

recoding

DIGITAL FUTURES

April 2026



I. Context-setting

South Asia, consisting of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, sits within the world as a large section of the population (nearly 1.8 billion). The region is often analysed through the lens of geopolitics, economic growth (or lack thereof), conflict or a colonial past. It is also marked by great diversity as a region, consisting of countries of differing sizes, linguistic richness, deeply held traditions and cultures and complex tensions.

While South Asia's cultural and political context is often highlighted, when it comes to digital rights, the region is rarely seen as a site of idea generation. While some countries, mainly India, are situating themselves as leaders and innovators in the tech space, South Asia is still not seen as a space where digital rights and tech policy principles are set. When South Asia is mentioned in policy circles, it is seen largely as a market given its size and the "untapped potential" of so many users being offline due to various digital divides on the basis of class, gender and geographical location. Narratives of digital and data colonialism permeate through policy circles, solidifying South Asia's position as a recipient of technology and policies rather than a driver.

Existing reports and assessments point towards a clear bend towards digital authoritarianism in South Asia. Tech Global Institute's whitepaper titled 'Digital Governance and Rights in South Asia, and the Path Forward' states that "several countries in South Asia, including Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, have been experiencing a decline in fundamental rights such as privacy and freedom of expression."¹

¹ Tech Global Institute, "Whitepaper: Digital Governance and Rights in South Asia, and the Path Forward", February 2025, <https://techglobalinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Digital-Governance-and-Rights-in-South-Asia-and-the-Path-Forward.pdf>.

The region is marked by excessive internet and network shutdowns and authoritarian laws, particularly criminalisation of online speech through laws such as the Cyber Security Act (CSA), and the former Digital Security Act (DSA) in Bangladesh,² Online Safety Act (OSA) in Sri Lanka,³ Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in Pakistan and ICT Act in India.⁴ Censorship enabled through these laws, including the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 in India, is ever-expanding as these countries seek to amend⁵ and broadly interpret regulatory frameworks.

In addition to increasing state control, the impact of profit-minded big corporations in the region poses challenges in terms of data extraction, content moderation and complicity with state power. The Indo-Pak conflict in 2025 offered a particularly stark illustration of platform deference to state power, with platforms owned by X, Meta and Google blocking content⁶ by Pakistani journalists and media channels in India.⁷ In addition to abetting censorship, social media platforms have systematically failed to mitigate harms and regulate harmful speech in the region. Particularly as content moderation has become more automated, content moderation has persistently fallen short. It was noted in the 2026 Bangladesh elections, Meta repeatedly failed to remove harmful online content, particularly from outside the country.⁸

² Clooney Foundation for Justice, “New Analysis of Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act Reveals Lessons for the Future of Press Freedom”, 23 November 2023, <https://cfj.org/news/new-analysis-of-bangladeshs-digital-security-act-reveals-lessons-for-the-future-of-press-freedom>.

³ Article 19, “Sri Lanka: Withdraw the Online Safety Bill”, 19 January 2024, <https://www.article19.org/resources/sri-lanka-withdraw-online-safety-bill>.

⁴ Digital Rights Foundation, “Bytes Behind Bars: Decoding Pakistan’s digital expression legislation”, February 2025, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Bytes-Behind-Bars-Decoding-Pakistans-digital-expression-legislation.pdfthey>.

⁵ Amnesty International, “India: Proposed changes to digital media regulation would facilitate abusive powers over users’ content – new Amnesty legal analysis”, 16 April 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/04/india-proposed-changes-to-digital-media-regulation-would-facilitate-abusive-powers-over-users-content-new-amnesty-legal-analysis>.

⁶ Digital Rights Foundation, “India bans Pakistani YouTube channels, withholds several X accounts in wake of Pahalgam”, May 2025, https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Short-Investigative-Report_India-bans-Pakistani-YouTube-channels-withholds-several-X-accounts_compressed.pdf.

⁷ Usama Khilji, “How Platform Shifts on Content Moderation Are Escalating Harm in the India-Pakistan Crisis”, 2 May 2026, <https://www.techpolicy.press/how-platform-shifts-on-content-moderation-are-escalating-harm-in-the-indiapakistan-crisis>.

⁸ Amnesty International, “Bangladesh: Meta’s content moderation delays risk fuelling real-world violence”, 16 March 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/03/bangladesh-metas-content-moderation-delays-risk-fuelling-real-world-violence>.

Civil society has noted that it finds itself in a “double bind” between state repression and lack of accountability from tech platforms. Civil society notes that it cannot back domestic legislation seeking to hold tech platforms “accountable” because these are usually ruses for exerting state power over companies. On the other hand, they have no binding legal tools to hold platforms accountable when they fail to respond to community needs. In this context, civil society in most Global Majority countries feel that they cannot take part in so-called globalised calls for regulation of big tech by state actors. While civil society in the Global North positions state regulation as the antidote to market overreach by big tech, civil society elsewhere cannot simply afford to concentrate more power in the state to regulate online speech and companies. The “Brussels effect”, which trickles down EU-centric legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) onto countries across the world, might create further issues when applied to contexts such as South Asia with weak institutions and rule of law. Further, others have pointed out a potential “dark Brussels effect” which could result in companies prioritising regulating hate content and disinformation in Europe, “at the expense of smaller markets.”⁹

Tech Global Institute’s whitepaper notes that tech policymaking in South Asia is subject to the “contagion effect”, which has meant that countries in the region have adopted policy terms and standards set by more “dominant” markets, all concentrated in the Global North.¹⁰ Parallel to this trend is the lack of cohesion and as the white paper notes, there is “no formal agreement among South Asian nations to address digital rights.”¹¹ This is largely mirrored in civil society for digital rights, given the dearth of forums, coalitions and alliances across South Asia.

⁹ Aishik Saha, “Global South Can Leverage EU Digital Services Act Principles to Fight Online Harm”, Center for the Study of Organized Hate, 20 January 2026, <https://www.csohate.org/2025/01/20/digital-services-act-global-south>.

¹⁰ Tech Global Institute, “Whitepaper”.

¹¹ Tech Global Institute, “Whitepaper”.

On the other hand, global convenings and forums on digital rights, while worthwhile spaces for South Asian participation, are largely dominated by Global North actors. Studies have found that these spaces overrepresent Global North interests “in leading overall discourse, in claiming authority over global issues, and in driving specific topics such as misinformation, privacy, and internet shutdowns.”¹² This necessitates a space that is purely regional in nature, that allows South Asian digital rights civil society to create positions and build consensus that is context-specific and speaks to the communities they work with. These push factors compelled Digital Rights Foundation, in partnership with Digital Accountability Collective South Asia (DACSA), to facilitate a convening of civil society groups across South and Southeast Asia in Bangkok on 3 and 4 April 2026 to reimagine what a just digital future could look like from a distinctly South Asian lens. This report captures the issues identified and lessons learned during this convening.

The following report aims to do two things: a. document the convening, particularly the analysis, tensions and recommendations that emerged from it, and b. to look forward, drawing on discussions and follow-up interviews with participants to envision what a South Asian digital rights identity could look like.

¹² “The geopolitics of digital rights activism: Evaluating civil society's role in the promises of multistakeholder internet governance”, Telecommunications Policy, Volume 46, Issue 10, November 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308596122001392>.

II. Convening methodology

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I feel that I have a crisis of imagination, we discussed a lot of problems, I found it very difficult to imagine a system that does not replicate these issues.

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A participant during a post-convening interview

The convening, spread over two days, adopted a “strategic foresight” approach to trigger discussions and arrive at a common understanding. The tools used for this were “futures triangle” and “back-casting” methodologies, to move participants beyond reactive analysis and toward collective imagination. Rather than forecasting or making predictions based on the present, these tools were used to create space for participants to articulate both the futures they seek and the futures they refuse, grounded in their lived political, social and technological contexts.

Participants worked across seven thematic groups to map the pressures of the present, the weights of the past, and the pulls of plausible futures over a 20-30 year horizon. Back-casting then enabled participants to identify the conditions, pathways, and risks that would need to be addressed for those futures to become possible. This approach was particularly deliberate given the context of factors such as shrinking civic space, heightened surveillance and funding precarity that often constrain long-term thinking in the region.

Participants reflected that the methodology was provocative and at times engendered discomfort. It was provocative, according to some, because it disrupted habitual modes of thinking. The methodology also aimed to level the floor between participants with different experience levels. Rather than asking people to master the existing landscape of digital rights discourse before they could contribute, futures thinking invited everyone to imagine forward from their own knowledge and concerns. As one of the facilitators put it, the methodology “equalised the differences in experience” by creating conditions where someone with fifteen years of internet governance experience at a global level and someone from a student movement in Lahore could build a vision together without the former simply teaching the latter. The goal was to avoid the familiar dynamic of one or two group members becoming the spokesperson, given their extensive experience.

Overall, while participants felt that the exercises were useful in forcing them to move away from day-to-day, reactive thinking, many found thinking 30 years out to be too challenging, especially given how rapidly technology progresses. Further, some felt that the outcome lacked granularity as the back-casting yielded every general understanding of how to achieve the future they envisioned.

Deliberate efforts were also made to ensure that the convening was not a gathering of “the usual suspects”. The organisers had felt that digital rights convenings tend to be very insular; the same organisations, frameworks and conversations are rehashed for a familiar audience. The organisers sought to disrupt this by bringing together both seasoned digital rights practitioners and activists from feminist movements, student politics and digital influencers, who had not previously worked within a digital rights framework.

Participants, however, noted that two days were too short to arrive at a common understanding and truly build trust. The organisers, however, felt that the convening was a good experimental space to see how participants could find common ground, shared language, and enough goodwill to want to continue. On those terms, it succeeded. But the time constraint meant that there was not enough space for the equally important conversation about each other’s work. Many people felt that they were just beginning to know each other when the two days ended.

III. Visions of the future

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By 2056, in the South Asian region, we will have community-driven, community-owned safe digital spaces and independent internet infrastructure where freedom of expression outside of corporate and state control is possible, rooted in institutional and governmental accountability. These spaces will be a public good, community-funded and community-moderated, adapted to community needs, with regulations and moderation in place to mandate inclusivity of marginalised groups and prevent hate speech and violence. The purpose of these spaces will be to harness the collective power of communities and rights advocates across the region for collective learning and advocacy without fear, to be fed into regional and local on-ground resistance and rights movements.

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Participant group at Bangkok Convening, April 2026

During the convening, participants did not simply articulate a theory of change or a list of recommendations; they articulated a vision of the future resulting from intensive discussions, contestation and consensus-building. There was no singular vision, because narrow aims and objectives do a disservice to the complexity and diversity of the region and its civil society. What follows is a map used to arrive at this rich vision: the weight of the past, springs of opportunity and the proposed principles for the journey.

The Weight

The participants named specific constraints, such as insufficient funding and a shrinking civic space, but they also identified system flaws that require holistic and collective action to correct.

1. Limited funding and human resources

South Asian civil society working on digital and other rights operates under severe resource constraints: limited funding, small teams and operational dependence on shifting donor priorities. The convening came a year after significant cuts to USAID funding which gutted civil society in South Asia, including many organisations in the room. Participants pointed out that the resource problem is not simply a matter of quantity. The structure of international funding itself is part of the problem, as donors pit organisations against each other rather than encouraging collaboration, and Global North research institutions extract data and analysis from Global Majority partners without equitable credit or benefit-sharing. Further, the terms on which funding flows frequently come with compliance requirements designed for contexts very different from South Asia. Participants also felt that funding was structured to achieve very short-term aims, and funding cycles last less than one to two years, which prevents any work towards systemic change. One participant shared that “nowadays, funding is activity-based, not about capacity building.” Another pointed out, “it shouldn’t be that you are working for the funder, the funder is a partner. This [relationship] needs to be nurtured.”

One participant observed that funders are often resistant to feedback, sharing that “when we talk about alternative funding, organisers think we are openly criticising them”. These attitudes within donor organisations can work as a silencing mechanism for civil society, who are often hesitant to speak up anyway because its existence is dependent on these very donors.

Participants felt that there was a dire need for an overhaul to the funding architecture in South Asia, focusing on flexible core funding, long-term grants, unconditional support, co-design of programs, and sharing pools of money rather than competitive grants.

2. Gaps in knowledge and capacity

Participants also felt that there was a critical gap in knowledge and capacity to tackle many of these emerging trends. Not only was knowledge and data concentrated in the Global North, but there was a lack of effort to distribute this expertise. South Asia often is the subject of study and a place to extract data, and is rarely seen as a site of research and knowledge production. Local research partners are often seen as “data collectors” or as providing local context, never seen as intellectual equals. These Global North institutions often concentrate proprietary data in terms of research, which can be a barrier to co-creating research as equal partners. Further, many South Asian countries experience a brain drain of trained professional experts who are absorbed by global and international companies and institutions.

Another knowledge gap within South Asian civil society was the lack of connectivity between digital security, developers and technical experts with activists and policy advocates. Digital rights spaces in South Asia have come to be dominated by advocates, conversant in human rights standards and internet governance policies, however, they only have a working knowledge of technologies and their development. Closer collaboration to bridge the technical/non-technical divide would mean bringing security researchers, developers and technical practitioners into these spaces with more intentionality.

Further, there was uneven connectivity of South Asian digital rights civil society with academics. While some thinktanks are housed within universities or have close collaborations, other, more activist-driven organisations did not have those connections or that connections were limited to only law or technical fields. One participant noted that to foster truly intersectional imaginations of digital rights, one would have to bring in academics and researchers from other disciplines into these spaces to allow for a cross-pollination of ideas.

3. Shrinking spaces and growing digital authoritarianism

All participants felt that there was growing digital authoritarianism in their country, and that their governments were deploying tech with little regulatory oversight and transparency. Deployment of surveillance systems, biometric databases, digital ID infrastructure, and censorship and content moderation frameworks has resulted in an urgent need for digital rights interventions. Despite this urgency, the ability of civil society to respond to these trends is severely constrained in an environment of shrinking civic space for dissent. Restrictive NGO and funding laws in many South Asian countries, along with a general hostility towards human rights work, have meant that while civil society's work has expanded greatly, its ability to respond to these challenges is severely limited.

While these trends are not just regional, rather seen across the globe, they are being felt acutely in South Asia, given the complicated histories of authoritarianism, accelerated democratic backsliding and colonial legacies.

4. Lack of civil society cooperation and fragmentation

Participants felt that civil society in South Asia works in silos both at a regional level and within their countries. Participants posited the need for greater collaboration between digital rights groups and larger civil society, particularly at the grassroots level. Further, civil society felt that they were not able to show solidarity or develop any cooperative mechanisms between countries. At the national level, civil society was disconnected from adjacent movements working on labour rights, feminist organising, student politics, and environmental justice. It was partly this problem that this convening sought to disrupt through a diverse pool of participants. Follow-up interviews pointed out that going forward, this convening needs to work more towards outreach and alliance-building at the national and local levels that can feed into a more diverse and robust regional convening.

There was also a recognition that NGOs, given their obligations to donors and onerous registration requirements imposed by states, often have to dilute their politics and stances. One participant, representing a movement rather than an NGO, noted that NGOs should play a supportive role to movements, who often have the space and political organising to push for change that NGOs are constrained to do. The modalities of this support was not fleshed out completely, but spoke to an understanding that organisations at the convening must develop deeper ties with movements and non-digital rights spaces. Further, the role of donors in the NGO-isation of civil society was also named as an issue, digital rights NGOs would have more freedom and space to work with movements if they had support from donors and grants started to build in solidarity work as a core part of the activities they fund.

The lack of coordination with diverse movements also resulted in some blind spots for digital rights in South Asia. One participant pointed out that digital rights spaces tend to disproportionately focus on content moderation and censorship; issues of labour are often overlooked. While there is some research happening in India around gig work, there is little to none in other South Asian contexts. Further, such research often never translates into organising and mobilising work. The participant pointed out that greater collaboration with labour rights groups would bridge these gaps, particularly as data annotation, content moderation, and RLHF work is disproportionately taking place in Global Majority countries.

At the regional level, cross-border collaboration has been a casualty of geopolitical hostilities. Tensions between Pakistan and India loomed large over the convening, as participants noted that any visible collaboration or solidarity across the border would result in security issues and labelling as “anti-national”. One participant from India shared: “The fact that you are having a conversation with someone across the border brings you under scrutiny. For individuals, it can become a security risk. For people from marginalised communities, your professional growth, individual standing in the community, and your life can be under threat.” These tensions are relevant for dynamics with other countries as well, such as Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions and hostilities between India and Bangladesh since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. This was seen as a major barrier to cooperation; however also reinforced the need to think more creatively and invest in less visible forms of cooperation going forward.

Many participants talked about the revival of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as a way to restart regional cooperation. One participant noted that there was no need to reinvent the wheel, and civil society should put its efforts into strengthening this existing framework. Crucial starting points can be the SAARC Social Charter, drafted by civil society in 2004.¹³ Others genuinely grappled with the limitations of SARC, “even in 30 years, we can’t imagine a South Asia regional rights mechanism”. While many noted that given the Indo-Pak tensions, the political conditions required for SAARC were unlikely. However, this invited the need for more focused discussion on regional mechanisms across the world and what was possible in South Asia, given its unique dynamics.

5. Diversity within South Asia

The dominance of Pakistan and India over discourse in South Asia can have the effect of invisibilising issues from other countries. Not all countries in South Asia are equal; in fact, India dominates as an economic and emerging technological powerhouse with an outsized influence in the region. India’s Digital Public Infrastructure is being exported across the region, both seen as a model to aspire to as well as being contracted to develop similar models elsewhere.¹⁴ While South-South tech cooperation fits into the values espoused by the convening, there is a real risk of exporting tech authoritarianism across the region through these exchanges, especially in the absence of legal and human rights safeguards.

These dynamics were evident at the convening as well, given the scale of India and Pakistan, a big chunk of the attention, resources and discursive space is taken up by them. As a consequence, issues in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bhutan are often pushed to the margins or subsumed into the Indo-Pak discourse. A challenge for this convening going forward is to ensure that hierarchies and marginalisations seen in global spaces are not reproduced at the South Asia level. This requires more resources to conduct outreach in countries often sidelined or completely absent from discussions. For instance, the convening, despite its best efforts, lacked representation from Bhutan, Afghanistan, and the Maldives.

¹³ “Social Charter”, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), 4 January 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/saarc/2004/117430>.

¹⁴ DPI Africa Info Hub, “Sri Lanka’s India-Funded Digital ID Signals Broader Shift In South-South Tech Cooperation”, 14 August 2025, <https://dpi.africa/sri-lankas-india-funded-digital-id-signals-broader-shift-in-south-south-tech-cooperation>.

In follow-up interviews, participants stated that there is a need for a stronger South Asian voice outside the Indian articulation of digital rights, and to develop convenings designed to check India's, and to a lesser extent Pakistan's, tendency to take up disproportionate space in any room.

Additionally, regional spaces often rely on tokenism and a small pool of activists to "represent" entire countries. Civil society convenings in South Asia typically consist of urban, English-speaking and connected individuals with the resources to travel and connections to international funding circuits. This form of representation papers over marginalisations within these countries, bypassing minorities and communities excluded on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, gender and language.

Meaningful representation is often a resource problem. This does not necessarily mean throwing in money to make the next convening bigger, as more participants would not necessarily translate into better representation. While more dedicated money to support travel of under-represented communities would be a good starting point, some participants suggested that the convening could go a step further by developing sub-granting arrangements that allow local, grassroots organisations to gather their own constituencies and bring that synthesis into the regional space.

6. Colonial legacies

Another major throughline of the convening was the search for a decolonial approach to digital rights. Colonial histories of South Asia loom large over any discussion, as colonialism is not simply an event of the past; it continues to be experienced in almost every aspect, be it legal, political or economic. Further, technologies and digital rights are deeply embedded in Western ways of thinking, often displacing traditional structures and forms of knowledge. A South Asian approach to digital rights thus faces the challenge of the present as well as the past, overcoming existing power dynamics in addition to the demons of the past.

Colonial power represents an unequal global distribution of power and resources, and these are encoded into the digital infrastructure: who owns the data centres, who writes the algorithms, who sets the content policies, and who benefits from the value generated by billions of South Asian users. These colonial legacies are also embedded in extractive profit and labour models that underpin the current production of tech and AI, and where the environmental cost is borne. South Asian countries are among the most climate vulnerable in the world, regularly ravaged by floods, extreme heatwaves, cyclones, glacial melt and rise in sea levels. During the convening, there was a shared understanding that digital rights priorities for South Asia must be distinct and grounded in these structural realities.

Participants also point to the weight of the “colonial hangover” constrains our collective and liberatory imagination. In the context of digital rights, the techno-determinism narrative that technological progress is linear and inevitable is embedded in all popular discourse. South Asian states reproduce these narratives, often in their uncritical embrace of digital public infrastructure as a silver bullet for governance issues. Many participants referred to the idea of “de-growth” as a counterweight to this determinism. Participants also emphasised the need for indigenously developed tech that is community-owned and built on community-funded infrastructure, outside corporate and state control, for collective rather than extractive purposes. Others expressed hope that perhaps in the future the collective can articulate an explicitly decolonial approach to digital rights, one that provides an alternative to the Western-dominated vision of technology. As one group shared in the plenary, recalling Audre Lorde’s words, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the masters’ house”.

7. Big tech and state collusion

A recurring undercurrent of the convening was the increasingly close relationship between technology companies and governments across South Asia. One group noted that the symbiotic relationship between the two had come to resemble a cartel. In many South Asian contexts, content moderation was where this collusion started to rear its head. Compliance rates with government requests for content removal are very high in many South Asian countries, and many governments have started to use restrictive laws around localisation as a bargaining chip against companies eager to avoid regulation. The threat of content moderation laws and requirements to locate staff inside the country has created a compliance incentive structure in which companies pre-emptively remove content in anticipation of satisfying state demands. One participant noted that these trends call for an urgent need to encode corporate accountability into international human rights law: “The traditional definition of censorship is significantly changing; previously, censorship by the state would have the power and the intention, but now there is new uncharted territory where this power lies with private entities.”

South Asian governments are also very eager to attract investment from technology companies, often wooing them with the promise of tax breaks and limited regulation. India's recent AI Summit was cited as an example of South Asian states auditioning for the role of being Silicon Valley's next outpost.

Inherent in this economic partnership is a deeper transfer of ideas and imposition of techno-ideological models of governance. One group at the convening referred to this as the "Nerd Rich", in which CEOs of technology companies are exporting ideas of governance and the state to serve their profit-driven ambitions and are directly antithetical to the collective liberation and digital rights. For South Asian countries, which have experienced the colonial expansionist designs of the East India Company and their ilk, tech executives looking to undermine the idea of the state was alarming to participants who could see through such an economic model as inherently extractive and colonial in nature.

A participant observed that "free speech absolutism is also emerging as a core idea; while we don't want censorship, we cannot go to the other end of the spectrum. Free speech absolutists are very powerful people who will control these platforms, and by politicians, such as Trump and Musk, the same people would also endorse government censorship." These trends could have deleterious impacts on marginalised communities and gender-diverse groups who are often the recipients of hate speech and disinformation.

One group at the convening was honest about leveraging power dynamics between state and company interests, for instance, how in some cases resistance to state regulation by platforms can benefit communities, as it can be a temporary bulwark against impending censorship. However, within this power calculus, the group was quick to point out that companies do not resist state requests out of a principled commitment to freedom of expression, nor is this resistance reliable. More and more, the trend in South Asia is that technology companies are becoming compliant, as they have significantly rolled back trust-and-safety infrastructure and public policy roles, which were often the interlocutors between civil society and big tech, are being phased out or being repositioned to cater to government interests.

Participants were clear about South Asian civil society's role in this, to resist these emerging cartel-like entities through innovative and collaborative work. Companies were never reliable allies, but are even less so now, and strategies that harness the power of users and people must be deployed against these powerful cartels.

8. Rapidly changing world order

“
When the future is going towards the right,
where do the rights go?
”

participant during Bangkok convention, April 2026

Anxiety permeated through the convening, in the backdrop of the ongoing war between the US and Israel against Iran and a larger context of a crumbling world order. There was a clear understanding that international human rights institutions, seen by local civil society as a valuable tool for accountability and transformation, are at an inflexion point. There was also recognition that we are moving from a unipolar world to a multipolar world order, with specific implications for South Asia. While the US's power would not wane any time soon, newer actors have started to emerge to share the hegemonic power. South Asia has been experiencing these shifts for a number of years already with the rise of Chinese power in the region.

The prospect of regional war also towered over discussions, especially at the back of escalating violence between Pakistan and India in 2025. In this context, participants flagged the use of technology, particularly AI, in warfare as another risk. Use of autonomous drones is not new to South Asia, as Pakistan was subject to US drone attacks in the early 2000s as part of the “war on terror”, and provinces in the country continue to see drone attacks against civilians as militants have started to use these weapons. Lack of transparency in many countries raised concerns regarding the acquisition of AI-based weapons systems in South Asia and their impact on civilian populations.

The systematic dismantling of international institutions undermines the rules-based world order that underpins human and digital rights. While there was worry regarding these developments, many saw it as an opportunity because these institutions, though extremely important, never fully worked for the Global Majority. These countries have experienced firsthand the ways in which democracy and human rights can be weaponised to serve interventionist designs. The ongoing genocide in Gaza was a reminder that the status quo is failing us, and recognition that a South Asian approach to digital rights would always contain within it a third-world critique of the very institutions it appeals to.

9. Digital divides

During the closing plenary, one participant observed she was “surprised not to see gender come up more in discussions, particularly as there are so many feminists in the room.” The marginalisation of gender as a niche subject or into the category of service delivery through helpline and legal aid work could be a reason for this. Gender and other intersectional approaches are relegated to the sidelines during discussions of geopolitics and regional cooperation. However, one participant pointed out that there is a lot to learn from South Asian feminist movements as a model for regional cooperation. Generations of feminists across South Asia have been highly collaborative, despite structural barriers to cooperation, and sharing knowledge and doing solidarity work across borders. Some feminist organisations have even built South Asian institutes for educational exchange.

Digital rights issues are all experienced differently and disproportionately by women, gender and sexually diverse people, Dalit and Adivasi communities, people with disabilities, and others who sit at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities. The issue of patriarchy and violence is particularly salient in South Asia, given the commonalities in cultural attitudes and barriers for women, transgender and other gender-diverse individuals. Another issue unique to South Asia is that of caste, which maps onto violence and digital divides. Some felt that areas such as Technology-Facilitated Gender-based Violence (TFGBV) could be entry points for regional work by civil society in South Asia, as they are traditionally seen as “less political” and could be good spaces to build coalitions and solidarity networks.

Cracks and opportunities

1. Rising cross-border issues

Harms such as online fraud, disinformation campaigns, hate speech, and TFGBV are increasingly taking on cross-border dimensions. While not a positive trend, this creates space for cross-border cooperation to address these harms, as shared threats can form the foundation for shared practice. These opportunities were seen as openings for developing solidarities and shared mechanisms for dealing with technologies across South Asia.

2. Young population

South Asia has one of the youngest populations, 30% of the world's total number of adolescents (340 million) are in South Asia. During the convening, the under-representation by Gen Z and Gen Alpha led one participant to remark: "Often, we talk about Gen Alpha and Gen Z as recipients of these conversations, but how are they impacted by all this? We are replicating the generational lack of trust, which could be detrimental."

Youth movements around South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, have effectively deployed technologies to for mobilising and amplifying their protests. The 2025 Gen Z protests in Nepal were partly precipitated by a ban on social media. This is a testament to the fact that these generations are intrinsically tied to technologies and that they are not passive users of these technologies. There was also a lot we don't know about newer generations and their use of tech. One participant noted that they were fascinated by the fact that "Gen Z and Gen Alpha are no longer posting on social media. Maybe there is a move towards more privacy and there is greater value for more privacy among young generations." This, they felt, was an opportunity to mobilise young people around the issue of data protection laws and in anti-surveillance campaigns.

Participants felt that working with new generations and building movement-to-movement solidarity across generations in South Asia could create a possibility for change.

3. Cross-border learning of repressive tech practices

Given the common threads of authoritarian practices running across South Asia and other parts of the world, there is space for inter and intra-regional learning. The convening itself was a good test case for such practices, as several participants were from Southeast Asia, brought in intentionally for inter-regional learning. One participant from Myanmar observed that “Myanmar has a lot of experience in resisting against digital authoritarianism. We know how to fight against state surveillance.” Centering experiential knowledge from the region and beyond can be a good starting point for building regional resilience and creating shared strategies for surviving digital authoritarianism.

4. Market logic

One robust argument for regional cooperation on digital rights and regulations could be that South Asia represents a sizable market for technology companies with a large user base. While market-based arguments for rights can be a double-edged sword, they can be part of the toolkit to help convince states and other actors to combine their collective user base to push for better compliance from technology companies in addressing human rights harms. Civil society itself, speaking as a representative of a large user base from South Asia, could also put a qualitatively different kind of pressure than any single national organisation can exert.

Further, building on the sizable youth population, regional civil society can also start to document policy, design and platform preferences of young users by asking whether they are opting in or out of certain platforms for reasons of privacy, surveillance or censorship. This data, collected across the region, could act as an effective advocacy tool for companies. It also positions the South Asian market as not simply a passive recipient of tech, designed and conceptualised elsewhere, but as local participants whose preferences could shape technology design.

Future values

Unlike the challenges and opportunities identified at the convening, visions for the future were grounded in hope and forward-thinking principles. These principles have been divided into three clusters for clarity:

1. Visions of tech design and infrastructure:

“
Maybe the future is not better tools, but
fewer tools and deeper relationships.
”

Participant reflection in Bangkok convening, April 2026

1. Decentralised power structures
2. Open-source, co-designed solutions
3. Algorithmic transparency and pluralism
4. Community-owned and non-profit tech
5. Technology shaped by local and cultural contexts
6. Small language models built for the region's linguistic diversity
7. Climate-conscious infrastructure
8. Democratised ownership of data computing power
9. Safety and accessibility by design
10. Encryption and privacy by design
11. Collective well-being at center of tech design
12. Internet access a public good
13. Rejecting tech built on labour exploitation

2. Visions of regional collaboration:

“

The revolution will not be televised, it will be organised from the ground up.

”

Participant during Bangkok convening, April 2026

1. Loose, collaborative and non-hierarchical regional networks
2. Civil society networks recognised in regional governance spaces like ASEAN, SAARC as a potential vehicle for rights-based digital standards
3. SAARC framework that treats internet access as a fundamental human right and establishes regional standards for platform accountability
4. Prioritising local expertise over default reliance on Global North actors
5. Synchronised and efficient resource-sharing
6. Community organising feeding into regional power, bottom-up

3. Visions for tech policy:

1. Inclusive, human rights-centric regulatory framework at the international level
2. Context and historically grounded policy making
3. Participatory and co-designed policymaking that centers the most marginalised community
4. Inclusion of civil society and impacted communities in oversight and co-regulation mechanisms
5. Inclusion of youth as stakeholders in tech policy
6. Move from content-based advocacy, responding to specific harms after they occur, to design-based advocacy
7. Transparency as the default
8. Transparency by states and companies for algorithms, content moderation, revenue, procure and development of technologies
9. Judicialization of accountability: independent oversight mechanisms
10. Mandatory human rights impact assessments for all tech companies and procurement of tech by governments
11. Democratised tech knowledge and information
12. Gradual divestment from surveillance and censorship tech by states
13. Implementation of labour standards for tech along all stages of the supply chain
14. Strict enforcement of climate and environmental standards across transnational supply chains of tech

IV. What's next?

“

“سب کا وقت آئے گا۔”
“Sab ka time ayae ga.”
“Everyone’s time will come.”

”

A group in Bangkok convening, April 2026

“

The master's tool will not dismantle the master's house
= divest from tools/systems/structures that are built
by and for oppressors.

”

A group in Bangkok convening, April 2026

1. Moving away from reactive work

Participants described how the futures-based methodology forced a shift away from the crisis mode that characterises digital rights work in the region. Many noted that while civil society is highly attuned to immediate harms, given the difficult circumstances they work under, this constant reactivity constrains imagination and long-term strategy. Participants valued the opportunity to think 20-30 years ahead, not merely as a prediction, but as a way of reclaiming agency in a moment defined by uncertainty, repression, and geopolitical instability.

During follow-up interviews, two participants reflected:

“Usually, our position is firefighting. This methodology forced me to think about the future even when things feel so bleak that the future feels impossible.”

“We are so used to responding to what just happened. Thinking 30 years ahead felt uncomfortable, but necessary.”

This feedback and experience underlines the urgent need for spaces to think along the long-term and resources for organisations, activists and coalitions to be able to do future-forward work on timelines that span beyond two to three years.

2. Fostering trust

Participants during the convening and in follow-up interviews noted that there is a fair bit of fatigue when it comes to coalitions. “Too many coalitions will take us in different directions, and very few have a concrete and larger plan for the future.” Participation in coalitions can dip in the aftermath of a convening if relationships are not robust. Given the tight space most civil society organisations are in, there is also a fair bit of competition among organisations, especially if relationships are fractured and weak.

Building collaborative and trusting relationships takes time, care, follow-through, and people-to-people contact, which includes informal contact as well as formal.

3. In between convenings

“

There are a number of platforms, DRAPAC, RightsCon, IGF, but event-to-event organising is limited in its scope. What about the ten months in between? What keeps us together?

”

A participant during a post-convening interview

Participants have emphasised the need for sustainable coalition work with regular check-ins and collaborations. While convenings are an important moment, the question of how this network sustains momentum during moments in between is the most important question. While convenings generate ideas, trust and excitement, the goodwill dissipates if there is no connective tissue or an ongoing relationship.

“

Funders want events, not bodies of work. So much gets lost in the in-between periods.

”

A participant during a post-convening interview

One participant suggested monthly meetings or meetings every two months. Another suggested a science fiction book club to sustain the speculative/futures methodology. A virtual book club could be a generative space for building community and ideas on the future of tech from a South Asian point of view. Additionally, monthly newsletters chronicling the work of participant organisations and key updates from each country could also be a good starting point, and can be made more participatory with convenors and compilers.

4. Funding grassroots work

While it may seem antithetical to regional work, many groups and participants expressed the desire to build a coalition from the ground up, to use the in-between periods between regional convenings to have local convenings with movements and communities often excluded from discussions of digital rights.

There was a genuine desire to find funding to support this work, to find partners and donors willing to fund the scaffolding (local, grassroots convenings) as well as the top (regional convening). This model of creating a truly participatory, inclusive and representative South Asian convening that is rooted at the local, national and regional level creates a vision of a group that works all year round, both independently and collaboratively, and moves towards building a movement for digital rights in South Asia rather than a series of one-off events. As noted earlier, participants emphasised repeatedly that while civil society shows so much courage in their contexts, donors must also step up to fund such work grounded in imagination, solidarity, and, even, failure.

5. Learning spaces

“

Governments learn from each other, which is why repression spreads regionally. Civil society doesn't learn fast enough.

”

A participant during a post-convening interview

The rich discussion during the convening points towards one certainty: that there are many discussions to be had on topics of regional solidarity, digital future and knowledge sharing. There is a lot more room for organisations to learn more about each other's work and their specific context. Participants expressed a near-universal desire for knowledge-sharing on a regular basis and through structured activities, such as joint research projects. Others expressed a desire for gatherings that do deep dives on specific issues for expert exchange.

recoding

DIGITAL FUTURES

2026

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