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Press Release: Singaporean and Indonesian authorities crack down on civil society--Credibility of WB-IMF Annual Meetings threatened

While “good governance” tops the agenda of the World Bank and IMF’s upcoming Annual Meetings in Singapore, authorities in Singapore and in neighboring Indonesia are attempting to silence civil society. Indonesian police officials have revoked permission to hold the International People’s Forum (IPF), a major civil society conference planned to coincide with the Meetings. In addition, the government of Singapore has reportedly “blacklisted” 20 civil society representatives, who will be denied entry into the country despite having accreditation from the Bank and Fund to participate in the Meetings.

For months, civil society organizers have been planning the IPF and had discussed the event with local and national authorities. Over 1000 participants were expected to attend from more than 40 countries around the world. The conference was to take place in Batam, a special economic zone which is a ferry ride away from Singapore.

“The IPF would have been a space to discuss policies promoted by the World Bank and IMF and promote alternative models of people-centered development,” said Sameer Dossani, Executive Director of the 50 Years is Enough Network.

In recent years, the Bank-Fund Annual Meetings have been a place for public debate around the operations of the Bretton Woods Institutions. Singapore was a controversial choice for the Meetings, given its autocratic style of governance. Earlier this year, the Minister of Home Affairs threatened that protestors could face caning and imprisonment. The latest events highlight the need to protect public participation and raise questions about the sincerity of the Bank’s commitment to guaranteeing that civil society has a voice in development debates.

“The crackdown on civil society highlights the irony of the Bank’s choice to hold its meetings in a place as repressive as Singapore while claiming to be a champion of good governance,” said Manish Bapna, Executive Director of Bank Information Center. “As authorities are denying public rights to freedom of speech and assembly, the Bank is commending Singapore as the world’s most business-friendly country.”

Shalmali Guttal of Focus on the Global South added, "It is surprising that Indonesia, which was one of the worst hit countries during the Asian financial crisis, would be intolerant of public debates on alternative development and finance policies. In recent years Indonesia has made great strides towards popular democracy. We would hope that the government would continue this trend and appreciate the importance of freedom of expression and assembly."

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