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Beyond Tolerance and Harmony:

Why A Rights-Based Approach To Religious Freedom Is Important

Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends,

A very warm welcome to the Asia Centre Summit 2026 entitled “Religious Freedom in Asia: Representation, Restriction, Rights”.

Allow me first to express my sincere appreciation to all our partners, speakers, participants, and supporters who have made this gathering possible. Your commitment and engagement are what enables Asia Centre to continue creating spaces for dialogue on some of the most pressing challenges facing societies across Asia.

Over the past decade, Asia Centre’s annual conferences have brought together over 750 international participants with diverse voices to examine critical regional issues that shape the future of our societies in the region and beyond.

This year, we welcome more than 70 participants from all over Asia, Europe, Australia and the USA. We are here to direct our attention to religious freedom, a fundamental human right that lies at the intersection of identity, dignity, equality, and democratic governance.

Freedom of Religion or Belief, or FoRB, is the freedom to adopt, change, or renounce one’s religion or belief without coercion or discrimination. It is recognised under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet across Asia today, the reality of religious freedom remains complex.

Many societies in our region place great value on tolerance, harmony, and interfaith dialogue. These concepts are important foundations for peaceful coexistence, but their meanings go beyond the absence of conflict or the expectation of submission. In fact, these terms are often used strategically to restrict dissent and open discussion. They are also used to overlook discrimination and discourage communities from raising legitimate concerns about their rights.

Although religious freedom across the region is presented with challenges arising from legal and bureaucratic constraints, technology-exacerbated social tensions, and violence against minority communities, the question before us is not simply whether current efforts promote tolerance and harmony, but whether they are grounded in fairness, equal protection of rights, and accountability in the first place.

One important observation is the reluctance of some advocates and organisations to adopt a genuinely rights-based approach. Too often, the language of tolerance, harmony, dignity and interfaith dialogue is championed as a tool for engagement without questioning who defines these concepts, whose voices are included, who are ostracised and what is normalised. There are also others whose practice of self-censorship, self-preservation and risk aversion inadvertently impacts the rights of others.

Hence, there is a need for greater reflection on the role of some CSOs, faith-based groups, international NGOs and donors. Increasingly, some of these actors are actively pursuing engagement with governments and regimes with a poor human rights record, and in doing so they risk further marginalising those very communities that are already outside the mainstream. As a result of such behaviours, we have a responsibility to consider who is left out of the conversation and whether our partnerships reinforce existing power structures, limit the rights of our beneficiaries, or help instead to create more inclusive and accountable spaces.

We are also witnessing a general loss of independence and agency among local CSOs that rely heavily on external donor funds. The global funding cuts have worsened this situation, increasing the complexity of organisational sustainability and its weaknesses – in an environment already scarred by intense competition. Meanwhile, development funds continue to be raised by entities in the name of local civil society, whose agency is often steered and restricted by rigid project design, shifting priorities, and, as we have seen in 2024, arbitrary aid suspension. As a consequence, not only are local interests captured by external donors, but local competitors who stand firm on their autonomy find themselves disadvantaged in their direct fundraising efforts.

These financial pressures are exacerbated by a parallel threat: the erosion of civic space through expanding surveillance targeting FoRB communities across Asia. Fear has led many CSOs to abstain from publicising their activities, prevent the disclosure of previously publicly accessible information about valuable events, and avoid identifying themselves or speaking openly about important FoRB issues. As these mitigation measures render online monitoring less effective, the surveillance of FoRB activities has shifted toward more intrusive, physical observations and organisational infiltration as part of transnational repression measures. As a result, what we are seeing now is the wider FoRB community becoming the target of scrutiny, turning places of worship, events, and conversations into sites of surveillance.

It is important to emphasise that as an independent regional civil society research institute, Asia Centre remains committed to open, constructive, and respectful discussion. In the face of the funding and surveillance challenges mentioned above, we are determined to foster a space of cooperation with partners from across Asia and beyond, valuing the contributions of development agencies, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs, civil society groups, faith-based groups and all stakeholders who support these conversations through principled, rights-based engagement.

Building on this commitment, following this year's conference, Asia Centre will launch a Freedom of Religion or Belief policy initiative. This initiative will seek to complement other ongoing interventions in the region, to serve as an unencumbered platform to strengthen policy research, dialogue, and advocacy on religious freedom issues. We will be writing to all of you after the conference on how you can be part of this initiative.

Over the next two days, we will examine these and many other dimensions of religious freedom in Asia. Through these discussions, we hope you will gain a deeper understanding of the current challenges faced by religious communities and other marginalised groups, the factors contributing to restrictions and discrimination, and the approaches needed to strengthen protections and accountability. I encourage all participants to engage openly and contribute to meaningful exchanges.

I want to stress that genuine harmony cannot be achieved by avoiding difficult conversations or suppressing differences. Rather, it emerges when societies create the conditions for differences to coexist freely, equally, and respectfully. We hope this conference will move beyond a narrow understanding of harmony and tolerance, towards a stronger framework grounded in rights, inclusion, and the recognition that religious freedom is an essential part of human dignity.

Before I conclude, I am pleased to announce that Asia Centre's next summit will be held from 19 to 20 August 2027 in Bangkok, Thailand, titled "Peace and Democracy for Asia: Rebuilding Trust in Divided Times". This reaffirms our commitment to examining the challenges shaping Asia, where FoRB continues to be a matter of debate, while creating opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and shared understanding.

But that is for next year.

For now, I wish all of you a productive, thoughtful, and inspiring conference. Thank you.