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The La Trobe Asia Brief

Indigenous Language Rights and the Politics of Fear in Asia

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"There is a drastic and rapid decline in space for civil society and the conditions for human rights defenders in Asia's three most populous and linguistically diverse countries. This is creating a politics of fear, which will have a chilling effect on the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages."

Message from the Executive Director

I'm delighted to introduce the new issue of the La Trobe Asia brief, in which respected academic experts examine the complex issues of indigenous language rights and the challenges faced by activists in furthering their cause.

While the rights of indigenous peoples worldwide have garnered attention and acknowledgement in many countries, there are notable examples of both neglect and oppression.

This policy brief examines instances in China, India and Indonesia, but they are not isolated.

I would like to sincerely thank Dr Gerald Roche, a respected researcher in La Trobe University's Department of Politics and a fellow of La Trobe Asia, for his work in leading this Brief in collaboration with Madoka Hammine of Meio University in Japan and Tuting Hernandez of the University of the Philippines.



The United Nations has declared 2022 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, and the quality and dedication of their academic work highlights the need for governments and societies to amplify the voices and knowledge of Indigenous peoples globally, and involve them directly in the process.

On behalf of the authors, I sincerely hope you enjoy reading these insights into contemporary challenges and opportunities across not just Asia, but the world in these efforts.

Associate Professor Rebecca Strating
Director, La Trobe Asia

About the series

The La Trobe Asia Brief is a publication from La Trobe Asia, based at La Trobe University. This series provides a platform for commentary, research and analysis of policy issues that are of key importance in the Asian region. The papers in The La Trobe Asia Brief series are written for an informed audience. Authors will be invited by La Trobe Asia to contribute to this series.

Photos

Front cover: Police blocking demonstrators protesting about West Papua freedom in Malang, East Java, Indonesia (Photo: Ibrahim14i).

Inside issue: Chris Bedan, Wandering views, Mo Wu, Bing Zhou, Sushanta K Debnat, Ibrahim14, Anna Plucinska, Phil Pasquini, Holi.

Back cover: Kashmir people near the border of the Jammu Kashmir Union Territory. (Photo: 3T Studios).

Editor

Matt Smith

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We would like to acknowledge intellectual debts to Guzel Yusupova and her work on the politics of fear and social mobilization in support of minority languages in Russia, and Ahmed Kabel and his work on decolonial language rights.

La Trobe University does not take institutional positions on public policy issues. The views represented in this paper are the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the University or collaborating institutions.



Executive summary

The United Nations has declared 2022 the start of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. This decade aims to raise awareness of the ongoing global loss of Indigenous languages and to initiate effective action in defense of Indigenous languages.

The plan for the Decade centers two key principles: a human rights approach, and participation by Indigenous people.

However, ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and restrictions on civil society present critical challenges for the Decade, creating a politics of fear that suppresses action in defense of Indigenous languages and undermines the effectiveness of the Decade.

We demonstrate this by examining the situation in China, India, and Indonesia. These are the three most populous and linguistically diverse countries in Asia. In each country, Indigenous languages are suppressed, while human rights defenders and civil society are under attack.

We conclude by making recommendations for the governments of China, India, and Indonesia; the United Nations; global civil society; and the government and people of Australia. Our recommendations seek to ensure the safe participation of Indigenous language rights defenders in the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Key recommendations include:

- The governments of China, India, and Indonesia must immediately cease attacks on human rights defenders and restrictions on civil society.
- The UN Special Representative on Rights Defenders should specifically monitor and produce information about the situation of Indigenous language rights defenders.
- The Australian government should use the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review process to highlight restrictions on language rights and attacks on language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia.
- International human rights organizations should focus attention on Indigenous language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia.
- Journalists and academics who focus on human rights issues in Asia should help bring attention to the situation of the region's Indigenous language rights defenders.
- Concerned individuals everywhere should stand in solidarity with language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia, and help raise awareness of their plight.



Uyghur men having a conversation on a street in Kashgar Old Town in Xinjiang, China - 4 October, 2017.

Introduction

Approximately 7,000 languages are signed or spoken in the world today, and around 4,000 of these are used primarily by Indigenous people. Conservative estimates suggest that half of all languages will no longer be used by the year 2100, though the actual rate may be much higher.

This global crisis disproportionately affects Indigenous people. Although Indigenous people constitute only 6% of the global population, over half the world's threatened languages are used by Indigenous people.

The linguistic dispossession faced by Indigenous people is one of the many harms of ongoing colonization. It undermines their identities and erodes their cultures, including knowledge that has sustained Indigenous communities and their environments. It demonstrates the failure of states around the world to create inclusive political communities.

The exclusion of Indigenous languages from critical services like education and healthcare also threatens the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people. Language is literally a matter of life and death.

In recognition of this situation, the United Nations has declared 2022 the start of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. This global event aims to draw attention to the ongoing elimination of Indigenous languages around the world and the urgent need to revitalize, protect, and promote them.

Plans for the decade prioritize two elements. One is a focus on human rights. The second is an emphasis on participation by Indigenous people.

The human rights approach of the Decade includes a focus on rights that specifically relate to language. For example, the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes:

- The right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit Indigenous languages to future generations
- The right to establish, control, and access educational systems and institutions in Indigenous languages
- The right to establish media in Indigenous languages

This approach also emphasizes the links between language rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of thought, opinion, and expression, while also declaring that language rights are connected to fundamental rights related to education, health, information, and employment as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Indigenous women in regional dresses at International Day of Indigenous Languages in Oaxaca Mexico - 18 February, 2020.

Meanwhile, the approach adopted by the UN Decade also emphasizes that Indigenous people should participate actively in securing these rights. The planning documents for the Decade were based on the principle of “nothing for us without us,” and the Decade itself has adopted the motto, “Leaving no one behind, no one outside.”

Taken together, these two key principles of Indigenous participation and a human rights approach mean that the UN's plan to protect, promote and revitalize Indigenous languages requires Indigenous people around the world to build an active, interconnected civil society sector in defense of their language rights and other human rights.

However, current trends regarding civil society and human rights defenders mean that Indigenous people will face enormous challenges to do this. Some will risk their lives.

Globally, and particularly throughout Asia, states are increasingly cracking down on human rights defenders, curtailing the space for civil society, and intensifying efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples. In 2021, 26% of rights defenders that were killed globally were Indigenous, though Indigenous people represent only 6% of the global population.

If the UN Decade aims to promote social mobilization in order to secure Indigenous people's language rights, state restrictions on civil society and human rights across Asia are likely to thwart that aim. Repressive measures will enable states to shut down existing mobilization in defense of Indigenous language rights, and also create a climate of fear that will preemptively curtail new forms of Indigenous language activism.

This policy brief explores how the politics of fear prevents Indigenous language rights activism in Asia, and offers solutions to address this problem.

Methodology

Rather than attempting to provide a broad overview of events and trends across Asia, this policy brief focuses on three cases: China, India, and Indonesia. These three countries are the most populous in the region, and also the most linguistically diverse. What happens in China, India, and Indonesia affects almost 40% of the global population and 20% of its languages.

Each of the case studies will provide information about the situation for Indigenous languages in the country, and an overview of recent restrictions on civil society and human rights. The linguistic background is drawn from reference works including *Cataloguing the World's Endangered Languages* and the *Ethnologue*. The information on human rights is drawn from the reports of several non-government organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Frontline Defenders, Article 19, and Civicus Monitor.

Although all these NGOs provide general narrative information about developments regarding human rights and civil society within specific countries, Civicus Monitor and Article 19 also provide performance rankings relative to their specific focus: freedom of expression for Article 19, and civil society for Civicus Monitor. Examining the ratings for this brief's focus (see table below) demonstrates that in addition to representing a large population and a diversity of languages, these cases also represent a range of rankings: China is the most repressive, India moderately repressive and declining, and Indonesia relatively, but not completely, open.

In examining restrictions on civil society and attacks on human rights in these contexts, our approach is broadly decolonial. This means we reject approaches that see rights as legal mechanisms provisioned by the state and supporting the liberal international order. Instead, we

see rights as a political mobilization strategy that works against the depravations of the state and the liberal international order. Rights thus provide affordances for social and political mobilization by oppressed peoples, including Indigenous peoples, aiming at greater self-determination beyond and against the state.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge methodological issues regarding the authorship of this policy brief. According to principles of the UN's Decade, and the broader principle of Indigenous self-determination, this policy brief would have ideally been authored by, or at least in collaboration with, Indigenous people from the three countries we discuss.

However, given the attacks on human rights defenders we describe below, this would have put those people at risk. This highlights a broader ethical bind in discussing Indigenous language issues in contexts where human rights defenders are under attack. We can either respect the principle of centering Indigenous participation, and place Indigenous people at risk, or we can center the safety of Indigenous people but contravene the principle of participation. We have chosen to do the latter.

This means that the report lacks the crucial grounded insights that only Indigenous people themselves can provide about their predicaments and experiences. Perhaps more importantly however, it also means that we have minimized harm to Indigenous people in producing this policy brief.

	Freedom of Expression (Article 19)	Civil Society (Civicus Monitor)	Total Languages	Endangered Languages	IYIL Activities
China	🔴 IN CRISIS	🔴 CLOSED	307	116	3
India	🟡 HIGHLY RESTRICTED	🟡 REPRESSED	456	192	13
Indonesia	🟡 RESTRICTED	🟡 OBSTRUCTED	715	252	5

Table 1. A comparison of China, India, and Indonesia, in terms of freedom of expression, civil society, linguistic diversity, and language endangerment. The final column lists the number of activities in each country during the UN's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2019).



Chinese soldiers patrol on the street in Lhasa, Tibet - 7 September 2011.

China

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is home to over 300 languages; over one third of them are considered endangered.

The government classifies the country's population into 55 minority nationalities, each supposedly with a distinct language and culture, in addition to the Han Chinese majority. Languages that are not associated with one of the 55 recognized nationalities are considered 'dialects'. People who speak these so-called dialects—actually the majority of the country's languages—are systematically denied all language rights.

This systematic denial of language rights is demonstrated by the situation in Tibet. The PRC's government currently extends limited and declining support for Tibetans to use a single Tibetan language in public institutions like education. However, Tibetans are a highly multilingual population, speaking around thirty different languages in addition to Tibetan. The government refuses to recognize these languages, and excludes them from schools, media, healthcare, and other public forums. Community-led efforts to introduce these languages into public institutions are actively suppressed.

The PRC's government does not recognize the existence of Indigenous Peoples. It therefore denies all Indigenous peoples' rights recognized by the UN, including rights to ancestral domains; rights not to be forcibly removed from their lands; the rights that ensure the necessity of a free,

prior, informed consent and fair compensation for relocation; and the language rights associated with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The governance of the PRC's 55 'minority nationalities' is guided by the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy. This law promises to establish autonomous areas, set up local governance, and provision rights to practice language and culture. These autonomous areas include the Tibet Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and others.

Despite this law, the government systematically creates and enforces insidious programs and coercive assimilatory policies that aim to erode and erase the languages and identities of minority nationalities.

Events in 2020 provide an example of how pressure is put on minority languages through educational policies.

In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, classes which referred to Mongolian language and literature were replaced with Han Chinese language and literature. The opportunities for Mongolian language teaching were noticeably reduced. Authorities implemented the plan despite protests against this attack on Mongolian language and culture, including eight suicides.

In September 2021, the State Council issued the outline of Child Development in China (2021-2023). A previous version of the outline had promised to respect and protect the rights of minority children to use their language for education.

The current outline, however, requires pre-school children to start learning Mandarin before they enter primary school. The Ministry of Education's latest Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) requires Mandarin in kindergartens in minority and rural areas from autumn 2021.

Beyond educational policies, the linguistic rights of minority nationalities are also violated when their communities are neglected in large-scale infrastructure projects. Despite being directly and gravely affected, minority communities are not consulted, and appropriate cultural and social impact assessments are not undertaken.

For example, mega dams are being constructed on all major rivers in Tibet, which will result in the relocation of Indigenous communities. The Baihetan project alone may result in the relocation of about 100,000 Tibetans, Naxi, and Yi people in Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces. These developmental initiatives threaten the livelihood of minority nationalities and lead to cultural and linguistic dislocation.

Protesting linguistic impositions and advocating for minority languages in the PRC can lead to unjust imprisonment under charges such as "incitement to separatism". For example, Tibetan language advocate Tashi Wangchuk was found guilty under this charge and was sentenced to five years in prison after participating in a documentary film, "A Tibetan's Journey for Justice" in which he appealed for education in the Tibetan minority language.

Protesters and human rights advocates in China are also subject to forced disappearances and secret trials, often resulting in isolation and imprisonment. Families of the disappeared are harassed, surveilled, and subjected to various sanctions that negatively impact employment and access to services.



Nuosu villagers in Lianghsan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Sichuan) travel long distances from their village to school 6 November 2018.

During its 101st session in 2020, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concern over the PRC's continuing persecution of language rights advocates. Concern was also expressed regarding government restrictions on the use and teaching of minority languages. The PRC denied these claims.

International human rights organizations continuously monitor and report on various violations of civil liberties in the PRC. In terms of freedom of expression, Article 19 classifies the PRC as being 'in crisis'. Human Rights Watch's 2021 report describes how Tibetans are still subjected to grave human rights abuses, and how Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang are subject to mass detention and torture for exercising their fundamental rights.

Various reports agree that human rights violations in Xinjiang remain particularly extreme. These violations include detention, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, separation of children, and severe restrictions on the expression and practice of culture, among others.

In terms of language, although Uyghur is still spoken and publicly visible on signs, the conditions that support its transmission to future generations have been progressively eroded. For example, since 2017, primary school education in Xinjiang has shifted to a Mandarin-medium model, with 'minority' languages taught only as an occasional subject.

During the same period, the mass internment system in Xinjiang began serving as a tool for enforcing the learning and use of Mandarin. Testimonies from the camps reveal that languages other than Mandarin were often forbidden, and inmates could be punished with physical violence for using them.

Meanwhile, inmates were forced to spend much of their time repeating political slogans and singing patriotic songs in Mandarin. Guards also used assessments of inmates' Mandarin proficiency to regulate their access to 'privileges' such as if and when they could eat and rest.

The reach of the repressive arm of the PRC goes beyond its borders. Protesters and critics abroad have reported being surveilled, threatened, and harassed. At the same time, global rights organizations are often denied access to information, making it difficult to assess the full situation of the threatened communities in China, and even more difficult to create connections with its 'Indigenous' communities.



Members of TIPRA (Tripura Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance) and their supporters protest for Village committee elections to be instituted locally in Khowai, India - 17 February 2022.

India

Home to over 1.3 billion people, India is a highly multilingual country. With over 450 languages, it is estimated to be the fourth-most linguistically diverse country in the world. Over 40% of the country's languages are considered endangered.

Official estimates of India's linguistic diversity (for example, in the national census) systematically under-represent the number of languages by reclassifying distinct languages as dialects. Furthermore, those languages that are formally recognized are treated unequally in policy. Languages classified as 'scheduled' and 'classical' languages are given extra support by the state, whereas smaller languages are neglected.

In 2022, Civicus Monitor added India to their watchlist of countries of serious concern, alongside Russia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, El Salvador, and Kazakhstan. Although the country has been classified by Civicus Monitor as 'repressed' since 2019, ongoing detention of human rights defenders, new raids on NGO offices, and attacks on journalists all earned India a place on the watchlist in 2022.

The situation for human rights defenders and civil society in India has been in steep decline since the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, and the implementation of their project of xenophobic cultural nationalism. Since being reelected in 2019, the BJP under Narendra Modi have intensified their crackdowns and their ongoing conflict with Indigenous peoples.

India is home to about 104 million Indigenous peoples, of whom almost 90% are rural. Indigenous people face numerous challenges, including massive displacement due to development projects, and alarmingly high levels of atrocities at the hands of state security forces.

Human rights defenders and civil society, both in general and in relation to Indigenous people, are increasingly targeted by legal suppressions. These include the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which allows the state to target individuals and organizations for terrorism and sedition, and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, which enables the state to restrict access to foreign funds for NGOs.

Official estimates of India's linguistic diversity systematically under-represent the number of languages.

Since 2019, the Indian state has repeatedly used both legal and extralegal measures to target Indigenous people and their allies, and to suppress civil society more generally.



In 2019 — the UN Year of Indigenous Languages — state security forces put down an Indigenous uprising in the state of Jharkhand, known as the Pathalgadi movement, arresting thousands of Indigenous people. Examples of more targeted violence against Indigenous people included the January 23rd detention and torture of four Indigenous teenagers in Madhya Pradesh, the August 27th death by torture of Pappu Bheel in Rajasthan, and violent police attack in July on Chhara communities in Ahmedabad city. Meanwhile, over a million forest-dwelling Indigenous people were threatened with evictions by new conservation laws.

Civil space more broadly continued to deteriorate after the BJP government was re-elected in 2019. The special constitutional status of the Jammu and Kashmir region was revoked, leading to protests that were violently suppressed, coupled with an internet blackout that went on for 18 months. Meanwhile, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act was updated to enable the state to designate individuals as terrorists. Finally, in August, the state of Assam released a National Registry of Citizens, creating what UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes referred to as “the biggest exercise in statelessness since the Second World War.” Amongst the nearly two million people rendered stateless by the registry were some 100,000 Indigenous people.

In 2020, attacks on Indigenous people continued. 11 Indigenous Gond people were killed in July in the state of Uttar Pradesh whilst defending against a land grab, and in October an Indigenous land defender was attacked and beaten, later dying in hospital in the state of Tripura. Forced evictions of Indigenous people continue, for example, in April, 32 families in Sagda village in Odisha state were evicted, and in December, 100 families of

Chakma people were forcibly evicted from their homes in Mizoram state. Government statistics from this year showed that crimes against Indigenous people rose by 9.3%.

In addition to these attacks on individuals and communities, the state continued to intensify its attacks on Indigenous land in the name of development. As part of the government’s COVID recovery plan, 38 plots of land were auctioned to coal mining companies—mostly Indigenous lands in the states of Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Odisha.

Meanwhile, the updated Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act was used to arrest human rights defenders, including the Indigenous rights activist Father Stan Swamy (who later died in prison), the Indigenous rights defender and language policy scholar Hany Babu (still detained), and journalist and rights activist Gautam Navlakha (still detained).

The Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Act was also amended to prevent large NGOs from distributing funds to grassroots groups. Almost immediately the new act was put into practice to freeze the accounts of Amnesty International.

These attacks on civil society and rights defenders continued in 2021. Aakar Patel, Chair of Amnesty India, was arrested and charged for social media posts. Climate activist Disha Ravi was arrested for sedition and ‘spreading disharmony’. The home and office of activist Harsh Mander were raided in Delhi, and Indigenous activist Hidme Markam was arrested. Some 10 NGOs were also targeted by the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Act.

Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the most multilingual countries in the world. Over 700 languages are spoken in Indonesia according to Ethnologue, and approximately 35% of these are considered endangered. The region of West Papua, which this section focuses on, is particularly high in linguistic diversity, with some 250 languages documented.

West Papua covers the western part of the island of New Guinea, and the region is currently divided into five Indonesian provinces: Papua, Highland Papua, Central Papua, South Papua, and West Papua. More than 50% of the population in these provinces are trans-migrants who came through the transmigration program between the 1970s and early 2000s. The region has the most diverse cultures and languages in Indonesia.

In May 2013, the Constitutional Court of Indonesia affirmed the Constitutional Rights of Indigenous Peoples to their land and territories, including their collective rights to customary forests. And while Indonesia is also a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), government officials argue that all Indonesians, except those considered to be of foreign descent, are Indigenous, and thus entitled to the same rights. Consequently, the government has rejected calls for specific needs from groups identifying as Indigenous.

Indonesian language policies, particularly in education, emphasize national unity. Bahasa Indonesia, the Indonesian language, was introduced as the primary medium of education during the 1940s and is the state-sponsored lingua franca of the country. Until the mid-20th century, local languages were part of the education system. Some regional languages were used as a medium of instruction in the early years of schooling. However, during the mid-1970s, the emphasis on Indonesian as the sole medium of instruction intensified. Indigenous people were primarily taught in Indonesian, except in the few places where major regional languages like Javanese or Sundanese were used.

These policies are implemented in West Papua. Since Indonesia forcefully annexed the region from the Netherlands in 1969, West Papuans have continued to seek independence from Indonesia. Conflict and violence have been ongoing. In 2001, the Indonesian government issued a Special Autonomy Law for the region, after which the government forcibly divided Papua and West Papua in two separate provinces. In 2022, it was further divided into five provinces.

The Indigenous people of the region recognize seven distinct customary territories, which includes Mamberamo Tabi (Mamta), Saireri, Domberai and Bomberai along the north coast. The Mee Pago and La Pago territory are located in the highlands of Papua and Ha Anim territory is located on the south coast of Papua.

During President Joko Widodo's second term, starting in 2019, the number of criminalisation cases has increased along with the government's investment-first agenda. Among these, acts of violence and criminalization against Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous human rights defenders continued to occur. In 2019, more than 15 cases of land grabbing, arrests, violence and evictions took place targeting Indigenous communities.

Violence against Indigenous peoples in West Papua is continuously reported. Two incidents from recent years demonstrate the nature of this violence.

In December 2018, a Papuan independence militia attacked a state infrastructure construction site, kidnapping several workers and later executing them. The Indonesian government launched a military campaign in response, leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of people. Local civil society organization, the Nduga Solidarity Civil Society Coalition, reported that 182 civilians died as a result of the conflict and following displacement.

In August 2019, Papuan protestors in the city of Surabaya (East Java) were attacked by civilian militias, insulted with racist slurs, and then arrested. This incident led to widespread protests throughout West Papua, which were violently suppressed by police. Over 30 people were killed.

Violent attacks on West Papuans are accompanied by malicious neglect by the state. For example, a measles outbreak in Asmat Regency killed an estimated 100 Papuan children in January 2018.

The Indonesian Government's fundamental policy toward Papua has never changed. It represents a consistent intention to violently retain the territory and assimilate its people.

Violence and armed conflict in Papua have continued to increase over the last five years. Thousands of Indigenous Papuans have been arrested and hundreds imprisoned, while dozens have been killed.

More and more people are migrating into West Papua and currently, almost 50 percent of the population is not Indigenous. In this type of colonialism, Indigenous people are not only threatened with losing their territory, but also their way of life, their traditions, languages, and identities that have been passed down from generation to generation.



Protestors campaigning for the freedom of West Papua blocked by police in Malang, East Java Indonesia - 1 July 2020.



Papua New Guineans protest against Indonesian government to give West Papua independence in Vanimo, Papua New Guinea
15 September 2019.

Conclusion

The three case studies above demonstrate a drastic and rapid decline in space for civil society and the conditions for human rights defenders in Asia's three most populous and linguistically diverse countries. This situation creates a broader politics of fear which suppresses human rights activism and participation in civil society, which will have a chilling effect on the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Meanwhile, China, India, and Indonesia continue to suppress Indigenous languages. This is done by refusing to recognize the legal status of Indigenous peoples, by reclassifying distinct languages as dialects, and by denying a host of language rights through various formal and informal policy measures.

If Indigenous people in these countries mobilize to protest and change this situation, they currently risk a range of punitive responses, including harassment, imprisonment, and death.

Furthermore, if the United Nations attempts to mobilize Indigenous people to defend their language rights, as suggested by the plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, it can expect two responses: either Indigenous people will participate, at risk to their safety, or the politics of fear will prevent the desired mobilization.

However Indigenous people in China, India, and Indonesia choose to respond, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages is unlikely to meet with success in Asia's three most populous and linguistically diverse countries.

Within this context, we make the following recommendations to support Indigenous language rights and address the politics of fear in China, India, and Indonesia. Our recommendations recognize that Indigenous language rights defenders in these countries currently cannot undertake their work safely. Thus, rather than placing rights defenders at further risk, our recommendations aim to create an environment in which their voices can be safely heard.

Recommendations

Indigenous language rights defenders must be protected. There are many ways that different institutions and individuals can help do this.

We begin with recommendations for the governments of China, India, and Indonesia. On the one hand, we recognize that directing recommendations to the governments of these states may seem like wishful thinking to policy-makers and citizens in search of concrete actions. However, at the same time, we also consider it appropriate to identify these governments as the parties responsible for restricting civil society, attacking human rights defenders, and suppressing Indigenous languages. Failing to identify them as the culprits would suggest that these governments can continue to act with impunity and without fear of censure.

Therefore, we recommend that the governments of China, India, and Indonesia immediately cease their attacks on human rights defenders and restrictions on civil society. We further recommend that they should initiate processes that enable their citizens to freely identify as Indigenous, to enjoy the associated rights expressed in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and to actively participate in the initiative of the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

In recognition of the fact that the governments of China, India, and Indonesia are unlikely to take these actions, we also make the following recommendations to members of the international community with the aim of placing pressure on these governments to act in the interest of their Indigenous peoples and their languages, and to ensure that Indigenous language rights defenders can act safely.

To begin with, given that the United Nations is responsible for organizing and promoting the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, and advancing an approach that centers human rights and the participation of Indigenous people, it also has a special responsibility to protect Indigenous language rights defenders. One way that this could be done is through the office of the UN Special Representative on Rights Defenders, which monitors the situation of rights defenders, and produces and disseminates information about the obligations that all states have to protect them.

The UN Special Representative on Rights Defenders could help protect Indigenous language rights defenders by producing and disseminating information about them, ensuring that threats to Indigenous language rights defenders become more widely known and better understood, and helping to challenge the impunity with which states such as India, China, and Indonesia currently act.

Modifications to the operations of the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages would also help. The governance mechanisms for the Decade currently include

the possibility to form ad hoc groups to investigate important issues and make recommendations for further action. We recommend that an ad hoc group should be formed to discuss the threats faced by Indigenous language rights defenders. The group could draft guidelines to help Indigenous language rights defenders ensure their safety when participating in the Decade.

These guidelines could be made available in multiple languages, and disseminated to all stakeholders that participate in the Decade. Additionally, the Decade's Resource Mobilization Strategy should prioritize support to Indigenous communities and language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia, given the challenges they face. One use for these resources could be to develop and implement training for Indigenous peoples in these countries, regarding such issues as personal safety.

Global civil society also has a role to play in ensuring that Indigenous language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia can safely participate in the Decade. At present, the organizations we relied on to produce this policy brief—Frontline Defenders, Civicus Monitor, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, and Article 19—do not explicitly produce and disseminate information about Indigenous language rights defenders.

Doing so would help end the impunity of states that attack Indigenous language rights defenders, and would also undermine the politics of fear that discourage Indigenous people from becoming language rights defenders. We therefore recommend that these and other relevant civil society organizations immediately begin producing and disseminating information about the situation if Indigenous language rights defenders globally, and especially in countries such as China, India, and Indonesia.



An Indigenous woman speaks outside the White House about the need to shut down oil pipelines to preserve access to clean water - 1 April 2021.

Journalists and academics also have a role to play in this respect. More investigative reporting and research will help shed light on these issues, eroding the politics of fear and challenging the impunity of states. Concerned individuals can also play a role, using social media to raise awareness of the challenges faced by Indigenous language rights defenders, and acting within local civil society to raise awareness of threats to Indigenous language rights defenders.

We also encourage Indigenous people elsewhere in the world to express support for and stand in solidarity with Indigenous people in China, India, and Indonesia, and other countries where they are under attack.

Transnational connections between and solidarity amongst Indigenous people has been essential to resisting the assimilatory initiatives of individual states and combating the politics of fear. Active efforts should be made to extend this solidarity to Indigenous people who live in states that deliberately try to isolate their citizens from these transnational movements.

Finally, there are also important actions that the Australian government and people can take to help protect Indigenous language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia.

To begin with, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should fund and encourage exchanges focused on Indigenous language rights, between Indigenous people and stakeholder groups from Australia and China, India, and Indonesia. Australia should also use the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review process to highlight restrictions on language rights and attacks on language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia. The next Universal Periodic Review for China and India both fall within the Decade, in 2023 and 2027 respectively.

All Australian citizens can also play a role in challenging the politics of fear and supporting Indigenous language rights defenders in Asia. They should use the freedoms they enjoy to inform themselves of the challenges faced by Indigenous language rights defenders in China, India, and Indonesia, and wherever possible, to build enabling person-to-person links with language rights defenders in these countries.



Thousands of Aboriginal protesters and supporters assemble in Hyde Park Sydney asking the government to change the controversial date of Australia Day - 26 January 2020.

Authors



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His work focuses on issues of power, the state, colonialism, and race in Asia, particularly the transnational Himalayan region, and explores how these forces manifest through state-sponsored language oppression and the social movements and community practices that seek to resist it.

He writes for the general public in *The Nation*, *Jacobin*, and *ROAR Magazine*, and his academic articles have appeared in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist*, *Patterns of Prejudice*, *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*, and other journals.

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