

## 6<sup>TH</sup> LAWASIA HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE 2026

11 – 12 May 2026  
Chatrium Riverside, Bangkok

### WELCOME REMARKS

by

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*‘Human Rights under Threat – Meeting the Challenges from Repression, Climate Change, Artificial Intelligence, and the Decline of the Rule of Law’*

1. Good morning everyone and *Sawadee kap*.<sup>1</sup>
2. I am delighted to welcome all of you to the 6<sup>th</sup> LAWASIA Human Rights Conference 2026 held in the City of Angels. With over 160 delegates from across 28 jurisdictions attending the Conference, it is a testament that LAWASIA continues to be well placed to be the platform to provide the forum for robust and insightful discussions in areas of Human Rights and Rule of Law in the Asia Pacific region and beyond and that these twin topics remain a subject close to people’s hearts.
3. The theme of the Conference, *Human Rights under Threat – Meeting the Challenges from Repression, Climate Change, Artificial Intelligence, and the Decline of the Rule of Law’* is apt and timely. It is reflective of the scale and direction of current global developments. What is immediately apparent is the asymmetry between the scale of the problems and the capacity of traditional remedies to address them.

### Repression

4. Across the world today, we are witnessing an increasingly visible and well-documented instances of repression. In Afghanistan, for instance, Amnesty International’s 2025 reporting points to suppression of protests, criminalisation of dissent, enforced disappearances and systemic gender-based discrimination and violence. In Myanmar, the military regime continues to inflict widespread suffering, with ongoing crimes against humanity, war crimes, enforced

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<sup>1</sup> A Thai greeting which means, “hello.”

disappearances, and the sustained destruction of civilian life.<sup>2 3</sup> Much attention has been drawn to the unlawful attacks by the US<sup>4</sup> and human rights violations in Iran, including restrictions on free speech and protests, arbitrary detention, discrimination against women and minorities, and extensive use of capital punishment.

### Climate change

5. Climate change is another looming concern. In 2025, more than 90 per cent of Tuvaluans applied for a visa scheme to obtain residency or citizenship in Australia, signalling a growing reality of climate-driven displacement. Even earlier, in 2022, the Government of Tuvalu announced the creation of a “digital nation” in Metaverse, an extraordinary step aimed at preserving statehood, identity, and culture in the face of the possible physical loss of its territory.<sup>5</sup>
6. As sea levels rise, small island developing states like Tuvalu are being forced into unprecedented questions: how to preserve not just land, but continuity, of community, culture, and their identity itself.

### Artificial intelligence

7. Artificial intelligence shifts gears to challenge the scale and nature of harm. It is often no longer clear, immediate, or attributable in the way traditional rights frameworks assume. Instead, harm becomes dispersed through its iterations, frequencies, produced through systems, models, datasets, and decision chains that are difficult to reconstruct or contest. The reality of opaque models, proprietary systems, and rapidly evolving deployment makes transparency difficult to secure.
8. The result is a form of harm that is cumulative and bringing a ‘new’ normal to the digital spaces and physical spaces that we inhabit. One concerning instance of how seamlessly violent artificial intelligence can be is how Twitter or X’s AI assistant, Grok, began generating deepfakes of people who had uploaded their pictures on

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, Global Analysis 2025 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/annual-report-global-analysis/>

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, Asia and The Pacific Regional Overview <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/report-asia-and-the-pacific/>

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International Report on ‘Trapped Between Unlawful Attacks by the USA/Israel and Internal Deadly Repression: People in Iran Face Dual Atrocity Risks’ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/trapped-between-unlawful-attacks-by-the-usa-israel-and-internal-deadly-repression-people-in-iran-face-dual-atrocity-risks/>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Story on ‘Earth Day: The battle to save a drowning Pacific island nation’ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/04/1167353>

the platform, at the behest of users without any protective measures to override this, until it required human intervention. The scale and ease with which this occurred was particularly alarming.<sup>6 7</sup>

9. The crises we face today are no longer contained or constrained by borders. From the rise of AI to the displacement of millions by a changing climate, our challenges are large-scale, dispersed, and transnational. How do we address problems that outpace our current legal structures? The answer is not found in the work of a single person or a single jurisdiction. It requires us to work in tandem, cross-regionally and cross-sectorally, to build sustainable, just institutions as recognised in Sustainable Development Goal 16.
10. It is time to accept that our most pressing challenges, war, large scale displacement, and global technology, are inherently transnational in nature and our focus should be on disentangling the legal conundrum brought on by this. They require a proactive gathering of minds to establish methods of cooperation that are both bureaucratic, legal, and grassroots.

### Decline of the Rule of Law

11. Human rights underpin the rule of law. The rule of law ensures that public power is not exercised arbitrarily, safeguarding individuals against the abuse of power. It ensures that core human rights such as equality before the law, freedom of expression, and fair trials are protected. Yet, global rule of law is experiencing an accelerating recession, with 68% of countries experiencing a decline from 2024 to 2025 alone, according to the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2025.<sup>8</sup>
12. In this space are the stakeholders, the lawyers (and the important role they play), the courts and the institutions. As human rights defenders (and there are many in this room), lawyers act to protect the vulnerable from exploitation and ensuring equal treatment. However, there are instances when lawyers have come under attack in carrying out their work and it is the lawyer who needs protection. The conference explores this in one of the sessions.

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<sup>6</sup> Teo, S. Artificial intelligence and its 'slow violence' to human rights. *AI Ethics* 5, 2265–2280 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-024-00547-x> <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43681-024-00547-x>

<sup>7</sup> BBC Article on 'Malaysia and Indonesia block Musk's Grok over explicit deepfakes' <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg7y10xm4x2o>

<sup>8</sup> World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2025

## Acknowledgements

13. I express my gratitude to everyone who has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to bring this Conference to you and extend my sincere appreciation to Matthew Baird and his team at the Asia Research Institute for Environmental Law, and to Sor Rattanamane Polkla and her team at the Community Resource Centre Foundation, together with the LAWASIA Secretariat for all their exceptional work in organising the conference and designing an enriching programme.<sup>9</sup>
14. I would also like to recognise the LAWASIA Human Rights Committee, the Environmental Law Committee, and the Indigenous Communities and Peoples Committee for taking the initiative to hold this joint conference.
15. Last but certainly not the least, my special thanks to the conference sponsors, Centre for ESG Law and Practice at the College of Law, LexisNexis and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for their generous support towards the success of the conference.

## Conclusion

16. I hope that, beyond the sessions which will be engaging, interactive, forward-thinking and multi-perspective, the conference also encourages all of us to reflect on the larger questions that sit behind these discussions and what we can do about it together.
17. I also hope each and every one of you can take full advantage of everything else this gathering has to offer, in the LAWASIA spirit - meeting new friends, renewing old friendships, sharing good conversations, enjoying excellent Thai food, and of course, taking in the beauty of Bangkok along the way.
18. Thank you.

Yap Teong Liang  
President LAWASIA

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.lawasiahumanrights.com/programs-1>