

For immediate release

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Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia still a long way to go in respecting rights

- New data suggests that Malaysia scored better than Vietnam across eight civil and political rights in 2022; however most of the country's scores fall in the 'fair' to 'bad' range
- Pro-democracy advocates, human rights defenders, and people who oppose the government have been identified as some of the most at risk of having their rights violated across Southeast Asia
- Latest data measuring up to 14 rights across 196 countries, and identifying 41 groups of people particularly at risk of rights violations, are now available on the Rights Tracker

New research shows that Malaysia performed better than Vietnam across eight rights measuring empowerment and safety from the state in 2022. In the latest data published by the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI), up to 14 internationally recognised human rights were measured in 196 countries.

“Despite performing better than Vietnam, Malaysia’s score of 5 out of 10 in Empowerment Rights, and 7 out of 10 in Safety from the State, sets the bar low for Southeast Asia. A significant number of people are not safe from various violations including torture and ill-treatment, and arbitrary arrest. Meanwhile, many people still face impediments to exercising their civil liberties,” said Michaelle Phoenix Yeo, HRMI East and Southeast Asia Lead.

Vietnam scored particularly low on the right to political participation. Its score of 2.5 out of 10 indicates that many people are unable to freely take part in the conduct of public affairs.

“Human rights experts identified people who oppose or criticise the government as being particularly at risk of having their right to freedom of association violated, including their right to form or join political parties. The targeting of this group also puts them at particular risk of arbitrary arrest, forced disappearance, torture, and other violations,” said Yeo.

The suppression of civic engagement and absence of political pluralism was evident in Vietnam’s indirect presidential election on 2 March. The sole candidate running in the country’s one-party regime was uncontested.

In contrast, the progressive opposition Move Forward Party won a striking victory in Thailand’s national elections on 14 May. Voters clearly rejected the authoritarian regime led by incumbent Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who seized power in a 2014 coup.

The election came at a time when Thailand scored only 4.5 out of 10 in Empowerment Rights, and 5.4 out of 10 in Safety from the State. Thailand has a long way to go in fulfilling its human rights obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Thailand scored particularly low on the right to freedom from arbitrary arrest. Its score of 3.1 out of 10 is among the worst in the sample of 30 countries in the study, nearly identical to the scores for China and Saudi Arabia.

“An alarming 93 per cent of local experts identified human rights defenders as being exposed to a heightened risk of arbitrary arrest in Thailand. People who oppose, criticise, or protest against the government were also identified as being at particular risk. The government uses oppressive tactics to silence dissent but Thai civil society is clearly pushing back,” said Thalia Kehoe Rowden, HRMI Global Spokesperson.

HRMI’s robust research methods track the progress of countries over time, and demonstrate any improvement or deterioration in governments’ respect for human rights. Because HRMI’s research comes directly from local human rights experts, it is an important supplement to incomplete official reporting.

“Hard numbers are useful tools to put in the hands of human rights advocates, media, the private sector, and researchers. We have the evidence to support civil society’s calls for Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia to do better in fulfilling its international obligations in respecting civil and political rights. The full set of HRMI’s latest data is now available on the [Rights Tracker](#),” said Kehoe Rowden.

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About the Rights Tracker: The Rights Tracker is a global project to track the human rights performance of countries systematically. The 2023 data set launched today includes annual data on eight civil and political rights for up to 41 countries from the years 2017 to 2022, with Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Maldives added this year. The data also includes inaugural scores on the right to freedom of religion and belief in a pilot of seven countries across Asia. Annual data on five economic and social rights for 196 countries (depending on the right) from 2007 to 2012, based on the award-winning SERF Index methodology, is also available. Please visit rightstracker.org for the freely available data set.

About HRMI: The Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) is an independent non-profit organisation part of a global movement building a world where all people can flourish. We track the human rights progress of countries, producing robust data that anyone can use to push for improvements in how governments treat people. What gets measured gets improved: if something isn’t being systematically measured, it can be more easily overlooked and undervalued. HRMI data make it easier for decision-makers to monitor their progress, and prioritise human rights. Advocacy based on sound information is one of the key drivers of change. www.humanrightsmeasurement.org

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