



May 11, 2022

Hon. Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Escalating digital rights abuse and suppression of freedom of expression in Southeast Asia

Dear President Biden,

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, write to express our extreme concern about the recent escalation in violations of freedom of expression, especially against digital rights across Southeast Asia. Many of those offenders are attending the ASEAN summit that you are hosting on May 12-13, 2022.

We would like to highlight a number of cases to illustrate our concern:

- Since the introduction of the Cybersecurity law in January 2019, Vietnam has used social media posts from platforms like Facebook to [arrest and imprison](#) peaceful activists. Force 47, a state-sponsored cyber army, has at least 10,000 online soldiers to unleash [military cyber warfare](#) targeting internet users and dissidents. The number of arrests are increasing, and activists are arbitrarily charged with long and harsh sentences to silence criticism. Currently, the Vietnamese government is planning to further control social media by amending legislation to require service providers [remove content or block livestreams](#) the government considers sensitive within 24 hours.
- Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has imposed a state of digital authoritarianism never before seen. [Multiple tactics](#) have been used to restrict the internet, including: ordering internet providers to shut down services for prolonged periods of time and requiring personal details of users to be given to the authorities; blocking social media platforms; intercepting and surveilling netizens; operating disinformation and misinformation campaigns; and amending laws and penal codes to crackdown on freedom of

expression. Most recently, the military junta signaled revising a proposed Cybersecurity Law that could [imprison anyone using a VPN](#) for three years. The human rights violations in Myanmar has reached an unprecedented level and internet restriction has assisted in covering up persecutions and police brutality.

We, therefore, respectfully call on you to directly address these issues with the ASEAN leaders at the Summit and request that:

- Freedom of media and freedom of expression in digital rights must be respected. These are basic rights and are fundamental to democracy. ASEAN Member States must uphold their commitment to the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration that they have adopted in 2012, in advancing and protecting human rights in the region.
- All political prisoners and online activists must be immediately released. Arbitrary arrest and detention are on the rise across the region. Generally, these are politically motivated and activists have little or no right to challenge the legality of their arrests. In addition, the judicial system is often corrupted—lacking independent oversight and heavily influenced by the ruling party.
- Laws and penal codes related to digital rules must not be implemented to suppress and punish online users critical of the government. Laws are constantly revised to sanction the authorities to conduct arrests; charge activists; and penalize and force internet service providers to block, take down posts and provide personal data of their users.

This upcoming ASEAN Summit is an opportunity for the United States to commit to its promotion of a free and open Southeast Asian region for trade, security, and human rights. Additionally, the protection of digital rights plays a crucial role in promoting democracy, and in turn, contributing to greater security and stability in the region.

Yours Sincerely,

ACAT Belgium

ACAT France

ACAT Germany

ACAT USA

Brotherhood for Democracy

Destination Justice

Viet Tan