Joint statement: Democratic principles in a time of crisis

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic requires crisis management by governments around the world. In these exceptional circumstances, lives will depend on rapid and effective government action. At the same time, it is essential that such action enjoys the consent and support of the people in each country who recognise that the government is acting to protect

the public. A crisis is no justification for undermining democracy.

For authoritarian governments, a crisis can be an opportunity to consolidate power, legitimatising crackdowns through evoking an existential threat to the nation. For emerging democracies, there is a risk that legitimate measures to address public health will undermine progress in consolidating transparency and accountability.

We, therefore, advocate continued adherence to key democratic principles:

- **Emergency powers should be limited in duration and proportionate to the threat.** At present, science gives a strong justification for limiting the movement of people, particularly the congregation of large groups of people. Such measures should be enacted only as long as they are necessary for public health, contain a sunset clause and allow for parliamentary oversight.

- **Measures taken to deal with the crisis must be continuously communicated to the public in a transparent manner.** The crisis must not be taken as an opportunity to wilfully suppress information on the pretext of public health concerns. This transparency must also apply to measures taken in increasing surveillance of citizens. Democracies are at their most effective and robust when ensuring a flow of reliable information to the public – including to organised groups and local communities.

- **Privacy rights should be respected.** Surveillance for the purpose of public health should not compromise the right to privacy or lead to unjustified restrictions on other human rights. Companies are sharing information with governments

on an unprecedented scale posing a threat to the privacy of citizens. Citizens need to be presented with opportunities to seek remedy for violations of basic rights during the crisis and independent oversight of government must be ensured.

- **Transparency and accountability are critical.** Experiences from other health emergencies show that there are real risks that, without strong oversight and transparency, the measures being taken will be less effective and corruption will rise. Exceptional measures must be checked by parliaments and other accountability bodies.

- **It is important to recognize and protect the crucial role of independent news media in the coronavirus pandemic.** States must ensure that emergency measures to tackle the disease, as well as the fight against disinformation, are not used as a pretext to censor news and freedom of information on- and offline (including critical ones) or implement regressive regulation against media freedom.

- **Leave no one behind.** Public health measures impact different groups in different ways. In every society, emergency measures can combine with existing vulnerabilities to cause real harm. Women can be at greater risk of violence and have worse access to formal healthcare; groups in conflict with the government can be excluded from care; minority communities can be victims of racist, xenophobic treatment, and subject to restrictions in access to healthcare; people with disabilities can be pushed down the priority list for treatment and refugees or IDPs can be left particularly exposed. Public health measures should take careful account of these and other vulnerabilities.