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Cover Photo: teenagers play 'Jump the string' in front of the Royal Palace on Sisowath Quay beside the Tonle Sap river. On weekend evenings the riverside is pedestrianised and attracts large numbers of weekend fun seekers. However the ongoing conflict with Thailand has this week struck a more sombre note (Rod Harbinson/ZUMA Press Wire 2025)

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Foreword

The Indo-Pacific region never fails to remind us how fragile geopolitical balances can be and how swiftly a country's internal dynamics can reshape the broader architecture of regional peace and security. Domestic politics and regional order are deeply entangled, each feeding back into the other in ways that are rarely linear and often difficult to anticipate. Elections shift strategic calculus. Surveillance laws silence the voices that might otherwise moderate conflict. And when disaster strikes, it is frequently the informal, the overlooked and the uncharted that hold communities together.

This eighth issue brings together four contributions which, each in their own way, interrogate the porous boundary between domestic politics and regional security.

Robert Sutton analyses how the Thai-Cambodian border tensions have been instrumentalised for electoral consolidation on both sides of the frontier. His piece is a timely reminder that territorial disputes are rarely only about territory: they are also about audiences, legitimacy and the short-term calculus of political survival; at the risk of making any negotiated de-escalation durably harder to achieve.

Esm'eralda Marion examines the implications for peace in East Asia of Sanae Takaichi's election victory and the strategic shift it embodies for Japan. At a moment when the regional security architecture is under considerable strain, her analysis invites us to take seriously the domestic ideological currents that will shape Tokyo's posture in the years ahead.

M. Torres Lorenzo documents with precision how law and digital surveillance are mobilised in Cambodia to push civil society into the shadows. This contribution is a careful and sobering account of how authoritarian consolidation proceeds not through sudden rupture, but through the patient, incremental narrowing of what is permissible.

Finally, Kalara Perera sheds light on the crucial, and often invisible, role of informal networks in disaster response, through the experience of post-Ditwah Sri Lanka. Her work is a compelling argument for looking beyond formal institutions when assessing resilience: it is in the margins, in the relationships that predate any crisis, that the capacity to recover is so often found.

The Use of Cross-Border Tensions and Nationalism in Thai and Cambodian Politics

Robert Sutton

Key Takeaways

- Nationalist sentiment and the military situation have been a boon to establishment politics in both nations, deflecting domestic criticism and rallying popular opinion around the state.
- An overtly pro-military stance was a key factor in the outcome of the recent elections in Thailand, and the new government represents a retrenchment of conservative interests under the banner of national unity and geopolitical strength.
- Public nationalist animosity towards opposing states, while beneficial to political leaders, is not simply a tool of ruling figures. It constrains both governments abilities to negotiate a durable peace without appearing weak, and public demands for action over even minor border incidents incentivise hardline and antagonistic behaviour in the disputed zone.

The long-running border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia erupted again in 2025, with two rounds of armed clashes in July and December. Although the fighting has been relatively and thankfully minimal, the heightened state of inter-state tensions and violence generated a surge of nationalist sentiment amongst the affected populaces and naturally has been a major facet of domestic politics.

In both countries, the conflict has enabled the further entrenchment of establishment politics through appeals to national security and solidarity, as well as the convenient deflection of domestic criticism.

The Military's Role in Thai Politics

The Royal Thai Armed Forces have long taken an active role in domestic politics, and alongside the Monarchy is one of the institutional pillars of Thai Conservatism.

Thai Armed Forces have also repeatedly interfered in Thailand's democratic process. For instance, the current constitution was promulgated by the 'National Peace and Order Council', the government established by the military during the 2014 coup, and established a series of controls upon Thailand's electoral process and outcomes.¹ These include an unelected Senate, "arduous" but "frivolous" restrictions on candidates, and the use of the Constitutional Court to forcibly dissolve parties.²

Pongkwan Sawasdipakdi, writing for the University of Melbourne's AsiaLink column, noted that the military has long presented itself in a "heroic" light, as the ultimate guardians of "the national interest."³ This enables them to claim a "moral authority" for their depictions of events and policies, as well as the use of force abroad. It also places de facto constraints on politicians' ability to resolve geopolitical issues without the approval of the armed forces or their legislative allies.⁴

The 2026 Thai Elections & Referendum

The 2026 General Election in Thailand took place on 8 February, alongside a referendum on a new constitution.

Anutin's position as caretaker Prime Minister was unsteady, dependent on a tenuous confidence agreement with the People's Party and by November, mired in a corruption scandal and criticism over the mishandling of floods in Hat Yai province.⁵ The second outbreak of violence along the border offered a perfect opportunity for Anutin to restore his image with voters, as well as to sidestep a looming vote-of-no-confidence by dissolving parliament on 11 December and giving the military a free hand.⁶

Going into the February 2026 elections, Anutin and the Bhumjaithai played heavily on nationalist and patriotic themes, presenting themselves as best suited to defend and enforce Thai sovereignty over the disputed zone.⁷ In January Anutin defended his hardline stance, arguing that "Those who speak against the wave of nationalism – are they even Thai?", and presented his policy *vis-à-vis* Cambodian "aggression" as both responsive to the wishes of Thai citizens and something which voters 'admired' about his government.⁸

During a 3 February campaign rally in Sisaket, notably one of the provinces bordering Cambodia, Anutin proclaimed that he and his party were "the only [potential] government that Cambodia feared", on account of their complete rejection of "negotiation, compromise, or returning land".⁹

This resonated well with the electorate, and the final result was a new governing coalition lead by the Bhumjaithai and a now much reduced Pheu Thai parties.¹⁰



Thailand's newly elected Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul attends a press conference at the Bhumjaithai party headquarters after a royal endorsement ceremony, in Bangkok, Thailand, March 20, 2026 (REUTERS/Chaline Thirasupa 2026)

Bhumjaithai's electoral success, rather than representing the reassertion of traditional Thai conservative parties, is instead the consolidation of the conservative and 'reformist' tendencies in the face of the emergent 'progressives'. The military-backed 'United Thai Nation' and 'Palang Pracharath' parties, have been unable to effectively capitalise on the groundwork laid by the 2014 coup, and became riven by internal bickering.¹¹ Both performed poorly in February's election, and Bhumjaithai has been able to effectively usurp their place in establishment politics.¹²

Anutin has successfully blended the Shiniwatra's style of populism with an explicit conservatism amenable to social and military elites.¹³ As the East Asia Forum noted, Bhumjaithai is an "electoral machine co-opted into cooperation with the existing power structure", and which capitalised in an "essentially opportunistic" manner on the surge in nationalist sentiment generated by the outbreak of the border conflict.¹⁴

Despite the resounding defeat for progressive camp, the corresponding referendum on whether or not to replace the "junta-backed 2017 Constitution" passed with a decisive 65% majority vote.¹⁵ The 2017 Constitution was unpopular even in 'establishment' circles, let

alone the 'reformist', and 'progressive' camps, with Bhumjaithai encouraging its voters to also vote "yes".¹⁶ Even successful, this referendum is only the first step, with additional votes required once a new draft constitution is drawn, a likely year's long process, and one undoubtedly subject to the vagaries of Thailand's coalition politics.

While the vote does indicate a clear dissatisfaction with the constitutional order put in place following the 2014 military coup, there is no clear mechanism by which the Armed Forces' influence over Thai politics can be excised. And with conservative elements now ascendant in the legislature, there is likewise no clear path for democratic reforms to eventuate from the drafting.

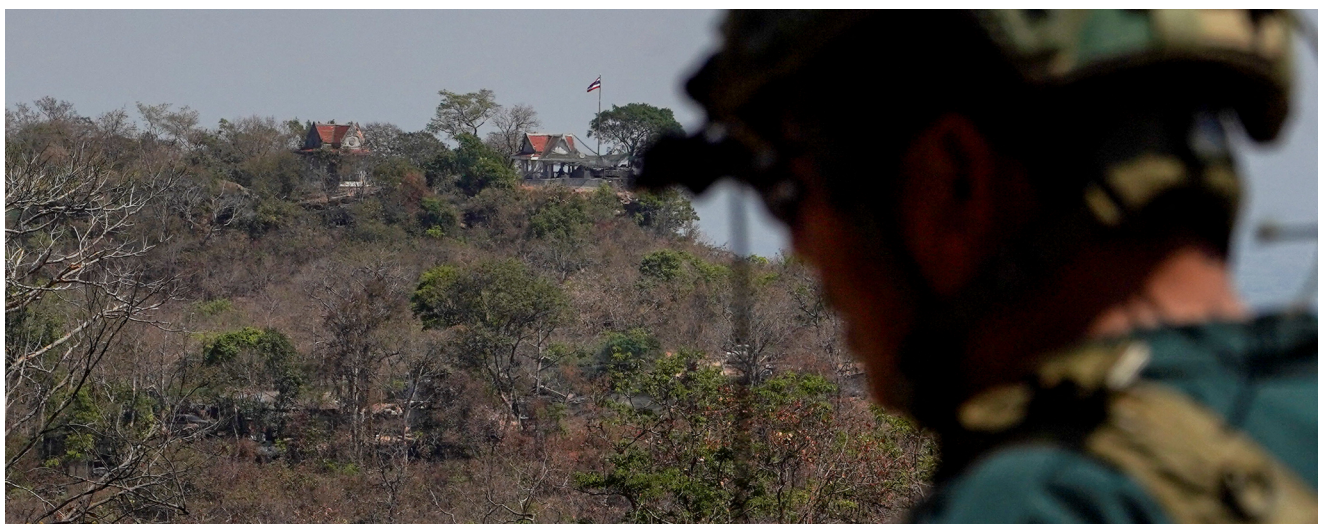
Post-Electoral Lawfare

In addition to the electoral defeat, the People's Party has been hit with further legal attacks, 44 of its members threatened with "lifetime bans from politics" for "breaching ethical standards" allegedly in connection to the party's efforts to reform royal insult laws.¹⁷ Furthermore, since 14 February, the party has been caught up in a scandal surrounding potentially inappropriate financial and ownership links to a media production company called Spectre C, and the use of that company for "illegal information operations".¹⁸ The apparent substance of the complaint filed with the Electoral Commission is that Spectre C has been engaged in shaping public opinion in the People's Party's favour beyond the media content they have been officially commissioned by the Party to produce. Combined with the involvement of former People's Party in the company, this could fall afoul of Thai constitutional laws on the ownership of media businesses by political parties.¹⁹ These accusations are of concern due to their facing a potential penalty of dissolution, the same fate visited upon the People's Party's precursors.

Cambodia

On the Cambodian side, the war has been utilised to reinforce existing patterns of social and political control. This includes the development of a revised citizenship policy which aims to enable the state to strip citizenship from dissidents on 'public unity' grounds.²⁰ Human Rights Watch has reported on how opposition political figures, activists and even mere social media influencers have been arrested for publicly criticising aspects of the war or even just failing to appear sufficiently patriotic.²¹

Although formally a democratic, constitutional monarchy, Cambodian politics are heavily controlled by a clique centred on the Hun family. The conflict facilitates an opportunity for this political elite to divert simmering public criticism and dissent through narratives of external aggression and Cambodia's "besieged" position.²²



A Thai national flag is seen at the Pha Mo E-Daeng area in Thailand's northeastern Sisaket province, as viewed from Preah Vihear temple in Preah Vihear province, Cambodia, following clashes between the two countries (REUTERS/Soveit Yarn 2026)

Conclusion

The surge in nationalist sentiment in Thailand linked to its border conflict with Cambodia has resulted in a staunchly conservative new government, one which shows little interest in substantive compromise with its southern neighbour. While the tentative ceasefire established 27 December remains in effect, tensions are high and alleged violations continue to occur.²³ These could easily lead to another round of military clashes especially if one or either side lacks any political incentive for diplomatic resolution.

For the Cambodian government, the political benefits of confrontation with Thailand may already be fading, as economic fragilities, hardly helped by the sudden onset of war in the Persian Gulf, begin to bite. Slowing GDP growth, displacements and damages to property and infrastructure incurred during the clashes are contributing to growing pressure against Cambodia's entrenched leadership.²⁴

As accusations over each other's conduct along the line of control continue to fly back and forth, the likelihood of renewed military engagement rises.²⁵ Neither government has a clear incentive to pursue peace, indeed almost the opposite, all the while international attention and multilateral engagement wanes, reducing outside constraints on their actions.

It is important not to take the role of senior politicians and military figures as a controlling one over public opinion, inventing groundswells of nationalist sentiment whole cloth for their own ends. The same figures can find themselves trapped by the court of public opinion, and run the risk of being thrown out of office if they chose pragmatism over more nationalist expectations. The opportunistic bent of Bhumjaithai could offer some hope that the 'nationalist wave' might be abandoned once seated at any negotiating table, but the new government will still have to deal with rivals and coalition members, who may well seek to displace Anutin as he did Paetongtarn Shinawatra after she appeared insufficiently patriotic.

Policy Recommendations

- The Thai government should commit to firmly protecting the freedoms of speech and of political activity of individuals and organisations which are unaligned with the military and royalist establishment.
- Cambodia and Thailand should seek an effective and durable disengagement of forces along their mutual border, and be cognisant of potential opportunist 'spoilers' within each other's governments who would prefer to reignite military clashes for their own gain.

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Sanae Takaichi Elected: Implications for Peace and Security in Japan and East Asia

Esm'eralda Marion

Key Takeaways

- Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's election triumph gives her solid parliamentary backing, enabling constitutional and defence amendments once subject to political restrictions.
- Takaichi's shift towards a more assertive defence approach could signify a turning point in Tokyo's post-war positioning, reshaping the scope of its pacifist doctrine.
- Japan's military buildup may be a security dilemma across the region, thereby triggering a weapons proliferation race and simultaneously heightening the risk of tension.

Japan elected its first female prime minister, witnessing the near disintegration of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) despite its postwar dominance.¹ On 4 October 2025, Sanae Takaichi secured the LDP leadership, inheriting a beleaguered party that had lost its dominance in both houses of Parliament. Following the abrupt dissolution of the 26 year LDP–Komeito coalition, a surge of political deal-making ensued, ending when Takaichi forged a new alliance with Osaka-centric Japan Innovation Party, Ishin no Kai. Takaichi was eventually elected Prime Minister on 21 October 2026.²

Under Takaichi, the party's rightward shift heightened division with voters gravitating towards alternative parties. In addition, with the absence of a strong opposition, the country was susceptible to political turmoil and a potential gap in democratic oversight.³ However, Takaichi set a new precedent by steering LDP to a resounding victory on 8 February 2026, after she opted to call for an early election just months after her historic rise to power. LDP won 316 out of 465 seats in the lower chamber of Parliament, granting the party a supermajority. This was equally a remarkable surge for LDP and its coalition partner, which accounted for 232 seats pre-election.⁴

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's resounding victory enables her party to dominate the Shūgiin (House of Representatives). With Takaichi's consolidation of political power, Japan has transitioned to a more aggressive stance through a more assertive security positioning.

Whereas boosting Tokyo's military capability wards off threats from Pyongyang and Beijing, this muscle-flexing diplomacy is likely to undermine regional balance and reshape alliances. Along with significantly anticipated policy reform, the security of the country and its citizens have not been overlooked.

In the wake of these changes, the relationship between security and foreign policy has gained considerable attention. This paper explores how Japan's current security posturing under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi will shape the peace and security in East Asia. Will Takaichi's leadership play a significant role in the stability of the region or exacerbate insecurity given the pre-existing tensions with Beijing?

Japan's Basic Law and Arms Export Regulations

According to Japan's pacifist constitution, in particular Chapter II, Article 9 on the Renunciation of War, the country renounces war and bars the maintenance of armed forces for purposes of resolving international disputes.⁵ Because of this, Japan's military has historically been restricted to self-defence responsibilities. However, Japan has subsequently broadened the interpretation of self-defence, approving international deployment of its troops within the framework of international peacekeeping missions, while largely refraining from armed interventions.⁶ By endorsing the modernisation of the military through the anticipated defence reforms, investment in cutting-edge defence technologies, and increased military spending, Takaichi is steering Tokyo towards a more normalised, proactive defence, military posture in the region.

Since the end of the second world war, Japan has not exported arms abroad owing to this self-imposed restriction. However, this is subject to change with Takaichi's notable shift in lifting the embargo on arms export. Whereas Japan's constitution does not particularly limit arms exports abroad, the Three Principles on Arms Exports, the basic policy designed to restrict the transfer of defence equipment and technology abroad, establishes a *de facto* ban on the exportation of military hardware.⁷ For Instance, arms exports to communist bloc countries, countries subject to the United Nations arms export embargo, and countries engaged in international conflicts, is strictly prohibited.⁸

Lifting the restrictions would pave way for Japan to enter the global arms race and deepen defence alliances. This signifies an approach aimed at nurturing the country's defence industry, a strategic framework that is likely to strengthen national security and accelerate economic growth by driving innovation.



Rafael Mariano Grossi, IAEA Director General met with HE Ms Takaichi Sanae Shugiin in Vienna, Austria (Dean Calma /IAEA via Flickr 2023)

Tokyo's Evolving Defence and Security Landscape

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's victory gives her political leverage to execute a rightward shift in Tokyo's security policies but also to bolster the country's military capabilities. The Prime Minister is also eyeing to elevate Japan's position in the international security landscape by balancing its commitments within an international, regional and its own domestic priorities.

Indeed, Takaichi seeks to increase surveillance efforts in collaboration with Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (U.S.). The alliance will translate in the establishment of an intelligence agency, while also advocating for the implementation of an extremely controversial anti-espionage law, that experts caution it is likely to infringe on Japanese civil liberties.⁹

By aligning Japan's security apparatus with that of its partners, establishing a modernised



Routine maritime transits through the Japanese archipelago should be part of any peaceful coexistence but could also become a casus belli between China and Japan should hostilities break out in the Taiwan Strait (Tokyo Review 2023)

national intelligence agency is paramount in ensuring cooperation with allies. While the anti-espionage law is set to bolster Japan's security, the new spy prevention legislation is a cause for great concern as it would limit fundamental rights.^{10 11 12}

Moreover, Takaichi is stepping up Japan's military and security budgets: defence spending would increase to 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) prior to the 2027 fiscal year, an increase that will match NATO standards. Increased spending is justified by geopolitical changes perceived to be potential threats to Japan, especially China's military expansion and operations being the key primary.^{13 14}

While Japan's shift into the ranks of leading global defence spenders has evolved over time, the transformation raises the issue as to whether the current buildup is a contravention of the pacifist constitution.¹⁵ Japan however argues that it is a peaceful state and the reinforcement is fundamental for a more self-sufficient military that can effectively deter China. This is in reference to Prime Minister Takaichi's comment, that any armed intervention by China against Taiwan could warrant armed retaliation by Japan.¹⁶ Japan's open declaration of its willingness to engage militarily in the event of Taiwan's invasion therefore paves the way for a joint defence scenario and further highlights its deviation from its long-standing peace-oriented policy.

Furthermore, Takaichi's November 2025 comments on the fact that a Chinese assault on Taiwan would be regarded as, "a survival-threatening situation" and "an existential threat."¹⁷ This resulted in diplomatic and economic retaliations from Beijing indicating the precarious consequences of her security revamp. Tensions with China intensified in early December 2025 amid Chinese carrier exercises near south-western Japan, Okinawa, when Chinese aircraft directed their radars at Japanese planes, a provocative move signalling readiness to fire missiles.¹⁸ Moreover, Washington is set to capitalise on Tokyo's defence reforms. For instance, increased resources will ensure the commissioning of a new air base in Japan's Mageshima Island.¹⁹ Nonetheless, having more air bases guarantees Tokyo's territorial coverage from the north to the south; strengthens strategic cooperation as is the case with the U.S.-Japan defence alliance; enhances national defence given the country's proximity to potential hotspots like the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait; as well as ensures the swift deployment of troops.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's election is a significant milestone in Japan's political landscape. She is keen on reshaping Japan's domestic and foreign policy as well as the defence and security industry.

While this move deters aggression, it is likely to exacerbate tensions in East Asia due to her alignment with the Washington-backed Indo-Pacific strategies, unwavering support for Taipei's security, and her tougher stance on Beijing. This may divide the region into polarised blocs thereby complicating ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three (ASEAN+3) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) regional blocs.

As Takaichi aims to reinforce Japan's intelligence capabilities to align with international security networks, the legal reforms are prone to consolidate state power and infringe on civil liberties. Furthermore, by lifting the ban on arms exports and shifting away from Japan's traditionally controlled military approach, the administration anticipates taking a more proactive role in both the regional and international security landscape.

Japan's shifting position in East Asia reflects how quickly geopolitical dynamics can change when internal politics converge with broader strategic objectives. Thus, will the shifts by Takaichi's administration cement her position in Japan's political landscape and elevate her public and international approval?

The future of East Asia's peace and security is therefore hinged on whether Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's assertiveness can be transformed into collaborative leadership that can act as a bridge-builder in the region or not.

Policy Recommendations

- To solidify Japan's regional and international position, Prime Minister Takaichi through the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs, should lead initiatives aimed at reducing regional tensions and facilitate reconciliation through multilateral diplomacy. These measures will reinforce national cohesion, enhance Tokyo's international reputation, and secure strategic partnerships.
- As Japan modernises its defence industry, the administration should prioritise international/regional cooperation, as well as economic and cultural partnership to ease tensions with Beijing and Pyongyang. By demonstrating Tokyo's dedication to peace and stability as opposed to military superiority, this will secure its regional credibility.
- Takaichi's administration should build new alliances with ASEAN member states, and European allies to diversify its security partners. Escalating geopolitical tensions signal the need for Tokyo to diversify its defence frameworks to balance the power dynamics in the region.
- Any attempt to amend Japan's post-war constitution, Article 9 included, requires public participation. The government through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, should incorporate open dialogue and public consensus to ensure legitimacy, accountability and bolster civic engagement. By doing so, the government will minimise domestic divisions and increase the country's democratic legitimacy.

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Underground by Design: How Lawfare and Digital Control Push Advocacy into the Shadows in Cambodia

M. Torres Lorenzo

Key Takeaways

- Cambodia's civic space is narrowing under Cambodian People's Party (CPP) dominance, with opposition dismantled, elections skewed, and power consolidated under the Hun family.
- Dissent is suppressed through lawfare and regulatory pressure, the expansion of digital surveillance powers, increasingly restrictive controls over non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the media, and the threat of statelessness.
- Incitement charges are applied broadly and now extend to social media content and reports of matters of public interest.
- Human rights lawyers portray themselves as politically neutral practitioners to evade persecution, while discreetly pursuing available remedies for their clients.
- United Nations human rights mechanisms have documented the regression in civic space, yet Cambodia has largely deflected reform calls through the invocation of judicial independence and extensive claims of necessity in the name of public order and security.

Fifty-one years after the oppressive and violent regime of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia faces a steady decline of its already restrictive civic and democratic space. In January 2026, the government of Cambodia finalised the implementation of the sub-decree¹ that allows the revocation of citizenship on the grounds of: 1) Treason or collusion with foreign countries; 2) Acts against national sovereignty, territorial integrity, or security; 3) Service in a foreign military or public office and refusal to resign despite government orders; and 4) Conviction of crimes such as *lèse-majesté* (insulting the King), threatening State security, or terrorism.² A criminal conviction of these offences is not an essential requisite in the revocation of citizenship, instead, an investigation and recommendation of a State-controlled committee would be the basis of the said revocation. There will be no judicial review nor the right to file an appeal.³ This development is consistent with the broader pattern in which the Cambodian authorities manage dissent, through politically motivated criminal prosecution, administrative control of civil society and the press, digital surveillance, and now, the threat of statelessness.

The regression of the civic and democratic space in Cambodia is attributed to its political climate. The Cambodian People's Party has governed the country for almost four decades and the court-ordered dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party in 2017 effectively eliminated the opposition bloc. Its successor, the Candlelight Party, was declined registration due to the failure to provide the original copy of its registration, an administrative and formal requirement that had not been previously enforced nor mandated by law. The 23 July 2023 elections for the National Assembly, senatorial slates, and local government were heavily skewed in favour of the ruling

party, garnering an overwhelming majority of the electoral seats. After serving as prime minister for 32 years, Hun Sen now holds the posts of Senate President and CPP President, while his son, Hun Manet, has been prime minister since 2023.

Judicialised Lawfare and Administrative Control of Civic Space

Article 31 of the Constitution⁴ expressly affirms that the human rights stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and in relevant covenants and conventions shall be respected. This incorporation clause in the Constitution results in the adoption of international human rights norms as part of the domestic law without need for further legislative action in the enforcement of these rights. In terms of freedom of expression, Article 19 of the UDHR⁵ grants the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information through any media. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),⁶ which was ratified by Cambodia in 1992, further qualifies the freedom of expression as the freedom to express opinions orally, in writing, or in print. Complementing these international guarantees, Article 41 of the Constitution provides for the freedom of expression, press, publication and assembly. In terms of the right to privacy, Article 40 guarantees the privacy of residence and the secrecy of correspondence by mail, telegram, fax, telex and telephone. It also provides for the due process in the search of the house, material, and body, while Article 12 of the UDHR protects against arbitrary interference in the privacy, family, home, and correspondence as well as attacks on honour and reputation. Article 17 of the ICCPR guarantees the same protection and extends it to unauthorised surveillance, interception of communications, and illegal searches on the person and property.

Despite these Constitutionally guaranteed rights, the government is using various domestic legislation as a subterfuge to further suppress political opposition and dissent. The Criminal Code, specifically applying broad and arbitrary interpretations on the provisions on incitement under sections 494 to 496, plotting under section 453, and *lèse-majesté* (insulting the King) under section 437, are used as a basis to imprison opposition members, human rights defenders, journalists, and more recently, social media users, thus preventing them from exercising their right to freedom of expression. The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights (LICADHO), a NGO that monitors, documents, and investigates violations of civil, political, economic, and social rights, reports that 82 documented arrests on grounds related to freedom of expression were recorded in 2025 alone.^{7 8}

Regulatory frameworks on digital control and surveillance regulations also reflect increasing draconian interpretation, thus threatening digital rights and freedoms.



Opposition leader Sam Rainsy leads supporters to submit petitions to Western embassies calling for an independent investigation into alleged election irregularities, Phnom Penh (Heng Reaksmeay/VOA Khmer via Wikimedia Commons 2013)

The Telecommunications Law of 2015⁹ marked a decided shift toward a state-controlled digital space through the grant to any “legitimate authority” the right to intercept and record private speech across all forms of telecommunications systems without the need for a judicial warrant or authorisation. The law also mandates telecommunications service operators to share data to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications upon request, ensuring unfettered access to the government, in direct violation of the right to privacy under Article 40 of the Constitution. Furthermore, the Sub-decree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway of 2021¹⁰ provides for a single State-controlled gateway that allows monitoring and control of online content under the guise of preserving national safety, protecting social order, and digital transformation. The broad drafting and sweeping powers granted under these regulations raise concerns that they may infringe Constitutionally protected speech and conduct under Article 41,¹¹ ultimately contributing to self-censorship.

The governing framework for grassroots advocacy organisations is not insulated from State control either. The Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations¹² requires all NGOs to be politically neutral, which runs counter to the very essence of human rights advocacy. It effectively hinders human rights work as advocating for the protection and preservation of rights is construed as critical of government policy or biased. The framework also compels civil society actors to submit reportorial documents of their activities, including a list of participants, project documents, financial reports, and funding sources. It also provides the mandatory registration of all NGOs with the Ministry of Interior, which has broad discretion in rejecting registrations and suspending or dissolving NGOs without any avenue for an appeal or any judicial or non-judicial remedy.

The Charter for Professional Journalism,^{13 14} promulgated in 2024 without stakeholder consultation, requires journalists, publishers, media outlets, and private individuals like content creators and social media personalities to register with the Ministry of Information in performance of its oversight functions. The Charter also prohibits publishing any content that is deemed harmful to peace, security, and public order which includes sensitive topics



The Cambodia Daily ends its 24years of operations after the Hun Sen government demanded USD 6.3M in back taxes without due process (Prachatai via Flickr 2017)

such as corruption. On 2 December 2025, the ministry issued new requirements that further restricts free press. Applicants for a press card are required to present a letter of good conduct stating that no lawsuits or complaints have been filed against them.¹⁵ In practice, journalists who report on sensitive or critical issues are frequently targeted with incitement charges. This creates a chilling effect on independent reporting as media actors are effectively placed under government approval and control and the incitement charges they face prevent them from obtaining the newly required press card.

When Advocacy becomes a Crime

On 2 March 2026, the Supreme Court upheld the conviction and ruled¹⁶ against the release of five Mother Nature environmental activists, namely Ly Chandaravuth, Phun Keoreaksmeay, Long Kunthea, Thon Ratha, and Yim Leanghy, charged with incitement, plotting, and insulting the King. The case stems from their various environmental advocacy work. Kunthea, Keoreaksmeay, and Ratha were arrested in 2020 over the organised protest of the reclamation of the Boeung Tamok lake.¹⁷ Chandaravuth and Leanghy were arrested for documenting sewage discharge in the Tonle Sap River in 2021.¹⁸ The charges for insulting the King stemmed from a Facebook post of a Zoom meeting held in 2021 were alleged “disrespectful language” of specifically referring to the King as a victim was uttered.¹⁹ Mean Lisa, project coordinator for Mother Nature Cambodia, expressed the organisation’s intent on continuing local and international campaigns for the release of the detained activists. Previously, the case garnered the attention of the international community for receiving the Frontline Defenders Award in 2021²⁰ and the Right Livelihood Award.²¹ Right Livelihood also raised the case at the 57th session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council through an advocacy statement.²² Due to the judicialised lawfare often perpetrated against activists, Mother Nature Cambodia is operating under strict security procedures preserving anonymity and is unable to accept volunteers within the country.

On 13 February 2026, journalist Luot Sophal was arrested in Oddar Meanchey due to his Facebook posts addressing the water shortage directly affecting Cambodian soldiers. Sophal indicated that only one bottle of water was provided every two days. He is charged with incitement to commit a felony and undermining the military morale. In response to his arrest, the Ministry of Information asserted that the press card of Sophal expired last year, that there is no request for renewal on file, and thus he is in violation of the law. During custodial detention, Sophal was ordered to post a video recanting the information he posted in the video subject of his arrest.²³ The LICADHO provincial coordinator in Oddar Meanchey is reportedly monitoring the case of Sophal and has offered legal aid.²⁴ The organisation is also in contact with the Committee to Protect Journalists²⁵ who has called for the release of Sophal, further amplifying the case to the international community.

On 3 February 2026, journalist Hem Vanna was arrested and charged with incitement and interception or recording of private conversations. The case arose from a Facebook video posted by Vanna portraying violence committed against Chinese nationals in a compound allegedly hosting a scam centre. The compound was located several metres from military police premises which therefore highlighted the failure of the police in their public duty. The arrest was condemned by Reporters Without Borders, citing that the reporting of public interest cases is not a prosecutable offence.²⁶ Human Rights groups Cambodia Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) and LICADHO also submitted a joint intervention letter to the court which was endorsed by various journalist associations across the Southeast Asian region.²⁷

These cases reflect how civil society organisations have responded to the political climate in Cambodia, by monitoring proceedings, mobilising legal aid, documenting due process concerns, and internationalising the cases through coordinated human rights advocacy networks. Within the legal profession in the country, “closeted” cause lawyering has become a legitimate legal strategy adopted by human rights lawyers to avoid disbarment, disciplinary proceedings, harassment, surveillance, or imprisonment. Succinctly, lawyers prevent outwardly presenting themselves as human rights lawyers while exhausting all remedies available on behalf of their client. They present themselves as politically neutral professionals who merely put emphasis on the rule of law, evidence, procedure, and legal reasoning. Professionalism is thus used as a shield from political persecution. This also created a community of like-minded legal professionals where legal defence, free legal assistance, and information sharing become available to fellow lawyers who are prosecuted. This phenomenon reflects how the legal profession is shaped amidst fear, corruption, and authoritarian control, that survival in a repressive system necessitates that resistance need not be loud and visible.²⁸



A small gathering of protesters and civil society representatives turned out in support of the five who have become symbols for freedom in Cambodia (Sok Serey/ZUMA Press Wire via REUTERS 2025)

International Mechanisms and Responses

On 23 July 2025, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia presented its fifth report²⁹ at the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Council, noting that a total of 17 entities submitted their input with regard to the situation on natural resources and human rights in the country. It reiterated that while progress was made on some Sustainable Development Goals, namely, clean water and sanitation and marine resources, a sharp regression on decent work and peace, justice, and strong institutions were observed. The report also emphasised that the State noted without acceptance the recommendations stemming from the recent universal periodic review³⁰ with regard to the civic and democratic space, electoral pluralism, and prosecution of political opposition. Annexed to the report is a non-exhaustive table of cases reflecting the detention and arrest of human rights defenders, political opponents, social commentators and journalists. Incitement, insulting the King, treason, and plotting are the most common grounds of the complaints. The case outcomes range from pre-trial detention to multi-year prison sentences, though some proceedings have ended in release after the defendants, while in custody and thus presumably under duress, recanted their statements and issued public apologies.

In response³¹ to the interventions and recommendations of the universal periodic review, Cambodia rejects the implementation of some of the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur in its 2023 report, without specifying such recommendations, asserting in broad terms that it violates the Constitutional independence of the Cambodian judiciary. These recommendations³² include the release of detained human rights defenders and political dissidents and the reform or repeal of draconian laws and practices. Cambodia also reiterated that the judiciary remains independent and that the rule of law remains to be upheld and that politicians, activists, and unionists cannot use their status to claim privileges and immunity for their alleged crimes, especially in cases where prosecution is necessary to safeguard peace and stability. Cambodia also acknowledged the revocation of the licenses of several media outlets and maintains the validity of these revocations grounded upon violations of regulations and licensing requirements. Finally, it asserted that the Criminal Code does not restrict the exercise of the freedoms of expression and assembly, while emphasising that these rights may be limited to protect the rights of others, good customs, public order, and national security.

The European Parliament³³ also condemned the shrinking space for civil society in Cambodia, specifically calling on the dismissal of politically motivated campaigns against civil society actors Centre for Alliance of Labour and Human Rights (CENTRAL), Equitable Cambodia, and Mother Nature and urging the amendment of the Law on Associations and NGOs. It further called on the Commission and its Member States to assess the tariff

preferences under the Everything but Arms³⁴ scheme conditioned on the substantial improvement in human rights and labour rights in the country. Finally, it called for the European External Action Service to increase support to persecuted civil society representatives and opposition members.

Conclusion

The narrowing democratic space of Cambodia reflects a sustained erosion of electoral integrity, suppression of political dissidents, and the instrumentalisation of legislative measures to achieve political ends. Under the threat of criminal prosecution and unfettered digital surveillance policies, advocacy work shifts from public demonstrations to discreet networks, vigilant documentation and monitoring, and international pressure. It is worthy to note that while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have an Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and an ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, both adhere strictly to the principles of non-interference and national sovereignty. As a result, international accountability over violations of international human rights rests primarily with UN human rights mechanisms.

Recent cases reflect that most civil society organisations are limited in amplifying the monitoring of legal proceedings and documentation of due process concerns, doing so without a visible figurehead and acting as a collective, due to the political persecution of human rights, environment, and labour advocates who share their sentiments in their personal capacity. Legal professionals are forced to appear politically neutral, even avoiding specific terms such as “human rights” and “democracy” and the active avoidance of citing international law in their legal arguments. Cambodia’s current trajectory also underscores the limited capacity of international scrutiny to translate into meaningful reforms in domestic policy and practice, leaving civil society actors to operate covertly against the shifting boundaries of permissible dissent.

Policy Recommendations

- The Royal Government of Cambodia must realign domestic policies and enforcement practices with international human rights standards, particularly the ICCPR which was ratified in 1992³⁴ dated 10 July 2007. The realignment must not be limited to mere textual alignment in domestic law and performative treaty commitments, but should be operationalised through proper reforms, judicial safeguards, and transparency measures.
- The Ministry of Information should establish an independent ethics and audit committee for the press in place of a government-controlled committee that further constrains Constitutionally protected freedoms.
- The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Interior must clearly and specifically define acts and offences that disturb peace, public order, and national security to prevent arbitrary or overbroad application, thus ensuring that enforcement remains lawful and proportionate.
- In drafting new legislation, the sponsoring ministry or executive agency must ensure timely, meaningful, and sufficient consultation with all relevant stakeholders in the drafting and adoption of laws, enacting and authoring laws, especially those that directly regulate their rights, work, or civic participation.

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Informal Social Networks During Disaster Governance of Cyclone Ditwah in Sri Lanka

Kalara Perera

Key Takeaways

- Cyclone Ditwah struck Sri Lanka on 26 November 2025, making landfall on the eastern coast on 28 November before moving northwards towards southern India. The cyclone triggered severe flooding and landslides across the island, marking one of Sri Lanka's worst natural disasters in nearly two decades.
- It resulted in the death of 680 people, 154 reported missing (as of 10 March 2026),¹ widespread destruction of homes, infrastructure, and public services, with over 100,000 houses damaged or destroyed, and major disruptions to roads, irrigation systems, electricity, and essential services across affected regions.²
- The scale of destruction raised critical questions about Sri Lanka's disaster governance, including issues of disaster preparedness, coordination among state institutions, dissemination of information and the effectiveness of relief distribution mechanisms in the aftermath of the cyclone.³

Natural disasters often expose and highlight strengths and weaknesses in governance systems, specifically in countries that are facing economic and institutional constraints. In Sri Lanka, the disaster response governance system is largely formal, with state institutions such as the Disaster Management Centre being at the forefront and other local government authorities coordinating relief efforts.⁴ However, experiences from many disasters showcase that while formal disaster governance systems play a primary role, communities mobilise through informal social networks such as family ties, neighbourhood groups, religious institutions and local and community associations to support the immediate shocks. Such networks are able to rapidly mobilise resources, share information and play a crucial role if formal responses are delayed, uneven or limited.⁵ Despite the crucial role played by informal networks in such situations, their role is sidelined and under-examined in discussions on post disaster governance in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this article examines how informal, community-based support systems complemented or contradicted and at times compensated for the formal disaster response post Ditwah.

The Impact of Cyclone Ditwah

The cyclone had a devastating impact on the country, with approximately 2.2 million people affected across the 25 districts of Sri Lanka.⁶ Colombo district has reported the highest number of affected individuals (329,600) followed by Puttalam (287,364).⁷ However, in terms of severity, districts in the Central Province have borne the brunt of actual displacement. From the 239,493 people forced from their homes, districts in Central province, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya host the largest share, followed by districts in Sabaragmuwa and Uva province, Kegalle and Badulla.⁸ The World Bank notes that the hardest hit districts such as Badulla, Kegalle and Puttalam were already identified

as comparatively poorer districts with many economically vulnerable communities including the plantation community being most affected.⁹ Many of the displaced persons have sought refuge at their relatives' homes and others in government-run shelters, community centers, schools and religious sites.¹⁰ These shelters are reported to be overcrowded, with limited access to clean water and hygiene facilities and such places also lack privacy, making it difficult for women and girls.¹¹ With the destruction of roads, irrigation systems and acres of cropland, the agriculture sector has been severely impacted. The long-term impact of the cyclone is yet to be determined.



Niluka Yaparathne, 48, along with her husband Pattini Gedara Nihal, 51, sit next to each other at a relative's house where they took refuge after their house was damaged by a landslide following Cyclone Ditwah, in Galewela (Thilina Kaluthotage/TPX Images of the day via REUTERS 2025)

Formal Disaster Governance of Sri Lanka

The disaster governance structure of Sri Lanka is highly centralised, with the central government being the main authority and state agencies carrying out different functions during the disaster cycle.¹² The National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM) is the central decision-making body, chaired by the President.¹³ The Disaster Management Centre is the central hub, coordinating tasks with other relevant authorities. District disaster management units across districts work with public administration systems, specifically through district secretaries.¹⁴ The tri-forces are mandated to provide immediate search and rescue and logistics when directed by the district secretariat.

The emergency measures expected of local authorities pre- and post- disasters include evacuation efforts, temporary shelter provision and distribution of relief supplies such as food, water, and medical assistance.¹⁵ Following Ditwah, delays in and even unequal distribution of resources were reported, as well as coordination challenges, due to network issues and destroyed road networks. Further, considering the centralised nature of the disaster management structure, the dissemination of information from the centralised authority to district and divisional authorities and to the community level was delayed, raising questions about the effectiveness of Sri Lanka's post-disaster governance mechanisms. The existence of such gaps created conditions in which community-based and informal social networks became critical actors in immediate response and recovery efforts.

The Role of Informal Social Networks During Ditwah

Along with the formal state apparatus, Informal Disaster Governance (IDG) emerges as a parallel "shadow" system. This system is anchored in informal social networks. These networks consist of unofficial, non-institutional ties between individuals that could stem from personal relations; or in working and voluntary environments.¹⁶ These relations will occur outside the context of formal organisations.

When a disaster like a cyclone occurs, these networks pivot from simple socialising to performing Disaster Risk Reduction and Response (DRR/R) functions, often improvising new roles to supply aid when formal institutions' delays or gaps in providing support occur.¹⁷ Such networks may transcend from mere volunteerism to become a functional system of informal governance¹⁸ operating parallel to the state apparatus. This is clearly evidenced in Japan, where community-based associations provide essential social services and emergency coordination that operate parallel to the municipal systems.

The mobilisation of persons may also go beyond existing informal social networks and evolve to involve broader groups of people, unknown to each other but driven by a similar goal, to support those affected by a disaster, forming an informal system. A prime example of this is the "Wall of Unknown Humans" initiative, where a network of ordinary citizens functioning entirely outside formal state organisations dispatched over 20,000 meal packets within days of the landfall.¹⁹ Local restaurants and domestic kitchens were also used as logistics hubs, providing food to victims across the island.²⁰



People affected by floods collect their belongings from the railway tracks after drying them following Cyclone Ditwah, in Kandy (Thilina Kaluthotage/TPX Images of the day via REUTERS 2025)

In many areas, people, religious institutions, and volunteer groups have been able to mobilise resources and set up community kitchens that are independent of the state's relief operations. These community kitchens were sustained through donations and supplies that were available in the community.²¹ In addition to providing support in making food, community kitchens were also important in providing coordination and information platforms where people could access updated information and connect with other people in the same situation. Most importantly, community kitchens were important in providing support to people who were unable to access support due to destroyed infrastructure.

One significant development was how digital coordination tools were created and used during the relief efforts. Social media was a main tool for information dissemination²² and communication in informal networks and with the broader public. Those affected reported using it to request support, usually when other formal mechanisms failed.²³ This led to the creation of crowd-sourcing platforms such as FloodSupport.org to coordinate aid and rescue efforts in flooded areas.²⁴ These tools helped bridge information gaps, especially when it came to delivering relief services.

At the same time, youth groups, civil society and religious networks were also involved in collecting and delivering essential items such as dry rations and clothes. These activities were largely dependent on donations and volunteers.²⁵ There were instances wherein local actors were also involved in facilitating transport to deliver aid to affected communities using personal vehicles or boats. These activities showed that local knowledge and trust-based coordination, as well as flexibility through informal networks, helped respond quickly to emergencies, a difficult task to achieve through formal networks.

The destruction of roads and other infrastructure resulted in some areas being entirely cut off from the rest of the country. Locals also mobilised and supported state authorities that were attempting to re-establish connectivity. For example, more than 800 community members from Matara, Southern Sri Lanka arrived in Badulla, upcountry, with machinery and construction materials to help with the reconstruction efforts.²⁶ In areas that were highly flooded, boats were the only means of reaching people affected. While the Sri Lankan Tri-forces supported the rescue and relief efforts, community volunteers also supported such efforts using inflatable but also fishing boats.²⁷

Issues With Informal Networks in Disaster Response

However, while informal initiatives have an important role to play in disaster governance, since such initiatives often operate independently, this can lead to fragmented responses and situations of duplication of efforts. For example, multiple actors reportedly sent aid to the same area while others were neglected. In other specific areas, food relief was distributed in abundance, leading to food being wasted.²⁸

Since support tends to flow through existing social connections, communities that have stronger networks may receive more assistance, while marginalised or isolated groups may be excluded. Further, without structured engagement with the state, informal efforts may remain isolated, reducing overall efficiency of the disaster response.²⁹

Conclusion

The disaster governance system in Sri Lanka operates through both formal state institutions and also through informal, community-based systems that play a critical role in immediate response and recovery. Informal mechanisms such as community kitchens, volunteer networks and digital coordination platforms have the capacity to mobilise rapidly, reach vulnerable populations, and adapt to local needs, often filling gaps left by formal governance structures.

However, the coexistence of formal and informal mechanisms tends to reveal challenges related to coordination, duplication of efforts and uneven distribution of resources, particularly in large-scale disaster contexts.

Policy Recommendations

- Both formal state mechanisms and informal networks should be recognised as complementary components of disaster governance through institutional integration, creating space for structured channels for collaboration
- The government should develop mechanisms such as resource and data sharing platforms to engage, support, and integrate informal governance systems into disaster preparedness and response frameworks.
- The Disaster Management Centre should establish centralised but accessible systems that can incorporate community-generated data and reduce duplication of relief efforts.
- The Disaster Management Centre should provide technical support, while the District Secretariat should transparently provide financial and logistical support to grassroots initiatives (e.g., community kitchens, volunteer groups) to enhance their sustainability and reach.

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