flashpoints that resonate with Gen Z's lived experience. We're not picking up the right signals because we're listening for the wrong things.

The fundamental challenge

Multilateral bodies appear bureaucratic, state-centric, and ineffective on issues Gen Z cares about – cost of living, elite corruption, officials flaunting wealth whilst citizens struggle. The advocacy shift required is profound. Demonstrating tangible value – showing that alerts triggered responses or communications freed detained activists – is the only language that resonates with a generation demanding concrete results. The burden of proof has shifted from movements to institutions.

Questions Without Easy Answers

At the end of the solidarity call, participants asked questions that reveal the complexity activists face daily. As you will see, these questions don't have simple answers. But across the region, movements aren't waiting for perfect solutions – they're building the infrastructure of resistance in real time.

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How do you work on a paralyzed legal system where the judicial system has a pattern of being pro-authoritarian for decades, hence lacking independent lawyers to defend human rights defendants?

In the Philippines, when the country enacted the controversial anti-terror law to expand state power against dissenters and critics, some courts were designated as "anti-terror courts" – creating an efficient assembly line for prosecuting activists.

To resist this, we organize what we call "people's lawyers" – progressive lawyers who donate time and waive fees for activists. Our organization Karapatan works closely with the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL). They helped secure the release of September protesters by mobilizing even non-members, systematizing legal defense networks to push back against repressive laws.

In Indonesia, NGOs collaborate with advocate organizations to create task forces for democratic rights, led by Indonesian Legal Aid. It's similar to the Philippines' people's lawyers model, though perhaps less advanced.

But the scale is crushing. Between August 25–31 alone, at least 3,337 people were arrested. Jakarta had only 20–30 defense lawyers available. Many detained protesters are eventually forced to accept police-provided lawyers who defend the police, not the accused. The networks exist; scaling them requires resource mobilization that hasn't yet materialized.

Have you had any intergenerational dialogue with older activists? Do you see this as valuable to your current efforts?

Yes, deliberately. Youth organizations maintain their own autonomous planning and digital strategy, but intentionally connect with elders who fought Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship.

While Filipino youth have creativity – being savvy with social media, generating resources, being creative in protests – we also believe that to sustain our fight and think long-term about ending systemic corruption, we have to learn from the past. We need discussions with those who fought these battles before, who know what changed, what didn't, and how to plot short-term wins toward long-term transformation.

In Karapatan, our national council deliberately mixes generations. Whether you're young or old, you can be in leadership. That's how we share ideas and knowledge across ages.

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What's the outlook for Bangladesh's February 2026 elections?

Realistic. All our institutions remain dysfunctional, with insufficient time to restructure before polls. From our perspective, we don't hope for very big changes. But this is a moment we're using to prepare for the next fight – for more open civic space and more democratic practices.

We're also preparing for transitional justice. We've lost nearly 2,000 people, and people have big hopes for the judiciary process, but there's not much progress toward acceptable justice for victims and survivors. Captured elements from the old regime are still embedded throughout society.

The protesters and young students have formed a political party and are preparing. Civil society organizations are documenting abuses, building solidarity networks, and establishing democratic practices for the long struggle ahead.

Looking forward

The session closed with a reminder of what drives this work. As facilitator Ramshay Ahmed, Communications & Advocacy Officer at I4C South Asia Hub, put it: **"As civil society organisations, our aim has always been to bridge the gap that exists between what a structured sort of reform can look like and what a grassroot movement is – and to create more spaces for such expression to exist."**

That bridge-building is already happening.

Activists are physically crossing borders to share strategies – Bangladesh organizers moving through Indonesia, Nepal, and Malaysia, creating face-to-face solidarity whilst the experience is still fresh. Legal defence models like the Philippines' "people's lawyers" are being studied and adapted across the region. New repression tactics are being documented and shared as early warnings. Intergenerational knowledge is being deliberately transferred.

These aren't formal programmes or institutional initiatives. They're movements recognizing their collective power, learning from each other's courage, and building the regional solidarity that makes sustained resistance possible. **The machinery of repression is accidentally forging stronger, more connected movements than it intended to crush.**