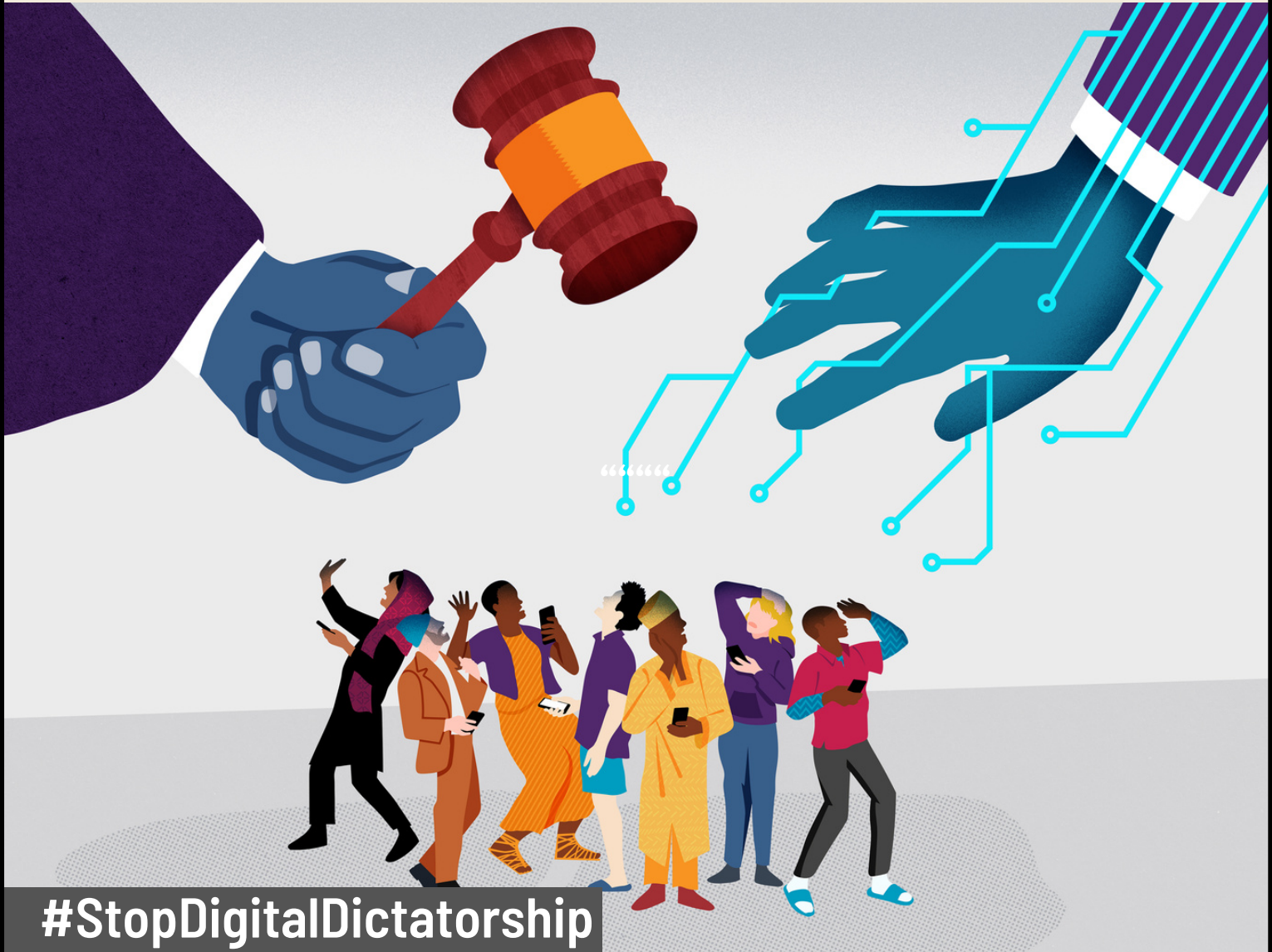


# JOINT OPEN LETTER

SOUTHEAST ASIA  
COLLABORATIVE  
POLICY  
NETWORK



#StopDigitalDictatorship

**UNESCO proposal hurts  
democracy and the internet by  
encouraging administrative  
online censorship in Asia**

# UNESCO proposal hurts democracy and the internet by encouraging administrative online censorship in Asia

\*This comment was submitted to UNESCO on June 27, 2023 by Southeast Asian Collaborative Policy Network, a coalition of 14 Asian organizations working to defend internet freedom in Southeast Asia.

The [UNESCO Guideline](#) may become the first UN document condoning and encouraging online administrative censorship. Administrative censorship means that an executive branch (“the regulator” in the guideline) deliberates on specific contents and censors or penalizes the contents or their authors. Administrative censorship bodies, unavoidably impaneled through majoritarian political process, cannot be impartial and often become the tools of pro-incumbent manipulation of public opinions or imposing majoritarian values on minority groups as seen in Türkiye, South Korea, and China. For instance, [Korea Communication Standards Commission](#), under the influence of the religious right, has blocked [womenonweb.org](#) which distributes information about medicinal abortion, a lifeline for women in abortion-banned countries or low-income women not being able to afford surgical alternatives. Many of the website blockings in Türkiye initiated through administrative censorship have targeted dissident postings. Also, cutting off speech from the marketplace of ideas without prior judicial authorization causes severe chilling effects on those who would rather be silenced than go through the legal costs of proving that their speech are

protected. For these reasons, administrative online censorship has been judged as unconstitutional in [Philippines](#), [France](#), and [Spain](#) by their respective highest courts, and unlike broadcast medium, only a small number of countries had dedicated internet censorship bodies.

That will all change if UNESCO recommendations, which purports to “draw lessons from UNESCO’s work in the domain of broadcast regulation over several decades(para. 3)” are adopted. In Asian countries where the social fabric is often more vertical than other parts of the world, such danger is real: the administrative branch already plays an expansive and intrusive role in peoples’ communicative lives. As planned by the government in Myanmar, where democracy is being threatened, and as already legislated in Viet Nam, Indonesia and Thailand, ICT ministries are fast adopting administrative censorship systems whereby platforms are to be penalized for not taking down what they consider to be “prohibited”, “illegal”, “against the state”, “damaging to the public” or falling under any of the undesired categories within a stringent time limit of sometimes several hours. UNESCO recommendations will entrench these harmful laws and encourage other Asian countries to follow suit thereby giving breathing spaces to the emerging digital authoritarianism.

The proponent of the Guideline argues that it does not encourage administrative censorship and merely sets out the safeguards restricting the countries that want to adopt administrative censorship. Those safeguards are non-existent. The absence is understandable from UNESCO’s initial reliance on broadcast regulation, which around the world has included

ensorship of even lawful contents. The internet has given tools of mass communication to countless number of powerless individuals who could not have their opinions reflected in the pre-internet media. It is clear that the UNESCO proposal is in danger of validating the intentions of some governments in developing countries, especially authoritarian regimes, to control the Internet and the information that can be disseminated through digital platforms.

At this point, we demand that UNESCO stop this process of providing guidelines for the governments to justify censorship and modify it into guidelines for platforms to follow in combatting disinformation and hate speech and especially remove reference to or reliance on “broadcast medium” for comparison, which will send a wrong message to the regulators around the world that it is consistent with human rights to regulate the internet content space in a manner similar to broadcasting.

Southeast Asian Collaborative Policy Network

\*Member organizations: Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet), Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA), ICT Watch, Human Rights Online Philippines (HRonlinePH), DAKILA, Public Virtue Research Institute (PVRI), Manushya Foundation, Free Expression Myanmar, Thai Netizen Network, Out of the Box, Open Net, Security Matters (SecM), KRYSS Network, PurpleCode Collective