Indigenous Peoples' Movements: The Struggle for Sovereignty and Democratic Transformation in Asia

Secretary General's Address to the Ninth General Assembly of AIPP

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Dear esteemed delegates, partners, and friends,

Warm greetings to each of you!

This Ninth General Assembly is a moment of reflection and recommitment.

I begin by honouring the visionaries who built AIPP through their sacrifices and foresight. This reflection is not merely a report; it is a tribute to the journey of AIPP, grounded in the founding principles that have shaped its vision and path.

1. The recognition of the right to self-determination as the overarching goal of Indigenous Peoples in Asia, first clearly articulated in the landmark 1988 conception report *"Indigenous Peoples in Asia: Towards Self-Determination."*

2. The unanimous adoption of the name "Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact," where *Pact* symbolised a solemn commitment to unity; an agreement to define and defend a common position and purpose through consensus and solidarity. These two values—consensus and solidarity—became the moral and political bedrock of AIPP.

From its inception, successive generations of collective leadership have upheld these principles and advanced this vision. I consider it a profound privilege to have worked with every generation of AIPP leadership since the beginning.

AIPP emerged with a humble yet transformative vision: to internationalise the recognition of Indigenous Peoples in Asia and to amplify grassroots voices by linking local struggles to regional and global movements. Rooted in this foundation, AIPP has stepped onto the global stage, anchored in human rights, environmental justice, gender equality, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

AIPP is not simply a network; it is a living manifestation of indigenous governance, of solidarity that transcends borders, languages, and political systems. In a world fractured by polarisation, AIPP holds fast to shared values—community over competition, dignity over division, justice over marginalisation.

Today, AIPP stands as the largest Indigenous Peoples' movement in the world, not only in its scope but in the depth of its solidarity and the strength of its collective belonging. Let this be a reminder—*we are who we are* because of the sacrifices of our elders and leaders who placed our future above their own. Now, we must do the same for our children and those yet to come.

Our journey is not only one of accomplishments; it is also a continuing resistance. AIPP has redefined our position; not as victims of history, but as architects of alternative futures grounded in our knowledge, identity, and collective strength.

We are the bridge between ancestral wisdom and the aspirations of future generations. That is our generational mandate; to protect what we have inherited and to imagine and build what is yet to come. A future shaped by our values, with Indigenous Peoples not only leading our communities but influencing nations.

Our solidarity defies the boundaries imposed by modern states. We are not marginal. We are central to Asia's democratic and ecological future. And we will prevail if we remain guided by the Indigenous African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, "I am because we are."

This report is a reflection of that collective spirit. It honours the successes we have built, the challenges we continue to face, and the unwavering commitment of our members, networks, and movements across generations and territories.

The Indigenous Condition in Asia

Let me now share a glimpse of the situation and condition of Indigenous Peoples in Asia. Between 2019 and 2024, AIPP received 1,126 reported cases of human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples from nine Asian countries. But this is only the tip of the iceberg of the condition of Indigenous Peoples in Asia.

In many parts of Asia, indigenous communities are on the frontlines of state repression. This is no coincidence. Our very existence—anchored in distinct systems of knowledge, governance, and relationships with land—challenges centralised, often exclusionary, state models of development and authority.

In Myanmar, the military junta's ongoing war against ethnic resistance forces has intensified the targeting of indigenous communities. The failure to reach any real political settlement since the 2021 coup has deepened this oppression. Indigenous Peoples, particularly in ethnic areas like Chin, Kachin, and Karen states, are forced to navigate militarised state violence and fragile resistance structures. The state views indigenous territories as strategic military zones, not as homelands with political legitimacy. This is also true for many indigenous territories, including the Ryukyus in Japan.

In Laos and Vietnam, one-party rule has effectively silenced indigenous voices. Advocacy organisations in Laos are now virtually non-functional, and Vietnam is heading in the same direction. These regimes suppress all dissent, but indigenous organisations are doubly targeted due to their claims to distinct cultural and territorial sovereignty. The situation is similar in Cambodia, where land grabs and development-induced displacement have intensified, leaving indigenous communities with no genuine recourse.

In Thailand, where democracy remains nominal, several thousand indigenous persons continue to live without citizenship and are denied basic rights. However, a positive development emerged in early 2025, when the Thai government formally committed to recognising the land rights of indigenous communities. We hope that the government will expedite the implementation of this commitment to ensure meaningful and lasting protection of indigenous land tenure.

In Northeast India, indigenous movements have long been framed as "insurgencies" and met with militarisation. Despite decades-long peace processes—most notably the Naga peace talks—no honourable political resolution is in sight. The Indian state's strategy of combining military pressure, patronage, and

selective negotiation has fragmented political unity and fostered elite co-optation. The eruption of ethnic violence in 2023 between Meitei and Zo-Kuki communities in Manipur further highlights how unresolved political questions, if neglected, mutate into deep social fault lines. Elsewhere in India, especially in central and eastern regions, Adivasi communities face constant displacement due to extractive projects, with the state-corporate nexus reinforcing a development model that undermines both indigenous self-determination and democratic participation.

In Nepal, despite constitutional recognition of Indigenous Nationalities, state policies continue to be shaped by dominant caste groups and elites. The federal restructuring promised after the 2006 democratic movement has not led to substantive indigenous autonomy. Their demands have been diluted into administrative decentralisation without meaningful cultural or political empowerment.

In Bangladesh, state's refusal to recognise Indigenous Peoples in the Constitution perpetuate their political invisibility and exclusion from national decision-making processes. The current political reform process is also increasingly leaving them out. Indigenous Peoples continue to face systemic discrimination, land dispossession, and cultural marginalisation in both CHT and plains regions. Despite promises made under the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord, key political demands such as demilitarisation, land restitution, and meaningful autonomy have been largely unmet.

In the Philippines, militarisation and criminalisation of indigenous leaders—especially in Mindanao and the Cordillera—reflect the state's ongoing use of counterinsurgency frameworks against legitimate community resistance. The "anti-terror" legislation has seriously curtailed civic space, while the 'whole-of-nation approach' has criminalised indigenous communities and organisers. Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, illegal arrests, and forced displacements are widespread.

In Malaysia, indigenous communities—particularly the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak—continue to face dispossession through infrastructure and plantation projects. Despite constitutional safeguards and recognition of Native Customary Rights (NCR), enforcement remains weak due to lack of political will and vision.

In Indonesia, the 2013 Constitutional Court ruling on customary forests was a milestone, but implementation remains slow. Indigenous Peoples—especially in Kalimantan, Papua, and Sumatra—continue to suffer dispossession and criminalisation from agribusiness, mining, and state development schemes. The Omnibus Law and related policies have further eroded decentralisation and land protections in favour of economic growth. Indigenous leaders face intimidation, criminal charges, and violence, while many communities remain without legal recognition.

In Timor-Leste, indigenous customary systems remain deeply embedded in local life, but formal political structures have yet to fully recognise indigenous self-governance or land rights. The state frames all citizens as part of a unified national identity. As the government continues to promote infrastructure and development projects, there is a growing tension between national planning and local customary governance.

In Taiwan, Indigenous Peoples have achieved certain legal and cultural gains within a democratic system. Although the government formally apologised in 2016 and initiated dialogue on historical injustices, land restitution and political rights, much remain unresolved. Further, several indigenous groups remain unrecognised and marginalised.

This overview is far from comprehensive, but it clearly shows that Indigenous Peoples in Asia remain at the most repressed end of the political spectrum. Why is this so?

Indigenous Movements as Political Transformation

Indigenous movements in Asia are often misread—even by civil society—as merely cultural protests or calls for inclusion and representation. In reality, these are deeply political movements that challenge authoritarian rule and dominant structures of power.

Our pursuit of territorial sovereignty and self-governance is neither separatist nor nostalgic. It is a political assertion of our right to live democratically as distinct peoples—through our own institutions, laws, and relationships with land. Democracy without a political people is hollow, and Indigenous Peoples are fighting to precisely preserve that political people and forms of life that make democratic existence meaningful.

In many Asian democracies, state sovereignty is treated as self-justifying and sacrosanct. Power is centralised and disconnected from the people. Several postcolonial states emerged from the amalgamation of princely states and diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities—often without genuine consent or with no consent. Without a democratic foundation for plural coexistence, these states defaulted to homogenisation and control. Laws became instruments of command; citizens were not the agents of law, but its passive subjects.

The absence of a unified political nation has enabled artificial majorities to dominate political minorities through the mechanisms of state power. Indigenous Peoples are disenfranchised—not only in a formal sense, but more fundamentally in that their ways of life, systems of governance, and epistemologies are not recognised as politically valid. Customary laws and traditional authorities are dismissed as pre-modern or obstacles to development.

Asian democracies tend to have strong executive branches, technocratic bureaucracies, and weak local participation. Decision-making is concentrated in capital cities, far removed from indigenous communities. Governance becomes technical management, not a political relationship. Governments conduct elections without cultivating a true political community; they centralise power while dissolving political responsibility; they impose unity at the cost of the plural political traditions that democratic freedom requires. What this implies is that the more the state grew, the more society shrank.

Democracy, if real, must be rooted in plural and local political life. It cannot be reduced to a single abstract model imposed from above. The suppression of indigenous self-governance is therefore not just a cultural or administrative issue—it is a denial of the conditions that make democracy possible.

Indigenous self-governance is grounded in consensus, collective responsibility, and sustainable stewardship—democratic in substance, even if not shaped by Western liberal traditions. They embody an ethical and participatory politics that remains alive in our communities. Our movements are not only resisting authoritarianism; we are offering new pathways toward democratic transformation—based on moral consensus, political responsibility, and sustainable living.

AIPP's Response and Strategic Innovations

Let me now come to how AIPP is responding to the complex social, political, and developmental challenges, and how these responses are already shaping transformative change.

AIPP's strategic responses emerge from deep, collective reflection across countries, born from a moment of reckoning. Faced with increasing fragmentation and deepening of despair due to intensifying state repression, AIPP undertook a process of internal questioning. The result was a shared realisation: to confront today's crises, we must return to our roots—reclaiming agency, rebuilding unity, and renewing solidarity through grounded action.

This led to the creation of Country Focal Organisations and a unifying Statement of Goal and Purpose—concrete efforts to realign AIPP's structure and culture with indigenous values. This was not a technical fix, but a strategic shift from reactive programming to long-term movement-building with a renewed commitment to effective coordination, collective accountability, and systems change.

To address the larger political landscape in Asia, AIPP has invested in leadership grounded in indigenous worldviews. AIPP launched the *Course on Democracy and Self-Determination* and the *AIPP School of Participation*—not as academic projects, but as grassroots engines of transformation and the basis for establishing true indigenous learning institutions. These aim to cultivate a new generation of leaders—strategically grounded, politically conscious, and spiritually anchored.

Central to building resilient movements are indigenous women and youth, whose leadership is vital for the success of our movements and towards building free institutions. On this account, AIPP supported the formation of *Indigenous Women's Network in Asia* and the *Asia Indigenous Youth Platform*. Though still growing into full momentum, these platforms have already sparked a surge in participation, visibility, and mobilisation among women and youth across the region.

But vision and institutions alone do not drive change. Clear goals, focused strategies, and bold action do. That is why AIPP launched the Centers of Excellence in Village Governance (COE-VG)—a flagship initiative in partnership with communities in Malaysia and Thailand. These centres are revitalising customary governance, grounded in local knowledge and collective leadership. They are not just models—they are living seeds of self-governance and participatory democracy.

In parallel, to protect those on the frontlines, AIPP has initiated the Centers of Defenders (COD) in Nepal and Bangladesh. These centres recognise and empower indigenous human rights defenders who embody courageous leadership, consistent frontline defense and impactful contributions to justice, dignity, and peace. The COD is more than a designation—it is a collective embodiment of our shared vision for a world where defending rights is met not with isolation but with solidarity and systemic protection.

Both the COE-VG and COD are designed to grow organically, led by communities, and powered by their own aspirations. They serve as beacons of hope and resistance—proof that indigenous resilience cannot be erased.

On the international front, where AIPP is a key actor, two milestones stand out for their long-term significance:

1. **The transformation of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Article 8(j)** under the Convention on Biological Diversity into a permanent subsidiary body. This marks a historic recognition of Indigenous Peoples as custodians of knowledge vital to the ecological future of the planet.

2. **Enhanced participation of Indigenous Peoples at the UN.** For the first time, in 2024, indigenous representatives—without NGO status—participated in the 57th session of the Human Rights Council. This breakthrough, achieved through the tireless work of the International Coordinating Body on Enhanced Participation (of which AIPP is a key part), is a step toward achieving permanent observer status at the UN. The OHCHR Stocktaking Report further supports this momentum, recommending a new participation structure that acknowledges Indigenous Peoples as distinct and equal actors in shaping global policy.

Carrying the Struggle Forward

As we move forward, our struggle for self-determination remains firmly rooted in the wisdom of our ancestors. The new Strategic Plan is not just a roadmap—it is a living document shaped by our identity, our memory, and our shared destiny. It calls on us to dream boldly, act collectively, and govern ourselves with courage and vision.

Before I close, let me quote from our new Strategic Plan:

"While we honour the diverse priorities of our members, we unite under one sacred vision: a world where indigenous sovereignty breathes life into every community, every system, and every generation to come."

And finally,
Let AIPP be not merely a platform.
Let it be a model of indigenous-led governance, solidarity, and vision across Asia.
Let this Ninth General Assembly reaffirm our commitment:
to act with courage, to build with care, and to dream together,
for our children and generations yet to come.

Thank you for your attention!