



2024 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT



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
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COVER PHOTO: Protesters in London, UK, call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza on 6 January 2024. Photo by Henry Nicholls/AFP via Getty Images.



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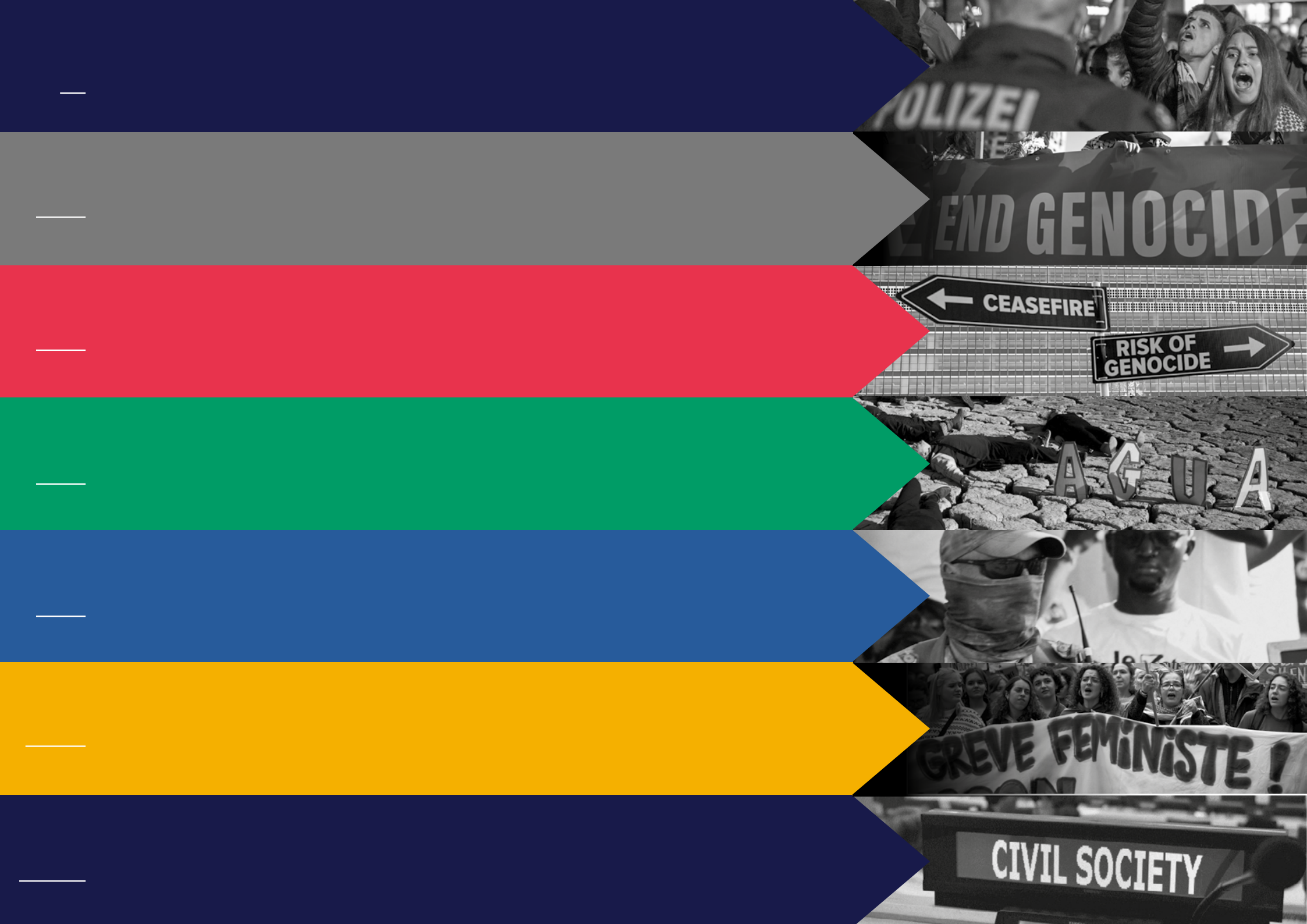


ABOUT THIS REPORT

Welcome to the 2024 State of Civil Society Report from CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance. This year's report, the 13th in our annual series, looks back at 2023 to identify trends in civil society action, at every level and in every arena, from responses to conflicts and struggles for democracy, inclusion and climate justice to demands for global governance reform.

This year's report draws from our rolling analysis and commentary initiative, **CIVICUS Lens**, and is directly informed by the voices of civil society affected by and responding to the major issues and challenges of the day. It reflects over 250 interviews and articles published by CIVICUS covering over 100 countries and territories.

Our report offers a civil society perspective of the world as it stands in early 2024: one plagued by conflict and crises, including of democratic values and institutions, but in which civil society works to hold the line in difficult times.





Volunteers distribute hot meals to displaced Palestinian families in Rafah, Gaza on 20 February 2024.

Photo by Abed Rahim Khatib/Anadolu via Getty Images.

OVERVIEW: A WORLD OF CRISES NEEDS CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is being tested like never before by a series of multiple and accelerating crises. Amid growing conflict and repression, in 2023 civil society faced mounting obstacles that made it harder to do its essential work of helping people, making their voices heard and upholding human rights. But civil society still managed to hold the line and make a difference to many. It's still a vital source of hope. The world is currently in a dire state – but it would be much worse were it not for civil society. The way out of crises is to listen to, work with and enable civil society.

CONFLICT AND CRISIS: A WORLD IN DISARRAY

Civil society is under attack amid deepening and intensifying conflict. In too many countries, people can't take the most fundamental rights for granted. When they wake in the

morning they can't assume they'll live to see another day. **One in six** people are currently exposed to conflict. Conflict-related deaths are at their **highest in decades**, with civilian casualties up **62 per cent** in 2023. Global military spending rose a **record US\$2.2 trillion**. The spectre of genocide has returned.

The **Gaza** conflict has rocked the world. In a grotesque act of collective punishment, Israeli forces are unleashing unrelenting cruelty on civilians. The suffering must stop, immediately. Even after that, the impacts will be felt for generations to come.

Violence threatens to escalate further across the Middle East, and the region is far from the only one submerged in conflict. **Russia** continues to wage its deadly war on Ukraine, civilians suffer as military fights militia in **Sudan** and a bloody conflict has set in three years on from a military coup in **Myanmar**.

These are just some of today's conflicts. In all of them, belligerents are targeting civilians, often because of their ethnicity. Fighting

forces are systematically using sexual violence and starvation as weapons of war. All are causing humanitarian crises, including mass displacement.

Over **114 million people** are now displaced, but those in power are in denial. Instead of recognising the reality of movement, political leaders are becoming more hostile, strengthening barriers, offshoring migration responses and stoking xenophobia. European countries are showing blatant double standards: while their warm reception of Ukrainians may be cooling as the war wears on, they're still treating them far better than Black and Brown arrivals. Even in the global south, home to most migrants and displaced people, long-established traditions of hospitality are in retreat: Turkey is forcibly returning refugees to Syria and **Pakistan** to Afghanistan.

Civil society offers a vital response, providing humanitarian aid, leading reconstruction efforts, collecting evidence of human rights abuses, urging the international community to act and calling for justice and an end to impunity. In Ukraine, voluntary initiatives are a huge contributor to resilience, with activists documenting rights violations and helping root out corruption. Journalists are providing crucial first-hand information about Israel's assault on Gaza. Sudanese youth groups are delivering humanitarian aid in the worst-hit conflict zones and offering solutions to advance democratic civilian rule.

But rather than listen, conflict perpetrators are attacking civil society, humanitarian workers and journalists, and states are criminalising civil society for supporting migrants and refugees. Civil society needs support and all sides in conflicts must respect its rights.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: REFORM DESPERATELY NEEDED

Belligerents are brazenly flouting long-established tenets of international human rights and humanitarian law because they expect to get away with it. Global governance institutions are flailing as states make **hypocritical decisions** that undermine the rules-based international order. Civil society has solutions for global governance reform but isn't getting a seat at the table.

Powerful states including Russia and the USA are demonstrating selective respect for the rules, shielding allies but castigating enemies. This is clear among the many states that rushed to Ukraine's defence but continue to back Israel. At the basest level, some states are displaying racism as they show concern for white people's human rights but not for those of people of colour.

International rules are supposed to make sure atrocities such as those being systematically perpetrated in Gaza don't happen, and if they do, they're quickly halted and those responsible face justice. But the key United Nations (UN) body, the Security Council, is **immobilised** by powerful states using their veto. Among those who hold the cards, principled and empathetic leadership is in short supply, as are humility and a willingness to listen.

The short-term calculations of unaccountable leaders are neutralising international agreements forged to tackle major transnational challenges such as the climate crisis and **sustainable development**, where delivery is falling far short. At the Sustainable Development Goals **summit** held last September, civil society put forward innovative ideas to unlock the money needed to finance development and climate resilience, but these were ignored, showing precisely why civil society needs to be included in decision-making spaces. Civil society is often denied access, from the **UN General Assembly** to the **G20** meeting in

India. At the same time, repressive states, even those that sit on the Human Rights Council, are retaliating against activists who take part in UN human rights processes.

Today's multiple crises are exposing the fundamental design flaws of UN institutions, testing them beyond their limit. But if trust in the UN collapses, people could embrace more authoritarian alternatives. To prevent this, states and the UN must take on board civil society's many practical reform ideas. The UN must become more democratic and it must fully include civil society as an essential partner.

Civil society calls for a rules-based order where clear laws and policies are followed to tackle climate change, end poverty, address deep economic inequality, de-escalate conflicts and prevent gross human rights violations. The UN **Summit of the Future** in September 2024 should commit to advancing this vision. Civil society is doing its best to engage with the process, calling for genuine reforms that put people at the heart of decision making.

CLIMATE: REPRESSION AS DENIAL

The climate crisis is a global emergency with immediate and long-term consequences. The need to act has never been clearer. 2023 was the **hottest year on record**. Seemingly every week brought news of another extreme weather event, affecting the most vulnerable people the worst.

The calls for urgent change are coming loudest from civil society, but in 2023 activists faced growing pushback. Many states are **collapsing** the space for climate activism, including in global north countries with vibrant climate movements where the right to speak out used to be respected.

German authorities used organised crime laws to target the Last Generation direct action movement, raiding homes, seizing laptops and freezing bank accounts. UK police took advantage of new laws restricting protest rights to jail protesters demanding an end to fossil fuel use. Several Australian states also introduced anti-protest laws to target and jail peaceful climate activists.

The repression of civic space should be recognised as the new frontier of climate denial. Outright denial is now relatively rare, but states and fossil fuel corporations, by suppressing civil society's ability to keep up the pressure, threaten to delay action on the scale required until it's too late.

Activism is needed because action by states and the private sector to alleviate the climate crisis is nowhere near sufficient. Global temperatures are on track to rise by **close to three degrees** on pre-industrial levels by the end of the century, likely triggering catastrophic tipping points. Fossil fuel firms are banking soaring profits and spending little on renewable energies, while states keep approving further extraction. International climate funding continues to offer far less than required. The fundamental inequalities of climate change – disproportionately caused by the richest people in the richest countries but with the worst consequences for the world's poorest – aren't being addressed.

Civil society showed why it's needed in 2023 by winning court cases, notably in **Belgium** and the **USA**, making states and companies hold to climate commitments, pressuring institutions such as universities to divest from fossil fuel investments and using disruptive stunts to win media attention.

At the global level, civil society forced the need to cut fossil fuel emissions onto the agenda of the **COP28** climate summit, unbelievably for the first time. But the event, hosted by the

United Arab Emirates, a petrostate with closed civic space, didn't have the civil society access required and didn't make the progress needed. The experience will likely repeat itself in 2024, with COP29 hosted by another petrostate with closed civic space, **Azerbaijan**.

DEMOCRACY: CONTESTED TERRITORY

Attacks on democracy are making it harder for people to advance the solutions today's crises require. As 2023 began, **72 per cent** of people lived in authoritarian regimes, and the situation didn't improve as the year went on. A record number of countries are sliding towards authoritarianism, while the number of countries democratising is the lowest in decades.

Civil society is working to defend democracy and hold political leaders to account, but this is becoming harder as civic space is shutting down. The proportion of people living in countries with closed civic space, 30.6 per cent, is the highest in years.

In countries that have recently undergone military coups, army rule has consolidated. Two further countries – **Gabon** and **Niger** – had military coups in 2023, completing a 'coup belt' that stretches coast-to-coast across Africa.

In some countries, democratically elected leaders have hollowed out institutions and practices of democracy, accumulating inordinate powers and curtailing freedoms so they can stay in office. Many other countries held ceremonial elections with the sole purpose of legitimising authoritarian leaders.

In free and fair elections, voters have repeatedly rejected mainstream parties and politicians. In a time of economic

uncertainty and insecurity, many are disappointed with what democracy has offered so far. Anti-rights political entrepreneurs are exploiting their anxieties and offering deceptively simple solutions to complex problems. They peddle supposedly anti-elitist discourse that presents itself as new and radical even when it's deeply regressive. They're gaining ground by stoking prejudice and hatred, including against migrants and LGBTQI+ people.

In several 2023 elections, including in **Argentina**, **Finland** and **the Netherlands**, far-right forces made advances, with some winning power or a share in government. Even where they don't take office, far-right politicians shift the political centre, forcing others to compete on their terms.

Polarisation is rising, fuelled by disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech. All are made much easier by AI-powered technologies that are spreading and evolving faster than they can be regulated. There's potential good in AI, but also great scope for regressive forces to use it to their advantage. Tech leaders can't be trusted to self-regulate. States can't be left alone to set the rules either, since many are keen to harness emerging technology for repressive purposes. Civil society is calling for **transnational regulation**.

Negative trends are likely to extend through 2024, when a record number of people go to the polls. But hope comes from the fact that movement isn't in one direction, and civil society has played a major part in any recent good news. In **Guatemala**, a new party born from mass anti-corruption protests was the unlikely election winner, and people mobilised in numbers to defend the result in the face of powerful political and economic elites. In **Poland**, a unity government pledging to restore civic freedoms came to power after eight years of right-wing nationalist rule, offering new potential for civil society to partner in retrieving democratic values and respecting human rights.

In 2023, civil society mobilised against restrictions on freedoms, countered divisive rhetoric and fought for the integrity of electoral processes. Throughout 2024, civil society will keep pushing for elections to take place in free and fair conditions, for people to have the information they need, for votes to be properly counted, for losers to accept defeat and for winners to govern in the interests of everyone rather than just their supporters.

GENDER: RESISTANCE AGAINST REGRESSION

In the face of regression, civil society continued to claim rights in 2023. It achieved the decriminalisation of same-sex relations in **Mauritius** and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in **Estonia**. **Latvia** and **Nepal** took crucial steps towards equal rights, and long-term struggles for marriage equality continue in every region, coming to fruition in **Greece** in February 2024 and likely soon in **Thailand**. Women mobilised against gender-based violence in numerous countries, sometimes winning policy changes.

But the year was more about resisting than advancing. The Taliban strengthened its grip in **Afghanistan**, theocracy reasserted itself in **Iran** and the global femicide pandemic continued. **Russia** deepened its anti-LGBTQI+ crackdown, extreme anti-gay laws were passed in **Ghana and Uganda** and anti-trans hysteria mushroomed in the USA. 2023 saw significant rights regression, putting the lives of still more women and LGBTQI+ people at risk.

Civil society's hard-won, decades-long trend of progress in women's and LGBTQI+ rights has slowed down, hitting the buffers of a backlash that's grown more intense. A well-funded, transnational movement with US roots that has fought against gender rights for decades is winning increasing

influence. In many countries, as the anti-rights backlash is being instrumentalised for political gain, attacks on activists who defend rights are growing.

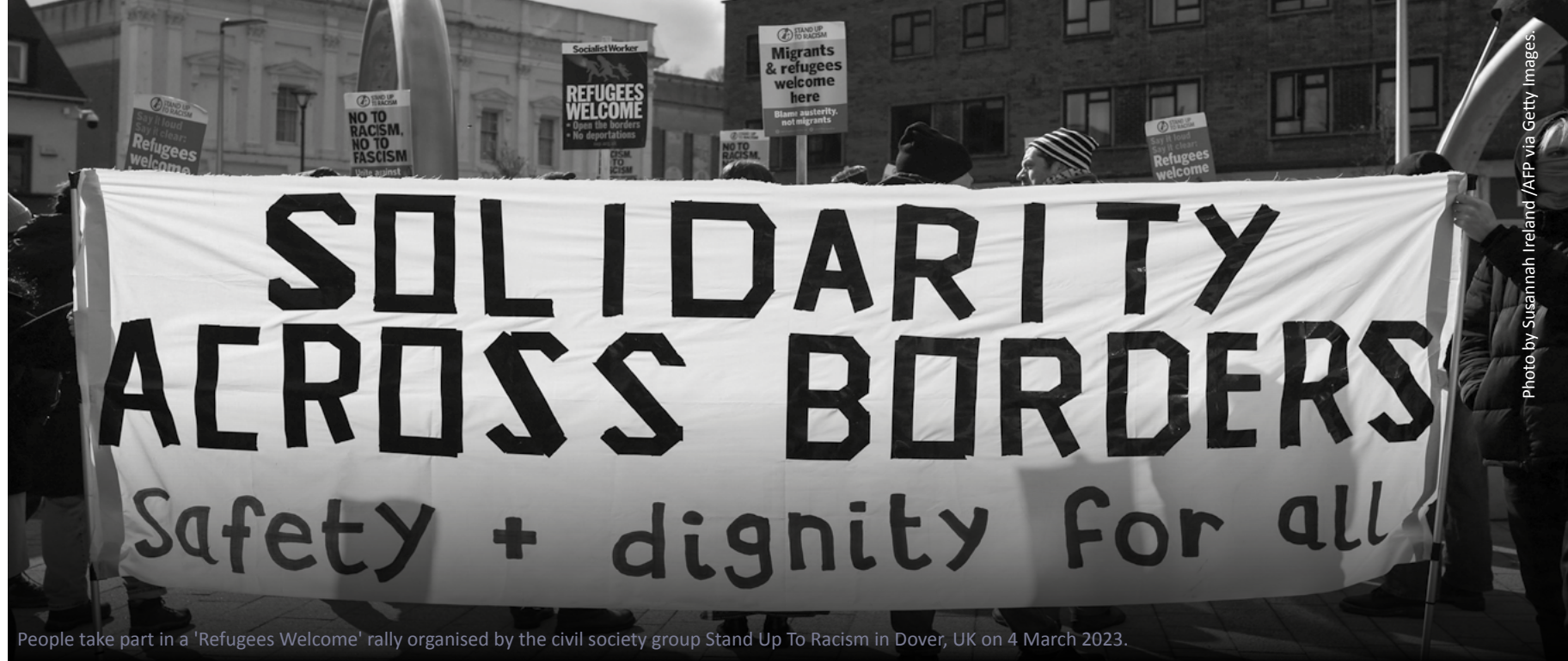
But activists across the world continue to resist oppression. Amid rising femicides, major protests by feminists in countries including Bulgaria and Kenya demanded action to stop the killing. Even in Afghanistan and Iran, women activists are finding subtle and clandestine ways to keep up their defiance.

While it's been a disappointing year for gender rights movements, the situation would have been much worse without their enormous efforts. Although progress slowed, most historic gains endured. Across the world, civil society resisted – through street protest, advocacy, campaigning, solidarity, mutual support and litigation – and stood firm.

TIME TO STOP ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

The direction of travel is shown by the fact that civic space is in its **worst state** since the launch of the CIVICUS Monitor's global coverage in 2018. Some **118 countries** now have serious civic space restrictions and only 2.1 per cent of people live in countries with open civic space. In December 2023, two more countries – **Bangladesh** and **Venezuela** – were downgraded to the worst civic space category, closed. Intimidation, protest disruption and detentions of protesters were the top violations documented in 2023, with democracy, climate and environmental activists and women and LGBTQI+ people often in the firing lane.

Despite the many constraints, civil society is doing everything it can to keep going. But restrictions are biting. A youthful generation has risen to lead today's impressive civic movements.



People take part in a 'Refugees Welcome' rally organised by the civil society group Stand Up To Racism in Dover, UK on 4 March 2023.

But it's questionable how long they can hold out against attrition as those in power deliberately increase the personal costs and dangers of activism.

With more countries shutting down civic space, activists in exile are playing an ever more crucial role in sustaining demands for democracy and human rights. But in response, repression is becoming more transnational as multiple states – China, Egypt and Turkey, among many others – are targeting exiles through surveillance, intimidation, violence and pressure on their families. Host countries often don't provide the protection required, particularly when foreign policy considerations come into play. Strategies to defend civic space urgently need to offer transnational responses.

There's a glaring need to reverse the restrictions and enable

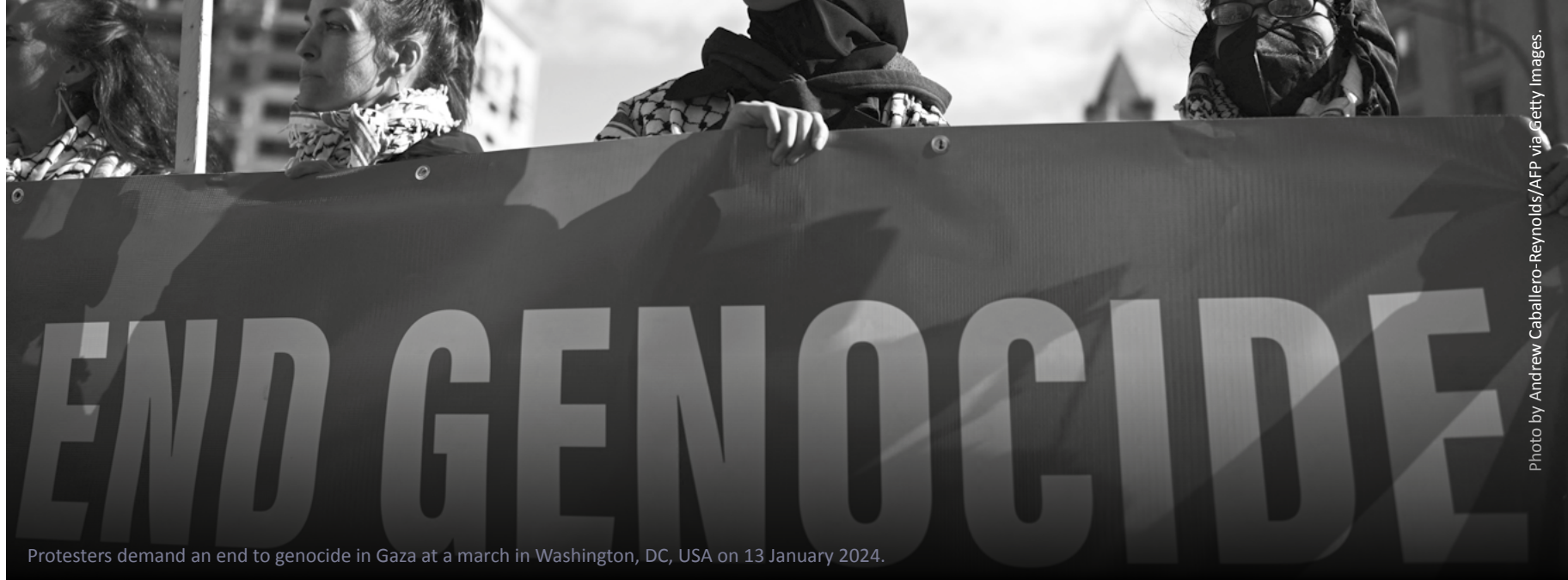
civil society so it can play its part in everything from building peace to tackling climate change to delivering progress on big international agreements like the Sustainable Development Goals.

The present way of doing things is clearly failing, given today's crises, and insisting on the same paths that led the world to its current state won't make things any better. Today's situation should prompt the question of what kind of world we want to see and how we get there. Civil society has a vision of a future where empathy and compassion prevail, human rights are respected, global threats are collaboratively addressed, resources are more equally shared and diversity is celebrated. It's a key source of solutions to address crises and make the world a better place. Imagine a world where political and economic leaders listen to civil society. It's time.



CONFLICT AND CRISIS: A WORLD IN DISARRAY





Protesters demand an end to genocide in Gaza at a march in Washington, DC, USA on 13 January 2024.

Photo by Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP via Getty Images.

A WORLD OF CONFLICT

So many people in so many parts of the world can't take the basics of life for granted. They can't assume when they wake in the morning they'll live to see another day. They can't count on clean water and something to eat. If they get injured or ill, they can't be sure of treatment. They can't rely on being able to access reliable information about the conflict they're trying to survive or being able to tell the world their story. They can't trust their government to protect them – in many cases, their government is the aggressor. They can't have faith the international community will come to their aid either. If they're forced to flee, they can't expect compassion.

Around the world, **one in six** people are currently exposed to conflict. Conflict-related deaths are at their **highest in decades**, with civilian casualties up 62 per cent in 2023 compared to 2022. De-escalation doesn't seem likely: global military spending hit a **record US\$2.2 trillion over the last year**.

Israel's assault on Gaza has rocked the world. The need to end the carnage is immediate – but even after a ceasefire the impacts will be felt for decades, from a generational trauma to heal to the vast task of physical reconstruction. It will also take a huge international effort to hold the perpetrators responsible for grotesque human rights violations to account.

Gaza is the site of today's most sickening conflict – and one that threatens to spill out into the wider region – but it's sadly far from the only one. Among others, Russia continues to wage its deadly war on Ukraine, civilians suffer as military fights militia in Sudan and bloody conflict rages in Myanmar three years after a military coup. Even in places where wars supposedly ended – as in Ethiopia and Nagorno-Karabakh – violence, rights abuses and impunity continue.

Alongside immediate casualties and injuries, conflict is causing huge environmental damage and devastating climate harm. Military forces are estimated to account for **5.5 per cent** of total greenhouse



GLOBAL MILITARY SPENDING HIT A RECORD US\$2.2 TRILLION



1 IN 6 PEOPLE WERE EXPOSED TO CONFLICT



CIVILIAN CASUALTIES WERE UP 62%



AT LEAST 167,800 PEOPLE WERE KILLED IN CONFLICTS – OVER 30,000 IN GAZA



OVER 114 MILLION ARE CURRENTLY DISPLACED



NEARLY 300 MILLION NEED HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION

gas emissions, equivalent to those of the **fourth highest-emitting** country in the world. Under the Paris Agreement there's no requirement for states to report their military emissions, and hardly any choose to, making it hard for civil society to pressure states to cut them. Civil society is urging disarmament to save human lives, realise human rights, and protect climate and planet.

Civil society is working on every front possible to respond to conflicts. It's providing essential services, offering protection, helping people forced from their homes, sharing information, calling for fighting to stop, urging the international community to act, demanding justice for human rights crimes and advocating for de-escalation, disarmament and peacebuilding.

But belligerents are attacking civil society for playing these roles. In many cases, soldiers and rebels directly target people trying to deliver vital humanitarian help. Journalists trying to share unvarnished truths are under fire too: **99 journalists and media workers** were killed as a result of their work in 2023. Perpetrators of violence are flouting long-established international human rights and humanitarian laws confident of impunity ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. Civil society calls for an end to conflicts and for everyone to learn the lessons on how to prevent violence, protect rights and build peace.

Unceasing slaughter in Gaza

The slaughter is unrelenting. Apart from one brief pause in November, Israel's bombardment of Gaza has been ceaseless. At the time of writing, negotiations for a second temporary ceasefire are underway. It's urgently needed, but beyond that, the assault must permanently end.

Already some 30,000 people have been killed and almost everyone has been forced from their homes. This is infamy that will resound through the ages.

Israel could never avoid mass civilian casualties when it decided to bombard the small and densely populated territory of Gaza, most of which Israeli forces have reduced to rubble. People have been forced to flee several times, pushed south into areas they were told would be safe, only for Israel to bomb them regardless. Israel may launch a further ground offensive at any moment. People are trapped, up against a sealed border.

There's no doubting the horror of the attacks perpetrated by Hamas and other groups in Israel on 7 October. Those behind

them deserve to face justice, and hostages must walk free. But Israel's response clearly constitutes collective punishment – penalising a population group for acts committed by some of its members – that presumes Gazans must be guilty simply because of who they are and where they live. This is a war crime under the Geneva Conventions. Israel has blanket blamed civilians for failing to stop an attack that caught everyone by surprise. On 7 October, Gazan civilians were merely doing their best to go about their daily lives in already incredibly difficult circumstances. They're not at fault.

Israel's war on Gaza looks like nothing other than a bloodthirsty campaign of revenge from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – and it may be no coincidence that a state of war is probably his only means to ensure political survival.

Civil society is trying to mount a humanitarian response, but the Israeli government continues to choke aid supplies. Much international aid sits stuck at the border in defiance of a December United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution and International Court of Justice (ICJ) provisional orders issued in February 2024 instructing Israel to allow full humanitarian access ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. The predictable result is rising hunger, lack of clean water and growing health problems with most hospitals destroyed.

Humanitarian work is dangerous: **at least 167** aid workers have been killed, the highest number of any conflict this century. Reporting on the conflict brings huge risk as well. More than **three quarters** of journalists and media workers killed in 2023 died in Gaza over just a few months.

Palestinians and Israelis desperately need civil society – with its ability to provide aid, support peacebuilding and demand

accountability – but the first reaction of many donors was to make activists' work harder. In the aftermath of the 7 October attacks, several European states suspended or announced a review of their support to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Palestine and Israel.

They did so on at best flimsy evidence that money might be diverted towards terrorism, or because they falsely conflated criticism of actions of the state of Israel with antisemitism. This deeply disturbing development played into the hands of an Israeli government that has long slurred and restricted civil society.

Civil society is besieged. For 30 years, the Israeli occupation has undermined the work of CSOs, disabling their role in promoting self-reliant development, political change and an end to the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. In recent years, the occupation government has become more explicit in suppressing CSOs, directly closing them down, confiscating their assets and arresting their staff. The occupation also imposes restrictions on the funding of CSOs. The political conditions on funding imposed by European and particularly US funders have led to the cessation of work by hundreds of CSOs.



ABDALAZIZ ALSALEHI
Social and Economic Policies Monitor (Al-Marsad)

Around the world millions of people have responded with empathy, taking to the streets to show solidarity with Palestinians, demand a ceasefire and call on their governments to pressure Israel to stop the bloodshed. And they've faced backlash from authorities. Politicians have mischaracterised many protests as antisemitic or as showing support for terrorism. In the UK, the then home secretary called them 'hate marches' and said waving the Palestine flag or chanting pro-Palestine slogans may be a criminal offence.



Photo by Sebastien Salom-Gomis/AFP via Getty Images.

Police officers detain a protester draped in a Palestinian flag during an unauthorised demonstration in Nantes, France on 11 October 2023.

In **France**, the government sought to impose a blanket ban on pro-Palestine demonstrations, but a court **ruled** these protests can only be banned on a case-by-case basis. Police broke up a prohibited protest in Paris with **teargas and water cannon**. In Germany, authorities have permitted some protests but banned others. Police **used force** when around a thousand people came

to a prohibited pro-Palestine vigil in Berlin. In Australia, police in Sydney **announced** they'd use 'extraordinary powers' to search and demand identification from people attending a pro-Palestine demonstration. These violations of protest rights are just a few examples of state responses to demonstrations during the early stages of the onslaught, and they've continued since.

Restrictions aren't limited to protests. In the USA, pro-Palestine groups have **reported** experiencing harassment and intimidation, critics of the Israeli state have had media appearances pulled and Muslim broadcasters have been **taken off air**. Academic freedom is at risk, with some wealthy donors threatening to **stop supporting** universities whose staff and students are perceived to support the Palestinian cause. Social media companies are **accused** of censoring or shadow banning – hiding from prominence – Palestinian and pro-Palestine posts.

These reactions have reinforced long-running efforts to curtail people's ability to call for boycotts of Israel. The global boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement has long urged peaceful tactics to put pressure on the Israeli state to comply with international human rights laws, of the kind that helped build momentum for the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Most US states have already adopted **anti-BDS laws**, often based on a model law promoted by pro-Israel lobbying groups, and efforts continue to introduce a federal-level law. French authorities have used an **anti-discrimination law** to limit BDS efforts, and in the UK, the government has **introduced** an anti-boycott bill that would prevent any public body making an investment decision on the basis of ethical concerns about a country. The draft law explicitly mentions Israel. These measures often equate criticism of Israel's human rights record with antisemitism, making it harder for people to speak out.

The fact that the anti-boycott bill and rhetoric around it conflate criticism of Israel with antisemitism will contribute to the chilling effect that makes rights advocates feel less able to criticise Israel for fear of being labelled antisemitic. In the long term, by setting up Jews and Jewish safety in opposition to other civil and human rights struggles, this bill will end up pitting minority communities against each other.



DANIEL LUBIN
Na'amod (British Jews Against Occupation)

Despite the challenges, global civil society continues to pressure international organisations and call on states to demand a ceasefire and urge restraint from Israel. And it has had successes. In February 2024, after three CSO filed a lawsuit, a court **ordered** the Dutch government to stop the export of parts for F-35 fighter planes to Israel. The court concluded there was a clear risk these could be used in serious violations of international humanitarian law. The Dutch government is however now appealing the decision. Civil society **launched** a similar case in the UK, currently subject to an appeal after an initial court ruling in the government's favour.

We brought this lawsuit because no government should allow transfers of weapons to a state committing war crimes. The court made clear that violations of international humanitarian law don't need to be proved and that a 'clear risk' of such violations suffices. It also rejected claims by the government that information provided by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and by UN special rapporteurs could not be credibly verified. Instead, it said that such sources must be taken 'extremely seriously'.



FRANK SLIJPER
PAX, Netherlands

Momentum to cut off the arms supply may build further after the ICJ's provisional ruling. In the wake of the court's orders, for example, Japanese company Itochu Corp **announced** it would end its cooperation with an Israeli weapons manufacturer.

Many more such actions are needed to stop the situation spinning even further out of control. There are clear signs of a potential regional escalation, with Hezbollah and Israel exchanging strikes and attacks on Red Sea shipping by Yemen's Houthi rebels bringing US and UK strikes in return. This escalation needs to stop. All belligerents should heed civil society's continuing calls for an immediate and lasting ceasefire.



READ MORE

> GAZA: IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE NEEDED

Russia's war on Ukraine in its third year

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine entered its third year in February 2024, showing how supposed discrete military actions can become protracted conflicts. The war has become an inch-by-inch battle for territory. It's brought disastrous consequences for civilians, with **over 10,000 killed** and widespread human rights violations. As in Gaza, journalists and media workers are paying a heavy price with **at least 69** killed to date.

While Ukrainian civil society offers an immense voluntary effort, Russian activists face intense constraints.

In Ukraine, civil society is working to **evacuate** civilians from occupied areas, **rehabilitate** wounded people and **restore** damaged buildings. It's also documenting and collecting evidence of Russia's many crimes, hoping to hold Vladimir Putin and his circle to international justice. The Tribunal for Putin (T4P), an initiative of three Ukrainian CSOs, among them **Nobel Peace Prize winner** the Center for Civil Liberties, gathers and logs details of human rights crimes, developing an evidence base that could be used by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other bodies to pursue justice. Last August it presented the ICC with **evidence** of acts of genocide by Russian forces in Mariupol.

Ukrainian civil society has increasingly focused on challenging corruption, reflecting increased public interest in how state agencies are spending money, including international aid, amid concerns that support could dry up if donors think funds aren't used well. Civil society initiatives are trying to make reconstruction corruption-free, including by using online tools to track public spending. The **Better Regulation Delivery Office**, an independent civil society think tank, is working to investigate and prevent corruption in building **reconstruction and restoration**.

At the same time, the extended conflict has taken an inevitable toll on people's ability to respond. Volunteering **dropped** from incredibly high levels of 80 per cent of people in the early months of the war to half that figure in the second year. Ukraine's civil society response to the war needs sustained international support.

Meanwhile Russia continues to pay a backhanded compliment to the importance of civil society by suppressing it through every possible means. The most shocking recent event is the suspicious death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in an Arctic penal colony. He's the latest in a **long list** of people to come to a sudden end after falling out with Putin.

State-directed murder – as many deem Navalny's death – is the most extreme form of repression, but Putin has plenty more tricks up his sleeve. One is criminalisation of protests, seen when people showed up at **improvised vigils** to commemorate Navalny. Police **arrested hundreds**.

Human rights organisation OVD-Info **reports** that at the time of writing, since the start of the full-scale invasion the authorities have detained 19,855 people at anti-war protests, brought 897 criminal cases against anti-war activists and introduced 51 new repressive laws.

Among **the many Russians** jailed for symbolic acts of protest, Crimean artist Bohdan Zizu **received** a 15-year sentence in June for spray-painting a building in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. In November, a court **sentenced** artist Alexandra Skochilenko to seven years in jail for placing information about the war on supermarket price tags. Authorities are even **criminalising** people helping Ukrainian refugees living in Russia.

In January 2023, the authorities **declared** Meduza, one of Russia's few remaining independent media outlets, an 'undesirable organisation', in effect banning it from operating in Russia and criminalising anyone who shares its content. In June, it was independent TV channel Dozhd's **turn**. Others received the same label as the year went on.

A court **ordered the shutdown** of the Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia's oldest human rights organisation, on a registration technicality in January 2023. In August, courts **ordered** the closure of another human rights organisation, the Sakharov Center. Through similar means the authorities have forced several other CSOs out of existence or into exile.

The state has designated numerous people and organisations as ‘foreign agents’, a classification intended to stigmatise them as associated with espionage. In November, it **added** the Moscow Times to the list. In February 2024, Putin **approved** a law that allows the government to confiscate money and other assets from people who criticise the war. The government has also doubled down on attacks on LGBTQI+ people as part of its strategy to inflame nationalist sentiments ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

The state is criminalising journalists as well. In March, it detained Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich on spying charges, sending a signal that international journalists aren’t safe. The authorities are also **holding** Russian-US journalist Alsu Kurmasheva of Radio Free Europe, detained while paying a family visit to Russia. Putin is likely planning to use them as leverage for prisoner swaps. State authorities have put other journalists based outside Russia on **wanted lists** or **charged them in absentia.**

It’s hard to hope for any let-up in the crackdown, at least as long as the war lasts. A non-competitive election will approve another term for Putin in March. No credible candidates are allowed to oppose him, and in February 2024 an anti-war politician who’d unexpectedly emerged to provide a focus for dissent was **banned** from standing. Last year the government amended laws to **further restrict** media coverage of the election, making it harder to report on fraud.

For a time last year, Putin seemed weakened when his former ally Yevgeny Prigozhin rebelled, marching his Wagner Group mercenaries on Moscow. The two sides agreed a deal to end the dispute, and two months later, Prigozhin died in a suspicious plane crash. The Russian state now directly controls the mercenaries.



Putin has since reasserted his authority. He may be gaining the upper hand in the war. Russia has greater firepower and is largely surviving attempts to isolate it financially, with repressive regimes such as China, India and Turkey picking up the slack in demand for its fossil fuels. It’s turned itself into a **war economy**, with state spending strongly focused on the military effort, although it won’t be sustainable in the long term. Some of the world’s most authoritarian governments – **Iran** and **North Korea** – are supplying weapons.

Meanwhile Ukrainian forces are **running out of ammunition**. Support for Ukraine has come under strain due to political shifts in Europe and the breaking of political consensus in the USA, with Trump-affiliated Republicans seeking to block further military aid.

Putin may be riding high, but such is the level of state control it's hard to get an accurate picture of how popular he is, and the election will offer no evidence. Given repression, protest levels may not tell the full story either – but some have still broken out, including those in response to Navalny's death.

A vital current of dissent has formed around unhappiness with war losses. Last September, an **independent poll** suggested that support for the war stood at a record low. Morale among Russian troops is reportedly poor and deserters have **called on** others to quit. **Families** of men serving in the military have **protested** to demand the fighting ends.

Protesters have offered other moments of opposition. In November, people held a **demonstration** in Siberia against a local initiative to further restrict protests. In January 2024, in Baymak in southern Russia, hundreds **protested** against the jailing of an activist.

Moments don't make a movement, but can offer inspiration that turns into one, something that often happens unexpectedly. Putin's story is far from over. As with other tyrants before, he'll likely look invincible until just before he falls.

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➤ [RUSSIA AND UKRAINE: A TALE OF TWO CIVIL SOCIETIES](#)

Sudan's forgotten conflict

With global attention focused on Gaza and Ukraine, little else makes the headlines. The civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militia that began in April 2023 has almost completely fallen off the world's radar. But it has created a vast humanitarian crisis – not just in Sudan but in the surrounding countries that many have fled to, particularly Chad. Sudan's civil society is offering solutions, but the international community isn't listening.

The war is a battle for supremacy between two rival leaders who'd previously worked together in the military government: Abdel Fattah al-Burhan leads the SAF and Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemeti, commands the RSF, which emerged from the notorious Janjaweed militias.

Conflict initially played out on the streets of the capital, Khartoum, and its neighbouring city of Omdurman, but has since spread to other parts of Sudan. Darfur is on fire, with the RSF accused of **door-to-door** killings of Masalit people and other ethnic groups, mirroring the genocide of Indigenous people perpetrated by the Janjaweed in the early 2000s. In December, the RSF **took control** of the major city of Wad Madani. Fighting has also flared in the mountainous Kordofan region. Meanwhile, the battles for Khartoum and Omdurman haven't stopped, and SAF troops scored a rare victory there in February 2024.

Sudan's civil society is diverse. There's a tier with a track record of involvement in political processes that backed the supposedly transitional administration that emerged after the **2021 coup**. There are established CSOs that advocate for rights and provide essential services. And then there are the resistance committees: neighbourhood-level groups that formed to play a crucial role in

the 2019 revolution that ousted former dictator Omar al-Bashir and that have continued to defy military rule.

The committees practise internal democracy, making decisions by consensus, and have consistently called for democratic government. They reject the calculations of the outside world, which tried to engineer a form of military rule to guarantee stability that would inherently result in oppression. During the conflict, they've also become a key provider of essentials such as food and water, healthcare services and life-saving information.

Diverse resistance committees worked together to **develop a plan** for transition, but domestic forces and the outside world consistently reject demands for democratic civilian rule as somehow too ambitious. Now the army is **targeting** people involved in resistance committees.

Attacks on civil society are part of a broader wave of violence towards civilians by the SAF, RSF and other militias. The UN has reported that since April, **over 12,000 people** have been killed and **7.76 million people** have been displaced, giving Sudan the unenviable record of having the world's highest number of displaced people. Cholera has broken out in the chaos along with other diseases such as dengue fever, malaria and measles, putting the health system under unprecedented strain. In the worst-affected regions, food, water and essential medications are scarce.

Armed forces are targeting humanitarian workers, hindering their ability to provide vital help, and **journalists**. On top of this, at the start of December the SAF-led government **terminated** the mandate of the UN Integrated Assistance Mission in Sudan, which was tasked with supporting transition to democratic rule.

Outside states are making self-interested calculations about which side to back, since Sudan's size and position between East and North Africa give it strategic significance. The United Arab Emirates is reportedly supplying the RSF with arms. Russian mercenaries also seem to be on its side. Both countries have an interest in Sudan's goldmines. On the other side, Egypt has always backed the military establishment, Iran may be supplying Burhan with weapons, and Ukraine special forces are **reportedly engaged** on SAF's side.

Meanwhile states aren't providing anywhere near the aid needed: at the year's end, the UN reported it had received only **39 per cent** of the funding it appealed for.

Outside states have consistently been guilty of wishful thinking, assuming the only way to ensure stability is to work with military leaders. Every process attempted since the 2021 coup has empowered the military leaders now at war, showing the folly of this approach.

The current conflict makes the strongest possible case for democratisation instead of continuing military rule. Power should belong to neither of the warring generals but to all the people of Sudan. The international community should take grassroots civil society, and particularly the resistance committees, seriously.

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➤ [SUDAN'S CONFLICT NEEDS CIVIL SOCIETY SOLUTIONS](#)



Protesters hold a national flag during an Independence Day demonstration in Niamey, Niger on 3 August 2023.

Sahel: military rule fails to make a difference

Elsewhere across the Sahel, armies have taken over several states in recent years. In 2023, Niger joined its neighbours Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali in being run by the military ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#). As in previous cases, a key justification the army used was the failure of civilian government to get to grips with a jihadist insurgency that has sprawled across borders.

States in the region under military rule have typically moved away from old relationships with the west, particularly former colonial power France, and also UN bodies, embracing closer cooperation with Russia. This often means welcoming Russian mercenaries who extract resources such as gold in return for fighting insurgents. Most mercenaries come from what was the Wagner Group, **rebranded** as the Africa Corps following its takeover by Putin.

Russian mercenaries are reportedly involved in as many as **18 African countries**. In Mali, they actively take part in combat – and have **killed civilians**. Increased Russian involvement is often preceded by intensive campaigns of pro-Russia, anti-France disinformation, as seems to have been the case in **Niger**.

There's generally high public support for military coups and shifts towards Russia, based on a narrative of past failures to tackle the security crisis. People whose lives are plagued by insecurity tend to be ready to embrace anything new that promises to change the situation. This trend can also be seen in **El Salvador**, where the president is currently highly popular thanks to draconian security policies that have subdued gang violence, enabling him to accumulate and concentrate power ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#).

The Niger junta has so far followed the pattern. When Mali's government kicked French forces out, Niger became the base for France's regional military operations. Social movements in Niger **protested** to demand French withdrawal and people waved Russian flags when celebrating the coup. The junta **tore up** military cooperation agreements with France and suspended French broadcasters. In October, it **ordered** the UN's top official in Niger to leave. In December, it ended two military agreements with the European Union (EU) and **met** with Russian military officials. The head of Chad's junta also **met** with Putin in January 2024, signalling a potential shift from its former strong alignment with the west.

However, there's no evidence military rule or the import of Russian mercenaries make any difference to the security situation. They haven't in the countries that had military coups in previous years. The insurgency continues and the violence has, if anything, **increased**, while the humanitarian situation has only **worsened**.

There's another problem for civil society. Even if some civil society groups initially welcome coups in response to insecurity,

juntas invariably crack down on civic freedoms. In Niger, the new government has restricted protests and the **media**, following in the footsteps of **Burkina Faso, Chad** and **Mali**. These restrictions will ultimately make it harder for civil society to call for change when disaffection kicks in again.



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➤ NIGER COUP: A FURTHER BLOW FOR DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA

Myanmar's coup-turned-conflict

It's three years since Myanmar's coup, and ingrained conflict has set in. The military held power for decades in the past, so the generals may have suspected little resistance when they toppled the elected government in February 2021. But the ousted National Unity Government is fighting a military campaign, in many cases alongside long-established ethnic militia groups. Major parts of the country aren't under the army's control.

Civil society is doing all it can to respond to humanitarian needs, defend human rights and seek a path to peace. Civil society groups in Myanmar and the region have developed a **plan** calling for an international response to end military violence, including through sanctions, an arms embargo and an ICC referral.

Civil society is also demanding that the key regional body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), gives the conflict priority and talks to the many groups seeking a return to democracy. So far that hasn't happened, with ASEAN sticking to a long-discredited **plan** and governments in the region showing

signs of wanting to normalise relations with the junta. Little progress can be expected as the authoritarian government of Laos chairs the organisation in 2024.



Laos has designated a seasoned diplomat as the ASEAN Special Envoy, tasked with meeting junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar. However, the lack of a clear agenda for engaging with supporters of democracy such as the National Unity Government, the National Unity Consultative Council and the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations raises doubts that ASEAN is playing a progressive role. Given historical and political ties between the military junta and the government of Laos, concerns linger about ASEAN's alignment with the interests of people in Myanmar.



AILEEN DIAZ BACALSO
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But sticking to the same path can only mean further carnage. Violence intensified during 2023. In November, three armed groups in the north joined the fight against the junta, forming the Brotherhood Alliance. In what the UN said was the **biggest escalation** in fighting since the coup, the rebel offensive **cut off** key trading routes with China. It seems clear the junta can't win this conflict in the short term.

Pushed into a corner, the military reacted with sickening violence. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar reports that the junta has **bombed** hospitals, schools, villages and displaced people's camps. Its attacks on civilians include mass killings, torture, sexual violence, forced labour and the blocking of essential humanitarian aid supplies.

The junta is trying to control the narrative, including by detaining a reported **64 journalists**. But it can't hide the truth.

In September, the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar **stated** that war crimes and crimes against humanity had intensified. Research **suggests** most of the military's senior commanders are responsible for war crimes. In September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, **condemned** the violence as 'inhumanity in its vilest form'.

The **deadliest** airstrike so far came in April 2023, when military forces reportedly killed 168 people, including 40 children, in the village of Pa Zi Gyi. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which keeps a running count, **reports** that at the time of writing, the junta and pro-military groups have killed 4,598 people and the junta currently detains 26,199 people. Jails are dangerous: 34 political prisoners **died in detention** in 2023.

Many people have been forced to leave their homes. By the end of 2023, **over 2.6 million people** had been displaced, 1.1 million up on the year before. The UN assesses that 18.6 million need humanitarian help. But it received only **29 per cent** of the funding it requested in 2023. Aid workers aren't safe either. The junta arrested or detained at least 142 in 2023.

In July, the army further **extended** the state of emergency, in effect since the coup. In February 2024, it **announced** compulsory military service for young people. The generals are no longer able to pretend everything is on track for the elections they once promised, which they hoped to use to legitimise their rule.

While ASEAN is weak, the army is under some international pressure. In October, the US government **imposed sanctions** on the Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the state-owned corporation that's the regime's main source of foreign income. The EU also **stepped up its sanctions** in December, including against two companies providing arms and generating income for

the junta. In May, India's Adani group gave into pressure and **sold off** its port business in Myanmar.

The international community must keep the junta isolated and refuse it diplomatic recognition. States should sanction the military's network of companies, including MOGE. An April 2023 UN Human Rights Council resolution condemned the junta's violence but **failed to call** for sanctions such as a prohibition on the sale of aviation fuel or an arms embargo. These remain key civil society demands, and they must be acted on to stop the killing.

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> MYANMAR'S MILITARY CATASTROPHE: THREE YEARS AND COUNTING

A frozen conflict ends in Nagorno-Karabakh

The long-running, often stalemated conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended decisively in September, leaving civil society scrambling to help multitudes suddenly forced to flee.

The two sides were long at odds over the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh, within Azerbaijan's internationally recognised borders but until recently populated mostly by ethnic Armenians as the self-declared breakaway Republic of Artsakh. The dispute resurfaced when the two countries became independent at the end of the cold war.

Historically Armenia had the upper hand, but Azerbaijan regained much of the territory in a 2020 offensive in which thousands died. The remaining breakaway region relied on a narrow



Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh stand in the back of a truck after crossing the border into Armenia on 28 September 2023.

corridor that connected it to Armenia, but Azerbaijan imposed a blockade in December 2022.

Free movement of people to Armenia became impossible. The prolonged blockade led to a humanitarian crisis due to shortages of essential goods – including electricity, fuel and water – and the closure of basic services.



SHUSHANIK NERSEYAN
People in Need Armenia

The consequence was a humanitarian crisis. Normal life shut down. Ten months of blockade wore people down, so the next Azerbaijani attack in September, it was brief. The two sides agreed a ceasefire just a day after the offensive began. A little more than a week later the Republic of Artsakh announced its dissolution.

In 2020, Azerbaijan withdrew a promise to respect Nagorno-Karabakh’s special status. It was clear the government intended simply to absorb the region into Azerbaijan. Given a history of ethnic violence and the much larger size of the Azerbaijani population, ethnic Armenians feared the worse.

When Azerbaijani authorities lifted the blockade, an exodus ensued. Over 100,000 people – almost the entire ethnic Armenian population – fled to Armenia. In what could reasonably be called an episode of forced migration and ethnic cleansing, the territory emptied.

The blockade and offensive were meant to achieve the ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The intentional deprivation of essential resources for survival followed by the direct attack to take over Nagorno-Karabakh, along with the creation of conditions for the Armenian population to leave, indicate that Azerbaijan is not contemplating any peaceful end to the conflict or human rights guarantees for Armenian people to feel safe in their homes and continue living in Nagorno-Karabakh.



LIDA MINASYAN
Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central and North Asia Collaborative Fund

The conflict and its aftermath passed with minimal attempts at international intervention. Azerbaijan uses its oil wealth to build strategic relations with European states and project a positive

international image, including by hosting the next climate summit, COP29 ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. Russia, preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, is no longer the solid partner for Armenia it once was. Turkey, Azerbaijan’s staunchest ally, is stepping into the regional space vacated by Russia. As a result, perpetrators of human rights abuses are unlikely to face accountability.

Azerbaijan is an authoritarian state where two generations of the same family have held power since 1993. Its civic space is closed, leaving no scope to criticise the state’s actions. The government cracked down further following its victory, ahead of an early presidential election held in February 2024 that wasn’t remotely free or fair and gave the incumbent a fifth consecutive term. In the month following Azerbaijan’s victory, authorities reportedly arrested over **20 people** for criticising the offensive. The state has continued to arrest journalists and dissidents since.

The conflict may be over, but long-term issues will need to be addressed. Armenia has a new population group, resigned to never returning home. People have enduring needs, both material and psychological. Civil society, having worked to provide emergency help during the exodus, must now be enabled to play a full role in shaping the broader response, which must include accountability for rights violations committed during the conflict.



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► **NAGORNO-KARABAKH: FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES OF A NEGLECTED CONFLICT**

Ethiopia’s unanswered questions

Ethiopia is home to another conflict the state desperately wants to say is over. A two-year war between federal forces and insurgents from the Tigray region supposedly ended in November 2022, with a peace deal signed that confirmed the federal government’s victory. But violence continues in several parts of the country, particularly the Amhara region, and there’s a growing **food crisis**. The state is still cracking down on civil society, **opposition protesters** and **independent media**, and uses internet shutdowns to limit the flow of information.

The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia **documented** that Eritrean forces – which fought on the federal government’s side – and Amhara militias have continued to commit rape and sexual violence since the Tigray peace deal came into effect. Amnesty International has **found evidence** that war crimes and possible crimes against humanity have been committed since the peace agreement was signed. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has **found** evidence of extrajudicial killings of civilians by government forces in Ahmara. It’s **reported** that in January 2024, federal troops went door to door to door killing civilians in the Amhara town of Merawi.

The state shows no real interest in halting rights violations or holding perpetrators to account – particularly those on its side. The UN Commission’s report found that the government’s transitional justice process doesn’t meet international standards. It says the government is failing to investigate human rights violations and isn’t providing support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Victims **don’t trust** the state to take them seriously.

The government wants to present the conflict as resolved and turn the page with the international community. It successfully

lobbied for the closure of the Commission of Inquiry of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Its mandate was **terminated** in June after two years, without ever producing a report. And then the UN Commission's mandate was quietly allowed to expire at the year's end. It needed a vote at the UN Human Rights Council to renew it, but following Ethiopia's lobbying, no vote occurred.

Civil society's **calls** to continue these international inquiries went unheeded because states were persuaded to move on for the sake of maintaining relations with a regionally strategic country. As conflicts rage elsewhere, this one has quietly slipped from the headlines.

Perhaps emboldened by the lack of accountability over its wars in Tigray and Amhara, in January 2024 the Ethiopian government announced an agreement with Somaliland that threatens to further fuel regional tensions. Ethiopia, landlocked since Eritrea became independent in 1993, **announced a deal** to lease a stretch of coastline from Somaliland, a de facto nation within Somalia's borders with no international recognition. It's suggested Ethiopia might recognise Somaliland in return, provoking an angry response from Somalia.



International involvement should aim to support Ethiopia and Somalia in reaching a mutually agreeable solution. This requires careful diplomacy to avoid exacerbating existing tensions or creating new problems. It's also essential to urge those with vested interests in the region to avoid exploiting this situation for their agendas. De-escalation must be the primary objective.



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All sides must take every precaution to ensure the current dispute doesn't spark another armed conflict. At the same time, the Ethiopian government must listen to civil society's calls to ensure accountability for human rights crimes and allow people to mobilise, campaign and express dissent.



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> ETHIOPIA: NO PEACE, NO JUSTICE

Haiti's gang violence spirals beyond control

In Haiti violence comes from a different source – but the impacts on people's lives are just as deadly. Gang violence grips the country. Civil society, a source of ideas often ignored by the government and the international community, criticises proposals for international intervention and calls instead for a broad-based transitional government to help steer Haiti towards safety.

Gang violence has flourished in the wake of the July 2021 assassination of President Juvenal Moïse. It's now known that a group of mostly Colombian mercenaries carried out the assassination, but it still isn't clear who ordered the hit. One of those accused of complicity is Moïse's acting replacement, Ariel Henry. But he isn't among 50 people recently **indicted** over the assassination, including Moïse's widow Martine Moïse and former prime minister Claude Joseph, in what they claim is a politically motivated move by Henry. Meanwhile Henry has formal political power but no mandate. The terms of all elected government officials have expired.

Criminal gangs have thrived in the vacuum. It's estimated that gangs control around half of Haiti. The capital, Port-au-Prince, is ground zero in a bloody battle between rival gangs. The UN Integrated Office in Haiti **estimates** that during 2023 around 3,960 people were killed, 1,432 injured and 2,951 kidnapped, although the real figures may be higher, since many crimes go unreported.

Gangs target peace activists and **journalists**. They use systematic sexual violence to control communities through fear. They're also skilled at extracting resources, including through kidnapping for ransom.

Webs of corruption link gangs with judges and police officers, leading to widespread impunity. The criminal justice system is weak and police **ill-equipped**. As a result, there are **no recent** reported prosecutions or convictions for gang violence. Haiti has no army: it was disbanded in 1995 after multiple coup attempts.

Those who can flee are doing so, facing hostility and danger. They're not welcome in the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti and is building a border wall. They're forced to take risky routes to more distant countries. And even if they make it to their destination, they're not safe. In the first half of 2023 alone, **over 115,000** were sent back to Haiti against their will.

Some have responded to violence by forming **vigilante groups** that have carried out lynchings of suspected gang members, and have also claimed victims with no involvement in gangs.

Violence has fuelled a dire humanitarian situation. People struggle to access essentials, including food and water. Cholera has returned and many children are malnourished. The insecurity situation limits humanitarian access, and as in Myanmar and



People flee gang violence in the Pétion-Ville neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti on 30 January 2024.

Photo by Richard Pierrin/AP via Getty Images

Sudan, funding is lacking. In July, the World Food Programme was forced to **cut** the number of people receiving food support.

In such dire circumstances, international help is needed, but of what kind and to what end remains a matter of civil society concern. Haiti's post-independence history has been one of self-interested foreign interference, particularly by the US government. UN forces have been no saviours either. A peacekeeping mission deployed from 2004 to 2017 was to blame for a wave of sexual abuse and a **cholera outbreak**. International civil society groups, such as those that responded to the devastating 2010 earthquake, have been criticised for taking a high-handed approach and accused of sexual abuse.

The latest plan, laid out in a **UN Security Council resolution** adopted in October, was to send in an international police force to strengthen law enforcement capacity. The US government had pushed this idea for some time but, presumably mindful of its dismal history in Haiti, sought another country to front it.

The government of Kenya **offered** to deploy a thousand police officers, and several Caribbean countries pledged a smaller contingent. But following an opposition lawsuit, in January 2024 a Kenyan court **ruled** the plan unconstitutional.

This latest proposal having failed, Haitian civil society groups want to know what the long-term plan is. They wonder how long the unelected politicians presiding over disaster intend to cling to office, and **call for** a non-partisan transitional government as an early step out of the crisis. They don't want an international response that props up a corrupt elite even longer.

Haiti's civil society is a **crucial source of resilience**, but its role has long been neglected by the domestic government and foreign

states, international organisations and international civil society. It should now be put front and centre. Haitian civil society should at the very least be enabled to play a strong accountability role over any new security initiative that may follow the unravelling of the Kenyan plan. Its demands for a more considered response beyond this sticking-plaster approach must be heard.

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➤ [HAITI: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY](#)

A WORLD OF DISPLACEMENT

Conflict is one of the key causes of migration and displacement, along with political oppression, economic strife and, increasingly, climate change. But despite the numerous conflicts and crises around the ever more interconnected world, states are in denial, refusing to recognise the reality that people are on the move, both within countries and across borders. Conditions for migrants and refugees are becoming ever more hostile.

Rising hostility in Europe

Blatant double standards are on display in Europe. European countries have broadly continued to welcome the many displaced by Russia's war on Ukraine. As of December 2023, there were **6.3 million** Ukrainian refugees, 5.9 living in Europe, along with **3.7 million people** internally displaced within Ukraine.

Even here, however, states are showing signs of compassion fatigue as the war wears on. In Ireland, housing scarcity has fuelled a backlash, expressed through an anti-migrant and anti-Muslim **riot** in Dublin in November 2023. The following month, the government **announced** it would cut its support for new arrivals from Ukraine. Across the EU, with the temporary status they were granted set to expire in 2025, Ukrainians worry about how long they may be able to stay.

But everyone else receives far worse treatment. European governments have shown they're palpably racist by largely welcoming Ukrainians while intensifying their targeting of Black and Brown people from the global south.

In Europe there's a disturbing emerging trend of governments offshoring migration responses: states pay poorer countries to host the migrants they don't want. Australia invented this approach in 2001, dumping people in detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, but it had been an outlier. Now the UK government is pushing ahead with its **Rwanda plan**, intending to deport people who enter the UK unlawfully to Rwanda and force them to stay there even if their asylum claims succeed.

When the government **introduced** the plan, it wasn't clear whether it genuinely expected it to work or the purpose was to put the opposition on the backfoot on a hot political issue, with the ruling party floundering in the polls. Even though the UK receives far fewer asylum seekers than other major European countries, right-wing politicians and supportive media have focused heavy attention on the 'small boats' issue – the arrival of migrants on the UK's south coast after crossing from France. With the government having shut down all safer routes for undocumented migrants, people are making the dangerous crossing across the world's busiest shipping route in unsuitable craft peddled by unscrupulous trafficking gangs.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made the Rwanda plan a headline policy, but civil society has taken to the courts to try to stop him. In November, the UK Supreme Court declared the Rwanda plan illegal on the grounds that Rwanda isn't a safe country for send asylum seekers. Rwanda is an authoritarian state with **repressed civic space**, where critics of President Paul Kagame are routinely assassinated or jailed, LGBTQI+ rights aren't respected and migrants face discrimination.

The UK government faces in two directions, maintaining both that Rwanda is a welcoming country and also that the prospect of going there will deter people from crossing. Its reaction to the Supreme Court ruling has been to rewrite the law. It recently replaced its memorandum of understanding with Rwanda with a treaty. It's backed this agreement up with a draft law, in parliament at the time of writing, that simply waves away the court judgment by declaring Rwanda a safe country. The bill also further limits the ability of people to mount legal actions against relocation decisions.

The government has also **announced** a planned rule change to force government staff to ignore any European Court of Human Rights rulings that halt planned deportations, while many of its more extreme politicians are pushing the idea that the UK should withdraw from the European Court.

“ The human cost of this bill will be catastrophic. Even before it has passed, we have seen the prospect of being sent to Rwanda drive the people we support into extreme anxiety and mental distress, and we continue to see alarming rates of self-harm and suicides. By implementing it, the government will be forcing people to face certain and irreversible harm.



ARIA DANAPARAMITA
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Photo by Henry Nicholls/AFP via Getty Images.

People protest against the UK government's latest Rwanda deportation plan outside the Home Office in London, UK on 18 December 2023.

If the UK's scheme comes into effect, it's likely to spark imitations. There are already indications. Denmark signed a similar memorandum of understanding with Rwanda in 2021, but is yet to follow up on it. Italy's **far-right government announced** a deal with Albania in November to relocate migrants rescued from the Mediterranean Sea, a key migration route. In return, as well as funding, Italy has promised to support Albania's attempts to join the EU. The deal was **temporarily blocked** by Albania's Constitutional Court the following month but **given the go-ahead** in January 2024.

In November, Germany **announced** harsher measures for asylum seekers, including social benefit cuts. Greece, meanwhile, has

put hostility towards migrants and refugees – and the civil society that works to help them – at the centre of its politics. It has put humanitarian workers on trial on serious charges, including espionage, people smuggling, membership of criminal organisations, fraud and money laundering – crimes that can bring jail sentences of up to 25 years. Many have been held in pretrial detention and others have been slapped with travel bans. The state has also put activists under surveillance. The government has criminalised operations to rescue migrants at sea, forcing several organisations to end their efforts. Greece has also been **accused** of illegal pushbacks. It's even **boasted** of 'blocking' people at its border.

These restrictions on the rights of civil society working to help migrants and refugees were a key reason Greece's civic space rating was **downgraded** from narrowed to obstructed by the CIVICUS Monitor in March 2023.

The challenge for civil society is that these actions bring governments a level of public support, which is why parties offer anti-migrant rhetoric ahead of elections. In Greece, the ruling party, long a mainstream centre-right party, won a second term in 2023 by extensively taking on board anti-migrant policies once the preserve of the far right. This offered a textbook example of how proponents of extremist ideas about migrants and refugees shift the political centre.

And yet the irony is that Greece, like Germany and several other European states, is currently experiencing labour shortages in key parts of its economy, including agriculture and services. In response, in December the Greek government **granted** legal recognition to thousands of undocumented migrants.

Greece is far from the only EU country accused of illegal pushbacks. In April, Lithuania **passed a law** legalising pushbacks

in emergency situations. At the regional level, the EU stands accused of poor treatment of migrants and refugees, something that contradicts its lofty human rights principles. Its border agency, Frontex, is alleged to be complicit in violence and other rights abuses. Civil society groups say its policies are at least partly to blame for the deaths **of over 3,000 people** last year.

Things could get worse. In December, EU states **agreed** a Migration Pact that threatens to create detention centres at borders, speed up deportations and allow states to engage in pushbacks in crisis situations. The EU is also muting human rights concerns about countries such as Ethiopia and Tunisia in return for commitments to strengthen their borders and return migrants. Through such actions the EU erodes humanitarian solidarity and dehumanises migrants and refugees.

“ The Rwanda plan is one component of the UK’s increasingly hostile environment for migrants. This is reflective of a wider global trend. Across the world, but particularly in Europe and the USA, governments are pouring money into tightening already highly militarised borders. In times of crisis or economic instability, governments will scapegoat excluded groups and migrants to distract from their own failings. It is the oldest trick in the book.



JULIA TINSLEY-KENT
Migrants’ Rights Network, UK

The implication that wealthier countries can simply pay poorer countries to tidy away their problems also says something disturbing about how they see the world as divided into people who have rights and people who don’t. It smacks of colonialism. Political rhetoric is also helping drive discrimination and vilification in global north countries against people of colour and of non-Christian faiths.

People are paying a lethal price for the closure of safe and legal migration routes. **More than 2,500** people died crossing the Mediterranean in 2023. As these paths get choked off, people take still riskier routes. Now people are trying to navigate the treacherous Atlantic Ocean to get to Spain’s Canary Islands. The number of people making the Atlantic journey from West Africa increased by **over 1,000 per cent** in 2023. CSO Caminando Fronteras (‘Walking Borders’) **reported** that 6,618 people died or disappeared, presumed dead, trying to cross to Spain in 2023, among them 384 children – 18 people a day.

Similar story in the Americas

It’s a similar pattern of hostility and increasing risks in the Americas for people trying to make their way to the USA. In an election year, US politicians have made border control an intensely political issue and are racing to the bottom to see who can posture as toughest on migration.

In October, President Joe Biden **announced plans** to strengthen the USA’s southern border and resume deportation flights to Venezuela, which had been paused. But surely no one can go lower than Donald Trump, the immigrants’ grandson who in December **told a rally** that ‘immigrants are poisoning the blood of our country’ – a straightforward use of white supremacist rhetoric. The politics are such that Republicans have repeatedly delayed backing support to Ukraine unless the deal also includes measures on US border control.

In an intensification of the politicisation of migration, Republican governors of southern states such as Texas have started **bussing** newly arrived migrants to far-off cities run by Democrats, dumping them there with no support, treating them as pawns in

a political game. A vital **voluntary effort** has mobilised in cities such as New York to extend help.

Meanwhile, as in Europe, when routes are closed off people increasingly take riskier ones. Migrants are now making their way north from South American countries through the **Darién Gap**, a dangerous territory that connects Colombia and Panama. In 2023, a record **520,000 people** took this once-rare path, around a quarter of them children and young people. On top of the highly challenging natural barriers they must overcome, they're vulnerable to killings, violence, sexual assault and theft. In December, Médecins sans Frontières recorded a **seven-fold increase** in monthly incidents of sexual violence.

People are also increasingly taking to the seas – and as in Europe, that brings great danger. A new people trafficking route has opened up across the Caribbean Sea via **the Bahamas** – and as in Europe, people are dying. In November, at least 30 people died when a boat from Haiti **capsized** off the Bahamas.

Shifting sympathies in the global south

Despite the politicised anxiety about migration in the global north, it remains a fact that most migration and displacement take place in the global south. Many people are displaced within their countries or across borders to neighbouring global south countries.

Many of Sudan's refugees have, for example, crossed the border into Chad, a low-income country already home to **around a million** displaced people before the conflict began. Refugee centres are struggling to cope and people live in crowded and insanitary conditions.

Camps have insufficient access to clean water, food and sanitation. Lack of electricity makes communication with their families back in Sudan difficult and has led women, in particular, to feel unsafe while moving around the camps after dark. Lack of adequate shelter is of particular concern. These conditions make the refugee community incredibly vulnerable to diseases and elevate the risk of gender-based violence. It is urgent to address these needs in a comprehensive manner, which requires immediate attention and support from the international community.



MONIM HAROON
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Chad

Broadly, so far Chad has shown solidarity towards new arrivals, although that could change as Sudan's conflict continues. Chad also stands accused of being a transit point for weapons that go to the RSF, which is responsible for driving most of the refugees to Chad in the first place.

Elsewhere in the global south there are troubling signs, with governments abandoning long-established humanitarian practices and some sections of the public determined to blame migrants for economic and social problems. In South Africa, for example, xenophobia has soared and an anti-migrant vigilante group **plans to stand** in this year's election.

Pakistan is home to an estimated four million Afghan refugees, including many who've fled successive waves of repression under the Taliban. In October, the government ordered all undocumented refugees to leave, affecting around **1.7 million people**. It justified its move with reference to terrorism, but it seemed to be more about offsetting economic pressure than anything else, with some Pakistanis accusing Afghans of keeping them out of jobs.



Photo by Hasan Mrad/DeFodi Images via Getty Images.

Refugees targeted by growing racist violence demand help evacuating outside the offices of the UN Refugee Agency in Tunis, Tunisia on 21 March 2023.

The government followed up its announcement by detaining many undocumented Afghans and dropping them at the border. People are being forced out even if they were born in Pakistan. Pakistani authorities have reportedly **committed abuses**, including seizing Afghans’ property and tearing up their identity documents, trying to make the situation so hostile that people feel compelled to leave. The Pakistan government also **imposed** ‘exit fees’ of around US\$660 on Afghan refugees who secure a resettlement place in another country – a move that saw it accused of making money out of misery.

For women, girls, LGBTQI+ people, journalists and anyone who’s criticised the Taliban, repression on return is certain. Pakistan’s policies can only worsen the already desperate humanitarian and human rights situation in Afghanistan.

Despite repeated requests, we haven’t received sufficient international support, which is crucial to prevent further escalation of the crisis. Given the current winter conditions in Afghanistan, our immediate focus is on providing shelters and kits for winter. We call on the international community to address these pressing issues and urge the government of Pakistan to halt refugee expulsions at least temporarily and collaboratively devise a strategy in consultation with the authorities in Afghanistan and the UN Refugees Agency.

 **HABIB MALIK ORAKZAI**
Pakistan International Human Rights Organization

Pakistan is following in the footsteps of Turkey, home to an estimated 3.6 million Syrian refugees. The ruling party has stoked xenophobia in reaction to economic trouble and as part of its strategy to win the May **presidential election**. In a sign of how normalised toxic anti-migrant sentiment has become,

the opposition campaigned on a promise to be even harsher towards Syrians.

In a blatant breach of the Refugee Convention's principle of non-refoulement, many people are being forced to return to Syria, where they **risk** arrest and detention. The Syrian state is committing **grotesque human rights abuses**, including against **returnees**. Before being sent back, people are arrested and held in dire conditions in detention centres. Those who remain in Turkey are subjected to heightened levels of **public hostility and violence**.

In Lebanon, also home to many Syrian refugees, state authorities are similarly scapegoating them during a sustained economic and political crisis and deporting them to Syria. Meanwhile Syria's murderous ruler, Bashar al-Assad, has been welcomed back into the regional fold, with states that once ostracised him now **normalising** their relations, potentially paving the way for even more forced returns.

In Tunisia, authoritarian president Kais Saied had led attacks on Black Africans who live in the country, seeking to focus public anger not on the failing economy or his many **attacks on freedoms** but on a visible minority. He's blamed migrants for crimes and violence and spread conspiracy theories that they're part of a plot to undermine the country.

The threat has gone beyond words. In July, the government reportedly rounded up **hundreds of people**, including children and pregnant women, **dumping them** at Tunisia's borders with Algeria and Libya. At the Algerian border, people were stuck in the desert at temperatures of over 40 degrees. At the Libyan border, they were exposed to danger in a militarised zone. Some reportedly **died** and others were subjected to sexual violence. In

response to international backlash, the authorities subsequently moved some people to camps. Groups of locals have also committed violent attacks.

There was a time when Saied would have faced international condemnation for stoking racism, but the EU's self-interested focus on controlling migration is letting him get away with it. In July, the EU and the Tunisian government **signed a deal** to provide Tunisia around US\$1.1 billion in funding, including money to prevent migration and return Tunisian migrants from EU countries, since people have continued to flee economic strife and repression. The EU and the Tunisian government have since fallen out, with the Tunisian government **handing back** around US\$65.4 million already received. But as the political manoeuvres continue, there's nothing to suggest life's about to get any easier for Tunisia's Black people.

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- TUNISIA: RACISM ON TOP OF REPRESSION

TIME FOR A CHANGE

2023 was sadly a year of immense and needless human suffering. People who've done nothing to cause conflicts – including children – weren't just the victims of those perpetrating violence but in many cases their deliberate targets. Even when people

escaped with their lives, they were subjected to ongoing cruelty and hostility. Government forces, militias and other violent groups were responsible for widespread attacks on civilians and the infrastructure they rely on. Allied with soaring military spending, recent events have raised the danger that any progress made to make the world more peaceful since the horrors of the Second World War is unravelling.

It needn't be this way. Life mustn't be this cheap. Civil society is urging the path of peace, de-escalation, justice and inclusion. It's demanding that long-established international human rights and humanitarian laws are respected, with consequences for those who don't. It's calling for solidarity with the victims of violence, and collaboration across civil society groups, including women's and youth organisations, trade unions and faith groups, to stop the violence.

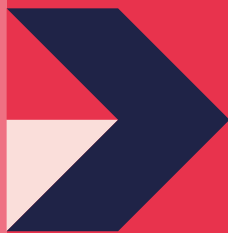
Civil society is often repressed and targeted with violence during conflicts. Global and national processes that try to resolve conflicts are often dialogues of elites, privileging the very people and mindsets responsible for starting conflicts, and sidelining crucial questions of justice and redress. Civil society is standing up for the voices of those on the sidelines, the world's most excluded people who are disproportionately impacted on by conflicts.

The same old approaches to conflicts clearly aren't working, or the world wouldn't be in the sorry state it is. It's time to listen to civil society, include it and enable it, and open up civic space so it can play its proper roles.



People protest against the deportation of Syrian refugees outside the offices of the UN Refugee Agency in Beirut, Lebanon on 19 May 2023.

Photo by Fadel Itan/NurPhoto via Getty Images.



GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: REFORM DESPERATELY NEEDED





Photo by Selcuk Acar/Anadolu via Getty Images.

Banners held by protesters at a demonstration outside UN headquarters in New York City, USA, ahead of a UN Security Council vote on Gaza on 20 February 2024.

The horrors in Gaza are beyond comprehension. The immense daily cruelty and suffering also signify a crisis in global governance. International rules are supposed to make sure that atrocities such as those being systematically perpetrated in Gaza don't happen, and if they do, the international community comes together to halt the bloodshed and bring those responsible to justice. But once again, states are flouting the rules.

Civil society demands the rules be followed, but some states are guilty of outrageous double standards, with the most powerful offering the most blatant shows of hypocrisy. When it comes to today's conflicts, Russia and the USA are among the states choosing to ignore or selectively interpret global human rights and humanitarian laws, blocking action when it suits their interests.

The US government was at the forefront of international denunciation of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The condemnation was justified: Russia has broken pretty much every rule, leveraging its alliances to dampen international criticism.

But the USA and its allies have repeatedly failed to condemn Israel's collective punishment of civilians in Gaza. They may be engaged in quiet diplomacy, but they've acted as a drag on international action and continued to supply the Israeli government with weapons for an assault that's caused tens of thousands of deaths. By backing Israel despite ample evidence of war crimes, an array of western states have badly undermined their argument that respect for human rights motivated their condemnation of Russia's war on Ukraine, adding weight to Russia's response that criticism of its multiple atrocities is biased and self-serving.

Many states seem to think there are two tiers of human rights: those that coincide with their interests and enable them to call out states they oppose, and those that don't, which they turn a blind eye to, such as when they're committed by allies. At the basest level, when states show concern for the human rights of white people but not for the rights of people of colour, their double standards smack of racism.



ONLY **15%** OF 169 SDG TARGETS ARE ON TRACK



THE HUMAN RIGHTS PILLAR GETS ONLY **4.3%** OF THE UN BUDGET



4 OUT OF 5 NON-PERMANENT SECURITY COUNCIL SEAT CHANGES WERE DONE WITH NO COMPETITION



AT LEAST **40** STATES PUNISHED PEOPLE FOR ENGAGING WITH THE UN

This is all a long way from the founding vision of the United Nations (UN). The UN's job, as its **Charter's** first article makes clear, is to maintain international peace and security and achieve international cooperation to promote and encourage respect for human rights. In 1948, a few years after the UN's founding, countries agreed to the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. Its preamble sets out why it's needed: because 'disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind'. In 2023, celebrations of the 75th anniversary of this landmark text were understandably subdued.

The ideas embodied in the UN Charter and Universal Declaration, and in other key agreements such as the 1948 **Genocide Convention** and the 25-year-old **Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**, have never rung truer. But the reality has arguably never been more dismal in the UN's lifetime.

As this report's ► **GO TO CHAPTER** sets out, 2023 was a year of conflicts: in Gaza and Ukraine, but also in Myanmar, Nagorno-Karabakh and Sudan, to name but a few. There's overwhelming evidence in these conflicts of 'barbarous acts' that have flouted fundamental human rights principles, with mass-scale crimes including genocide and crimes against humanity. States and other belligerents are normalising the breaching of principles intended to prevent atrocities, based on the near certainty of impunity from a failing international system.

While the global governance system is essential and is tasked with significant responsibilities, it is not delivering results. It's dysfunctional and fails to respond to the biggest challenges we face – the existential climate emergency, the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and other major conflicts. The system is not dealing with these challenges – it's not anticipating them nor preventing their escalation.



NATALIE SAMARASINGHE
Open Society Foundations

The need for a more democratic, effective and robust global governance system became increasingly clear during 2023. But the direction of travel may be the opposite. Alternatives such as the BRICS group, expanded through the inclusion of a slew of repressive states at China's instigation, are no improvement.

As trust in the system declines, the hypocrisy of global north states gives considerable scope for authoritarian regimes such

as China and Russia to position themselves as champions of the global south, channelling justified anger into the construction of an even less democratic global order with even fewer barriers to impunity for human rights abuses.

The collapse of the rule of law, coupled with failures by the UN system to establish just and effective responses and address global challenges, has undermined trust in leaders and institutions. These challenges are interconnected and can only be addressed by interconnected responses, through a reinvigorated multilateralism, placing the UN, its Charter and its values at the centre of joint efforts.



FRANCESCA RESTIFO
International Bar Association Human Rights Institute

Civil society wants a rules-based international order, where states are equal and consistently follow clear laws and policies to tackle climate change, end poverty, address deep economic inequality, de-escalate conflicts and prevent genocide and other gross human rights violations.

Civil society is a key source of solutions to strengthen international rules, and is looking for some matching moral leadership from states, their heads and international institutions, in a world where that seems in short supply. Civil society needs a seat at the table, something it's so often denied.

There's a potential big opportunity approaching to start changing for the better: the UN **Summit of the Future**, to be held in September 2024. The summit will bring world leaders together to discuss ideas for reform and agree a Pact for the Future. For civil society, the summit could be a make-or-break moment for the UN. Civil society is doing its best to engage and urging ambition – but is anticipating another disappointment.

ISRAEL: IMPUNITY ENABLED BY INTERNATIONAL INACTION

Security Council failures

Nowhere is the UN's weakness more apparent than where it needs to be strongest, at the UN Security Council. The Council took a full six weeks after the killings began to **pass its first resolution** on the assault on Gaza. The delay was the fault of some of the Council's five permanent members, with the USA and Russia variously vetoing four earlier proposals. By the time the resolution passed on 15 November, Israeli forces had killed considerably more than 10,000 people.

On 22 December, after multiple deferred votes, the Council passed a **second resolution** demanding immediate, safe and unhindered humanitarian access sufficient to meet the scale of the crisis and calling for the UN to play a key role in coordinating humanitarian response. The December vote came after UN Secretary-General António Guterres **invoked** article 99 of the UN Charter. The rare use of this mechanism, which allows the Secretary-General to bring a matter to the Security Council's attention, raised the alarm about the desperate seriousness of the situation and helped bring pressure for the Council to act.

Neither proposal received unanimous support. They passed because states with veto powers were persuaded to abstain in return for watered-down language. Both Russia and the USA abstained in December. At the time of writing, progress towards a further resolution appears to have stalled.

The seriousness of the violence demanded stronger decisions – but the resolutions represented a step forward of a kind. The November vote was the first time the Security Council passed



Photo by Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images.

The UN Security Council meets at UN headquarters in New York City, USA on 24 October 2023 to discuss the situation in Gaza.

any kind of resolution on Israel-Palestine relations since 2016. Ever since, the USA used its veto to prevent action.

Security Council decisions are supposed to be legally binding – but Israel’s immediate response in November was to announce it would ignore the resolution. It’s also done little to act on the December resolution, and is still allowing nowhere near enough aid in. Israel has a history here, having ignored a string of binding Security Council decisions, along with those of the Human Rights Council and General Assembly. Among these is the **2016 Security Council resolution** that confirmed Israel’s settlements in Occupied Palestinian Territories constitute a flagrant breach

of international law and further occupations must immediately cease. Israel is behaving like a rogue state unwilling to stick by the rules, protected by its powerful ally from sanctions of the kind imposed on other egregious human rights violators.

The same deadlock has been seen with Russia’s war on Ukraine, where the aggressor is one of the permanent five. In a blatant conflict of interest and the clearest possible flouting of the Council’s principles, Russia has repeatedly used its veto power to ensure the Council makes no decision on the war. It has used the Council to **spread disinformation** about its invasion. It was even free to **hold** the Council’s rotating chair in April – the month after the International Criminal Court (ICC) **issued** arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and an associate for the war crime of unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia.

The impasse over Ukraine gave impetus to the Security Council reform debate. Momentum is building for ideas to expand the Council’s permanent membership to encompass some major global south countries – although that wouldn’t solve the problem of states making self-interested calculations when exercising their powers. Big global south players like India and South Africa face accusations of wanting to get onto the Council not to help it do its job better, but to instrumentalise its power just like the current permanent members.

Civil society has put forward several reform proposals, including the development of protocols to moderate and reduce veto use and enhanced public access to present evidence and improve accountability. But political will remains lacking. At the opening of the UN General Assembly last September, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy **proposed** a procedure whereby two-thirds of General Assembly members could vote to overturn a Security Council veto – but the debate that followed was **vague and inconclusive**.

The Security Council must open itself up to civil society advocacy and scrutiny. Civil society must be able to exert pressure so Security Council members leave their self-interest at the door and make decisions strictly in line with the UN Charter.

Decision making is dysfunctional because of the nature of our global governance institutions. The UN is basically a congress of ambassadors tasked with defending each country's national interest as perceived by their governments. The dynamic is of competition rather than collaboration, so you end up with the lowest-common denominator compromises.



JOHN VLASTO
World Federalist Movement

With efforts largely stalled at the Security Council, concerned states tried to use other parts of the UN system. They took to the UN General Assembly, where each state has a vote but resolutions are non-binding. The General Assembly **passed a resolution** calling for an immediate truce on 27 October and **another** overwhelmingly supporting a humanitarian ceasefire on 12 December.

But voting patterns clearly showed the national interests and international alliances at play. In December, the USA voted against the resolution and several other global north countries abstained. This vote at least showed some shift away from support for Israel compared to the situation in October, with the sheer scale of Israel's atrocities presumably changing the calculations of some states. But with 153 votes for, 10 against and 23 abstentions, the resolution fell far of the near unanimity consistent with a commitment to uphold the UN's principles.

The UN had seen this before, but in mirror image: at the **General Assembly vote in February 2022** calling for an immediate end to

the war in Ukraine. Then, Russia's circle of loyal allies and captive states voted against and **32 others abstained**, most clearly motivated by strategic relationships with Russia. Voting patterns were reminiscent of the cold war.

In both cases political leaders made narrow calculations of national self-interest rather than a determination to respect international human rights and humanitarian laws. The result of these practices is an international system that fails at the highest level.

ICJ and UNRWA in the spotlight

Double standards have also been in plain sight in the **case** South Africa brought to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the UN body that adjudicates disputes between states. South Africa accuses Israel of breaches of the Genocide Convention. The Court rapidly **issued an interim ruling** in January 2024, overwhelmingly backed by its judges.

The ruling ordered Israel to take action to prevent and penalise genocidal acts, curb genocidal statements and ensure humanitarian access. To the disappointment of many, it stopped short of ordering a ceasefire, but it's hard to see how Israel could comply with the Court's ruling without drastically and immediately changing its tactics.

It is only through adherence to humanitarian principles and the rule of law that we can shift away from armed conflict. It is our collective responsibility to prevent future generations experiencing prolonged cycles of violence in which human rights and basic humanity are compromised.



NESHAN GUNASEKERA
International Association of Lawyers against Nuclear Arms

The ICJ is enormously important. It is the highest court we have, and its rulings should be adhered to. There is also an essential role for the international community to play in protecting and supporting the ICJ, complying with its rulings and fostering their enforcement. That is often lacking. There should be no place for double standards.



THOMAS VAN GOOL
PAX

ICJ orders are binding, but that doesn't mean they can be enforced. The UN Security Council has to act, and veto powers come into play here too. In 2022, when Ukraine brought a case under the Genocide Convention, the ICJ went further than with Gaza, ordering Russia to halt its invasion, but Putin simply ignored the ruling. Israel has made clear it intends to do the same, counting on the US veto, and hasn't stopped its slaughter or restriction of humanitarian access.

Global north states are showing tremendous hypocrisy towards the ICJ's decision on Israel. In 2019, The Gambia brought a case against Myanmar accusing it of committing genocide against its Rohingya population. In November, six states – five from Europe plus Canada – **joined the case** to support The Gambia's position. Among these, the UK submitted an argument that actions such as the systematic deprivation of food and medical services and forced displacement could be considered acts of genocide, particularly when committed against children. Yet, the UK **hasn't** made the same argument about similar acts Israel is carrying out in Gaza. In November, US President Joe Biden **said** that the ICJ was 'one of humanity's most critical institutions to advance peace'. And yet his government attempted to rubbish the case brought by South Africa, describing it as 'meritless'.

We are witnessing a hierarchy of victimhood and an arbitrariness in compassion and condemnation. Mounting evidence of atrocity crimes in Gaza has revealed blatant double standards in our response to crisis situations, particularly by states that pride themselves as champions of human rights, justice and international law.



ELISABETH PRAMENDORFER
Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

The ICJ interim ruling could at least have focused moral pressure on Israel and its allies, but the spotlight quickly shifted to UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestine. Hot on the heels of the Court's orders, Israel stated it had **shared a dossier** with allies claiming that some UNRWA staff took part in the horrendous attacks against people in Israel committed by Hamas and other groups on 7 October.

The allegations centred on 12 out of over 13,000 UNRWA staff deployed in Gaza. UNRWA immediately fired several of the accused and the UN launched an independent inquiry. But the international repercussions were swift. **Eighteen states**, including the USA and Germany, UNRWA's biggest funders, quickly announced they'd pause their funding. The total funding put on hold reportedly stood at **around US\$440 million**.

Not all states were as quick to rush to judgment. Denmark, Ireland and Norway committed to continuing their support and Portugal and Spain **announced** additional aid. But the scale of the funding suspensions threatened to bring UNRWA's work to a rapid halt. Immediately after the ICJ had ordered unfettered delivery of humanitarian aid, the UNRWA accusations put in doubt the lives of an estimated **two million-plus Gazans** forced by the conflict to rely on the agency for their survival.

Multiple global north states seemed to be hearing what they wanted to hear, leaping on apparently **flimsy** evidence to do Israel's bidding against a UN agency it has always opposed – and at the perfect time to change the headlines. Once again they looked like hypocrites, undermining the international system they claim to uphold.

Human rights pillar takes a backseat

Given the scale of human rights violations committed by Israel, there's been much activity in Geneva, home to the UN human rights system. In the early months of the conflict, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, **called** for a ceasefire and an end to collective punishment. Multiple UN special rapporteurs and independent experts drew attention to the **risk of genocide** and urged a ceasefire. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called for a ceasefire and **condemned** the escalation of attacks by Israel against civilian targets. These were just a small number of the calls for action and expressions of concern made by UN human rights bodies and officials.

But the problem is that it was all too easy to ignore. Human rights are one of the three pillars of the UN, alongside peace and security and sustainable development. But they're very much the poor relation. The human rights pillar gets only **4.3 per cent** of the UN's regular budget. New initiatives depend on voluntary contributions and are routinely underfunded.

The problems with funding were plain to see in January 2024, when UN offices in Geneva went through a temporary **shutdown** due to a liquidity crisis, unable to meet heating costs at the height of a human rights emergency. Around 50 UN member states – over a quarter – were reported to have failed to pay their 2023 contributions fully or partly.



At a press conference in Geneva, Switzerland on 6 December 2023, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk says that Palestinians in Gaza are living in 'utter, deepening horror' and calls for an urgent ceasefire.

Photo by Fabrice Coffrini/AFP via Getty Images.

It was the clearest possible sign that human rights just aren't being taken seriously enough, despite the pronouncements by leaders of powerful countries. As global human rights challenges mount up, states should urgently reassess their priorities.

For the global governance system to be more robust, effective and democratic, the three UN pillars – security, development and human rights – should have equal importance. Today, a lot of emphasis and funding are placed on the security and development pillars, while the human rights pillar is underfunded and under-resourced. While the UN Security Council and the UN Economic and Social Council are primary UN bodies, the Council remains a subsidiary one.



MARC LIMON
Universal Rights Group



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- GAZA: INTERNATIONAL HYPOCRISY ON FULL DISPLAY
- GAZA: INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM FAILING LATEST TEST

VOTES WITHOUT COMPETITION

Another challenge with key international bodies on display in 2023 was the selection of members through non-competitive elections, including the Security Council's non-permanent members and the Human Rights Council.

The UN is divided into five regional blocs, each of which has seats on the Human Rights Council and Security Council, with

members rotating on and off each year. But every year, regional blocs mostly put forward only as many candidates as seats available, meaning they win unopposed.

There were five non-permanent Security Council seats to fill in 2023 and only one went to a competitive vote. Fortunately, sanity prevailed as Slovenia easily saw off the challenge of Belarus, a staunch ally of Russia and an **authoritarian state** where people are routinely jailed for speaking out. Russia's bid to return to the Human Rights Council also failed – its previous term ended in suspension due to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In a race between three states to choose two East European members Russia came a distant third, beaten by Albania and Bulgaria.

Competitive elections give a valuable chance for civil society to engage, advocate and expose poor human rights performance. They offer opportunities to penalise egregious human rights offenders and reward more democratic states that may be likelier to uphold key UN principles. Positive outcomes however aren't guaranteed: in 2023, Cuba, where civil rights are **systematically repressed**, won a competitive vote for its Human Rights Council seat.

Even when non-competitive slates are on offer, states can communicate disapproval by withholding votes from the worst offenders. That's happened to China when it was one of four Asian and Pacific states put forward for four Human Rights Council seats. States still have to vote even when there's no competition, but as a result of a concerted campaign, China got the fewest votes. Burundi, where the government widely represses dissent, likewise came last in the three standing for three seats from the African group.

But such results represented symbolic acts. They didn't stop these human rights abusers sitting on the peak human rights

body for the next three years. The presence of serial and egregious human rights offenders can only tarnish the Human Rights Council's reputation and undermine its ability to act.

In a further absurdity, in November Iran **chaired** the Human Rights Council's Social Forum – an annual dialogue between states, intergovernmental bodies and civil society. The theocratic regime took this role despite its **extended and intensive crackdown** on the women's rights protest movement. The session was held in a largely empty room with many staying away rather than legitimising the blood-soaked regime.

Iran took the chair because it was the only country nominated. For states committed to respecting human rights and ensuring an effective Human Rights Council, the lesson is to engage actively and stop leaving the floor clear for those that aren't.

It isn't only about how states vote, but also about how they act. In September, the UN **presented its annual report** on reprisals imposed on people who cooperate with the UN. The report documented that 40 states punished people for using UN spaces and processes to stand up for human rights and demand accountability. Shockingly, 14 of them were members of the Human Rights Council – almost 30 per cent of the body's members. It's a disgrace that points to a broader problem of a lack of respect for human rights by many states active in the UN.



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SCRUTINY REJECTED

There's another growing danger to the global governance system: repressive states are increasingly bold about refusing to engage with multilateral bodies that try to hold them to account.

In 2023, Ethiopia successfully **lobbied** to end scrutiny mechanisms set up by both the Human Rights Council and the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights in the context of conflict ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

The African Commission's inquiry never produced a report and the UN's commission ended without a vote taking place, its mandate allowed to expire. The Ethiopian government wanted to shut down these processes because they might have contradicted its narrative that its two-year conflict is over and peace has been restored, even though violence continues, no one has been held to account for atrocities and national justice processes are inadequate.

In **Sudan's conflict** between its military and militia, there was a concerning development in December when the government **kicked out** the UN's transitional mission, tasked with helping restore civilian rule. There's also considerable pressure on UN peacekeepers to withdraw from Central and West Africa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo people have held **mass protests** demanding their departure that brought violent military repression.

The UN had a human rights office in Uganda since 2005. But last August, it had to **close** after the government decided not to renew its mandate. In the government's view, it was no longer needed because it had done its job and there were now adequate domestic channels to raise human rights issues.

Ugandan civil society disagrees. Uganda's civic space is **repressed**. Environmental rights activists, **journalists** and **LGBTQ+ people** face threats and attacks, and the right to protest is tightly constrained. The national human rights watchdog, the Uganda Human Rights Commission, lacks resources and depends on the government's cooperation – which isn't always forthcoming.

“ The Ugandan authorities cite the achievement of its goals as a reason not to prolong the UN office's mandate. Civil society groups, however, think its closure will result in the loss of a crucial player in the field of human rights, given the critical role it played in terms of democratisation in Uganda, capacity development, technical assistance and human rights monitoring.



DR LIVINGSTONE SEWANYANA
Foundation for Human Rights Initiative

In February 2024, Venezuela's **repressive government** followed suit, **ordering** the UN's human rights office to close and giving staff three days to leave. The move came in response to international criticism of the government's human rights record.

It isn't only UN institutions being pushed away. In January 2024, three states under military rule – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – **announced their withdrawal** from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The three have been at odds with the body over their failure to make rapid progress towards restoring democratic rule.

ECOWAS imposed sanctions following military coups in recent years as part of its increasingly tough stance to try to stop the normalisation of rule by junta in West Africa – but states run by armies now seem prepared to dismantle regional cooperation rather than accept pressure for democracy. It will take a year for



Protesters hold signs denouncing ECOWAS (CEDEAO, in French) at an Independence Day demonstration in Niamey, Niger on 3 August 2023.

withdrawal to take effect. In any negotiations during this period, ECOWAS shouldn't compromise on fundamental democracy and human rights principles.

LITTLE PROGRESS ON THE SDGS

2023 was supposed to be a big year for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Every UN member state agreed this ambitious set of 17 interconnected goals in 2015, following extensive civil society advocacy. Since the goals are supposed to be met by 2030, 2023 marked the midway point.

The SDGs' vision of a more equal, just, peaceful and sustainable world is one everyone should be able to get behind, but according to the **UN's assessment**, only 15 per cent of 169 targets are on track and almost a third have stalled or seen regression on the 2015 baseline. **Current trends** suggest that when 2030 comes, 575 million people will still live in extreme poverty and 600 million will live with extreme hunger – about the same numbers as in 2015.

We have far-reaching global goals and an international rule of law system, but our commitments lack implementation. The international system lacks sufficient accountability mechanisms and the current power dynamics prevent the effective use of the tools that do exist. To act on the goals and objectives that we set for ourselves, we need to enhance implementation, follow-up and accountability mechanisms.



ANJA OLIN-PAPE
Global Challenges Foundation

The SDGs have never been on track, and the situation has worsened, including due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ripples caused by Russia's war on Ukraine and the connected cost of living crisis, the effects of climate-related disasters and the consequences on all these in increasing debt levels for global south states. Governments are having to spend their budgets on servicing debt rather than meeting the SDGs. Poorer countries are having to borrow at rates up to eight times higher than richer countries, and interest rates have gone up.

The longer-term problem is that the current global governance system isn't set up to deliver the SDGs. Unaccountable bodies such as the G20, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and international financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, command much of the power to make global economic decisions. Civil society has little space to pressure them to meet the SDGs for the benefit of the world's most excluded people. Instead, decisions tend to reflect the interests of the most economically powerful states.

Dire economic conditions for many mean that proposals to reform bodies such as the IMF and World Bank – including to **make them more attuned** to protecting civic space – are gathering momentum. Civil society has long criticised them as reflecting the post-Second World War balance of power, dominated by US and European interests, something at odds with the universal ownership of the SDGs. The choices they make reflect this power imbalance. For example, in **almost all** its pandemic loan agreements, the IMF insisted on global north economic orthodoxy that meant spending cuts or consumption taxes that disproportionately hit the poorest people – a direction opposite to that needed to achieve the SDGs.

It is possible to link the catastrophic failure on the SDGs to a failing global governance system. The measures that would be needed to meet the SDGs, notably debt relief and expanded funding, would require a deep reform of the international financing architecture. Right now, it doesn't make any sense. The global south may receive official development assistance and other financial flows, but a substantial share kind of evaporates in that debt servicing is sent back to the north, notably via debt service to the IMF and World Bank.



ANDY SUMNER
King's College London, UK

International financial institutions also **continue to provide financing** for destructive fossil fuel projects and other development initiatives that cause environmental destruction, while global south states lack funding to switch to renewable energies, adapt to the impacts of climate change and make up for the loss and damage caused by climate change ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#).

In April, the UN and the government of Barbados **launched** the Bridgetown Initiative 2.0, a joint call for a large-scale SDG stimulus package to enable countries struggling with debt and liquidity to invest in the SDGs and improve their resilience to climate change. The initiative also urged long-term reform of the international financial system. This is one of several proposals to reorient the international financial system around climate response and resilience – but more urgency is needed.

For these reasons the UN held a special SDGs summit during the high-level opening week of the General Assembly in September. Ahead of the summit Guterres put forward an **SDG stimulus plan** with the aim of unlocking US\$500 billion in funding to help realise the goals.

But the summit produced no fresh commitments. Leaders of some major economies – including China, France and the UK – were absent, signalling the low priority they accord the SDGs. US President Joe Biden was the only leader of a permanent Security Council member to attend. The SDG stimulus plan didn't get traction. In finalising the SDGs summit's **declaration**, states struggled to agree on fundamental issues such as climate change and women's rights. Civil society's innovative ideas – such as swapping debt for climate financing, new global tax rules and wealth taxes – remained off the table, underscoring a bigger problem of civil society's exclusion from UN elite dialogue circles and national-level processes to achieve the SDGs.

Civil society is also excluded from oversight of performance in meeting the SDGs. Ever since their inception, the SDGs have faced major accountability deficits at national and global levels. Too many states are happy to mark their own homework, with reporting at the UN voluntary and often treated as a PR opportunity to talk up the achievements of governments and leaders.

There's little sign states are willing to address the problem. The SDGs summit's declaration included a commitment to work with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society. But it said nothing about the restrictions that mean **just 2.1 per cent** of people now live in countries with open civic space.

This omission in the statement came despite the fact that SDGs 16 and 17 make clear that civil society must play a full role in achieving the goals. **SDG16 target 10** calls on states to protect fundamental freedoms, with one of its indicators offering a stark reminder of what happens when they don't: it tracks the number of killings of human rights activists and others who defend human rights. States with horrendous track records of attacking civil society claim they want to realise the SDGs – but the SDGs aren't intended to be cherrypicked and can't be achieved

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



without the ability of people to make demands and monitor decisions that comes with open civic space.

Currently, populist politicians who attack the values implicit in the SDGs are making political headway ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#). Conspiracy theories and disinformation are gaining ground that portray the SDGs as part of a plan to create a totalitarian global government and those who advocate for them, including civil society, as a demagogic global elite. Given this, to advance the SDGs, it's now more important than ever that states and the UN recognise and defend civil society and embrace global governance reform. Otherwise, the SDGs will become yet another example of global failure, and of hypocrisy on the part of national leaders where actions don't meet their lofty promises.

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► [SDGS: TIME TO GET BACK ON COURSE](#)

CIVIL SOCIETY EXCLUDED AT UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Apart from the SDG summit and a Climate Ambition Summit that produced no progress on climate change, it was business as usual at the high-level opening week of the UN General Assembly. As is customary, presidents and prime ministers converged on New York to give self-serving speeches. Many took the opportunity to talk up their achievements, and some to spread disinformation. Among them was Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who told a pack of lies about his country's war on Ukraine.

For civil society, it was also distressingly business as usual. In a repeat of past practices, accredited civil society organisations (CSOs) that usually engage with the UN were largely locked out of UN headquarters, forced to mount events in locations as close as they could get. The only exception was an **SDG Action Zone**, set up within the perimeter to give civil society access to discussions on the Goals, but this was a ticketed rather than open space.

Civil society's back-of-the-queue status epitomised a bigger problem. Although Guterres was emphatic in his **praise for civil society** and human rights defenders at the opening of the SDGs summit, there's little sign of follow-up on his 2020 **Call to Action on Human Rights** and **Guidance Note on Civic Space**, which opened up the promise of a greater role for civil society. Civil society is urging the UN to develop an evaluation report and action plan to identify areas for improvement.

Civil society's exclusion was underlined in a further weary annual ritual. In February, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) NGO Committee concluded its annual session. The body determines which CSOs receive ECOSOC accreditation, the status that enables interaction with UN institutions. As such it's

the UN’s gatekeeper – and some states on the Committee use their power to keep the gate as closed as possible. Several of its members– Bahrain, China, Cuba, Eritrea and Nicaragua – have closed civic space, and few have open civic space. Repressive states carry their domestic hostility towards civil society into the international sphere.

Their key tool is deferral of decisions. They can delay applications for years, leaving CSOs wasting energies and resources repeatedly jumping through hoops of providing additional information. During its 2023 session the Committee **received** 239 new accreditation applications to add to 321 previously deferred. But from a total of 560 applications, it approved only 214, under half. It only approved 56 previously deferred applications, showing how deferrals can affect CSOs year on year.

States hostile to civil society asked the most questions of CSOs applying, with China in the lead, followed by India, Algeria, Pakistan and Turkey. These are among the states that instrumentalise the Committee to suppress civil society, including CSOs from their countries.

This problem has plagued the Committee for years. If the UN is serious about what it says about civil society, it needs to put thought into finding a way through the impasse.



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› UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY: PR AND PLATITUDES

AN EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL ORDER: BRICS AND THE G20

Meanwhile, outside the UN the international order is changing – but the question is who gets to change it, and to what ends.

The BRICS summit, held last August, agreed to admit six new members to its titular line-up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. All the states that took up their positions in January 2024 – Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – severely **restrict civic space**. Argentina was the only incoming member that broadly respects civic space, but in December its **new president** Javier Milei **announced** it wouldn’t be joining.

Civil society has long worked to try to open up the UN and criticises its institutions for not being sufficiently democratic and accountable. But the emerging alternatives are still worse. The UN has rules centred around human rights, however imperfectly they’re observed, and the decisions it makes are a matter of record. Beyond the Security Council, every state has an equal vote. That isn’t the case with emerging alternatives like BRICS. The rationale behind the expansion of the BRICS group and its membership criteria aren’t remotely clear, but its new intake makes evident that human rights aren’t a consideration.

So far BRICS has largely focused on development and financing. In 2015 it launched its New Development Bank, with membership open to non-BRICS countries. But the annual BRICS summit is a big and highly symbolic event, and remained so in 2023, even though Vladimir Putin was absent, saving host South Africa having to dodge its obligation as an ICC member to arrest him. The summit provides a stage for autocratic leaders like China’s Xi Jinping to grandstand as international statespersons without any prospect of accountability.

China strongly pushed for BRICS expansion, which it characterises as democratisation in counterbalance to a western-centric international order. But rather than addressing the real need to democratise global governance, it perpetuated the notion that national leaders are the only ones fit to make decisions on issues that affect everyone. All that could transpire from the redistribution on offer is some state leaders gaining more power as others lose it.

It won't be genuine reform unless it opens up opportunities for civil society participation. But moving in the opposite direction, BRICS will hold its 2024 summit in Russia, even though it isn't Russia's turn, presumably so Putin can place himself at the centre and position himself as a global leader. In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine Putin deserves international isolation, but this summit takes things in the opposite direction.

The expansion of BRICS and the decision to let Russia host should surely invite questioning of what it really stands for. And the same questions could be posed of the G20, the annual gathering of leaders of powerful economies. Its 2023 summit, hosted by India, epitomised one of the great flaws of state-centric international summitry.

Held just ahead of the high-level opening of the UN General Assembly, the G20 summit offered a key opportunity for states that wield the most power to commit to making some progress in addressing today's major challenges. But that's not what happened.

Instead, the host government went to unprecedentedly lavish lengths to project a positive image of the country's leader, Narendra Modi, ahead of 2024 elections. The evident aim was to position India as a global power and Modi as its unquestionable leader. A summit that India hosted on the simple principle of

rotation was packaged as if world leaders were, by attending, granting Modi special recognition.

The ruling party's hostility towards independent civil society was reflected in an official consultation process held ahead of the summit. The Indian government tightly controlled it and packed it with supporters, simply not inviting Indian activists it disagrees with. An alternative civil society-organised gathering faced **disruption and intimidation**.

For all the PR, the summit produced a statement that said nothing about civil society and made zero progress on key matters such as climate change and Russia's war on Ukraine. With Russia a G20 member, states agreed a compromise statement on its invasion even weaker than the one resulting from the previous G20 meeting in Indonesia.

The G20 summit offered further evidence that global governance can't be trusted to states alone – and certainly not a self-selected elite group of states.

The G20 summit was perhaps the year's most blatant example of how states and leaders hosting important international events use them to bolster their image instead of addressing matters of substance. Civil society levelled similar criticisms at the UAE, host of the COP28 climate summit ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#).

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- BRICS: THE BURGEONING OF AN INTERNATIONAL REPRESSIVE ALLIANCE?
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CIVIL SOCIETY'S WORK TO SHAPE THE RULES

Despite the weaknesses of the global governance system and the challenges of engaging with it, civil society continues to push for the development of new global rules, in the form of international treaties recently agreed or currently under negotiation.

There are many problems here too. Treaties often reflect compromises that fall short of the ambition civil society calls for. Once agreed they tend to have weak enforcement mechanisms. **Evidence suggests** that only treaties relating to finance and trade are taken seriously enough to deliver on their objectives. But despite these problems, civil society engages because conventions offer standards states and the private sector can be held to and create processes that offer opportunities for further engagement and advocacy.

Civil society is a key source of inspiration. In each of the landmark conventions of recent decades, including the Rome Statute that established the ICC, the Landmines Treaty and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, civil society took the lead, developing the ideas, building alliances and urging adoption and ratification. It continues to do so.

Environmental treaties

2023 saw mixed progress on the urgent front of improving global environmental governance. One of the key processes states and the UN concluded in 2023 was the **Oceans Treaty** – the Agreement under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction. The treaty



A nine-metre high monument themed 'turn off the plastics tap' by Canadian activist and artist Benjamin von Wong, made with plastic waste, stands outside the UN Environment Programme headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya on 22 February 2022.

Photo by Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images.

was agreed in March and adopted in June. At the time of writing it has 86 signatories and will come into force 120 days after 60 states have ratified – a milestone yet to be achieved.

The need is great. The health of oceans is rapidly **deteriorating**. Over 70 per cent of the earth's surface is water and most is defined as high seas, areas beyond national jurisdiction that are crucial zones for climate and biodiversity. International law was weak and negotiations to strengthen it dragged on. Two supposedly final sessions in 2022 **failed to agree** a treaty. Key disagreements centred on fishing rights, the distribution of benefits from potentially lucrative **marine genetic resources**, the prospect of opening **the Arctic** up for exploration and the provision of funding to global south countries.

Civil society had no formal representation in the negotiation process but worked hard to develop relationships with supportive states and build pressure for the treaty to be finalised. Now civil society is pushing for widespread ratification and, crucially, implementation by as many states as possible.

Implementation is key, as the Convention of Biological Diversity shows. In December 2022, states **agreed** a Global Biodiversity Framework under the Convention. Following extensive civil society advocacy, its headline target is to conserve and manage 30 per cent of land and seas by 2030. This reflected a key civil society advocacy ask. But campaigners are well aware no global biodiversity targets have ever been met.

So far, states have been slow in producing the national biodiversity strategies and action plans they're required to have in place by the next Biodiversity Convention summit, COP16, to be held in Colombia later this year. And as is so often the case, money is a key stumbling block.

The agreement established a fund that's supposed to provide US\$200 billion per year to support global south countries to implement the biodiversity framework by 2030. Arguments over this almost stopped a deal being achieved. But so far the fund **remains far short** of what's needed. Only Canada, Germany and the UK provided initial contributions. Civil society calls for much more funding. Among its ideas are financing from international banks and innovations such as **debt-for-nature swaps**, in which states sell bonds that back conservation efforts.

Another important treaty is under negotiation – the Plastics Treaty – and as with other environmental conventions, negotiations are dragging on. The latest round of talks was held in Nairobi, Kenya in November, and failed to produce agreement on key points.

Civil society wants an ambitious treaty because the problem is huge. Plastic pollution is everywhere, in the soil and oceans and in human and animal bloodstreams, and the scale of the crisis is growing. But a powerful industry lobby is involved in the negotiations. Plastics are produced from fossil fuels. Part of how fossil fuel corporations are **mitigating the business risk** of potentially falling demand for oil and gas for energy and transport is to push for continued expansion of plastics use. Mirroring what's seen at COP climate summits, some **143 fossil fuel and chemical industry lobbyists** were involved in the Nairobi talks.


Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia are among the states working to slow down and limit the process, **insisting** that the treaty shouldn't include binding targets and shouldn't focus on plastics production, trying to restrict its scope to recycling and waste control. Civil society and some states are making clear this is an inadequate response to the scale of the problem and want the treaty to focus on all stages of the plastics cycle, including design and production, so less plastic is used and what's used is less harmful.

The talks broke up with a messy draft and no agreement on the way forward. The next round is due in Ottawa, Canada in April 2024. Civil society will keep demanding real ambition and progress.

We are optimistic that the need to solve this planetary crisis will prevail. The international community has been failing on climate change and cannot fail on plastics as well. The Plastics Treaty could be a way to show that international cooperation is the best way to solve global problems and that human health and the environment can and must be put ahead of national interests and business interests.



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The pandemic treaty

Civil society once had high hopes that a Pandemic Treaty could help make sure lessons were learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and major mistakes could be avoided next time. In responding to the pandemic, many states took strongly nationalist and self-interested approaches, global institutions were sidelined and vaccines were concentrated in global north countries, reproducing global inequalities. Civil society stepped up **advocacy efforts** for an international agreement, and with more states coming on board, in December 2021 the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a process to develop a pandemic treaty. But civil society’s hopes are being disappointed.

The WHO has held multiple negotiation sessions, the latest last November. But civil society criticises the current draft for **failing** to adequately take human rights standards into account, including the right to health and the right to benefit from scientific progress. States negotiating the treaty haven’t agreed on the core principle of equity – needed to prevent a repetition of a globally unequal response when the next pandemic strikes.

Those most affected by the pandemic have been excluded from negotiations, with global north states dominating the process, bent on protecting the interests of private health and pharmaceutical companies, which have great lobbying power. Big pharma’s evident determination to defend its intellectual property rights can only continue to hinder access to vaccines in global south countries.

The final treaty is due to be adopted at the 2024 World Health Assembly this May, but as it stands civil society expects to have little to celebrate.

Tax, business and human rights

More positively, there’s been some progress towards developing a global tax framework under the auspices of the UN, something civil society and many global south states are united in pushing for. In November, the UN General Assembly **voted** to develop a global tax framework.

This is a crucial issue. Until now the OECD, a club of 38 wealthier states, has determined the global tax regime – and everyone else has had to fall into line. That’s not only unjust – it deprives global south states of the tools they need to tackle scourges such as transnational corporate tax avoidance and apply redistributive approaches to excessive wealth.



Activists call for a climate tax on the rich ahead of the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on 15 January 2023.

In a globalised world taxation should be governed by a body in which all countries have a say rather than an elite group, with the UN its obvious home. But to ensure any new international tax rules are fair and transparent, civil society, having called for this shift, must be fully involved in their development.

A big struggle looms. The November vote revealed a neat divide between powerful global north states defending the status quo and global south states broadly backing change. Even OECD members Chile and Colombia broke ranks to support the resolution, while Mexico and Turkey abstained. To advance change given the power of those standing in their way, global south states need to work with civil society – but for some, this would entail an uncomfortable recognition that civil society has a legitimate role to play.

Meanwhile, there may also be progress in the development of a binding international treaty on business and human rights. Civil society has long advocated for a treaty, since businesses, particularly transnational corporations, have huge impacts on human rights. The ninth session of the working group took place in October and potentially marked a step forward.

For the first time, global north states that have long dragged their feet seemed to accept that a treaty is going to come and rather than debate whether it's needed began to engage in substantive discussions. That includes the UK and USA, and perhaps to lesser extent the European Union (EU). African and Latin American states remain to the fore, pushing for a strong treaty with human rights and environmental protections. In the context of the onslaught in Gaza, several CSOs taking part in the discussions also urge that the convention's text strongly reference international humanitarian law, emphasising the need for due diligence for businesses working in conflict zones.

States disagree on whether the convention should apply to transnational corporations only, all business enterprises or somewhere in between. Civil society is also concerned about the relative lack of consultation with trade unions, and is calling for stronger protections for women, Indigenous people and other excluded groups. There's still much in play and a lot to debate, but 2023 might go down as the year the treaty became a real prospect.

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Tech and artificial intelligence

Civil society broadly supports international treaties because they contribute to the development of an international rules-based order, but some rules could cause more problems than they solve. Civil society has strong doubts about one treaty currently under negotiation, the UN Treaty on Countering the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes, known as the Cybercrime Convention.

Cybercrime is a widespread and growing problem, estimated to cost some **US\$11.5 trillion** in 2023, and states can't tackle it without addressing its cross-border nature. But the problem is what's defined as crime – and who gets to define it. Around the world, cybercrime laws are one of the favoured contemporary tools repressive states use to penalise online dissent. Now those same states are trying to use a global treaty process to strengthen their assault on rights.

Troublingly, Russia initiated the process, backed by a line-up of fellow repressive states: Belarus, Cambodia, China, Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Syria and Venezuela. That alone should ring alarm bells. Civil society questions whether a new treaty is needed, pointing to the existing Council of Europe **Budapest Convention**, which any state can ratify, but most haven't, and that so far **isn't fully operational**.

The negotiation process at least gives civil society a chance to take part in discussions. Civil society opposes a broad treaty that enables states to define what constitutes a cybercrime and gives them further tools to restrict freedoms, including by **expanding state surveillance**. Instead, CSOs want the treaty to respect **human rights principles**. They're calling for a limited convention that focuses on a narrow range of crimes and is consistent with human rights norms, such as the **resolution** on the right to privacy

in the digital age adopted by the Human Rights Council last October, which contains strong standards on surveillance systems.

The latest round of talks broke up in February 2024 with no consensus. Civil society will continue to sound the alarm about the dangers of a regressive convention.

CSOs, as well as the private sector, are bringing vital perspectives to the table on the potential impacts of proposals made in the treaty negotiations, on practical issues, on data protection and on human rights. Fundamentally, CSOs are providing fact-checking and evidence to back up or challenge the arguments made by member states as proposals are made and potential compromises are discussed.



IAN TENNANT

Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

Civil society is also raising human rights concerns in the evolving field of AI regulation. The rapid burgeoning of AI and its ability to change pretty much every sphere of human life far exceeds the current state of regulation, and there's little doubt new rules are needed to prevent harm and mitigate risks of states and companies using AI to restrict human rights. Regulation can't be left to tech entrepreneurs, happy to move fast and worry about the consequences later, or states, many of which see repressive potential in AI. The EU rather than UN is leading current efforts. The European Parliament is expected to vote on an EU-wide law this year, and given the bloc's economic and political power, it will have global repercussions.

Civil society's concerns about the current text of the draft law focus particularly on the uses of AI in mass surveillance and emotion recognition, and the potential of these to be used against excluded groups, particularly in policing and border control. As

the EU's draft law has developed, protections against the use of measures such as facial recognition have been eased. With the law moving towards finalisation, civil society will keep pushing to eliminate loopholes and protect fundamental human rights.

“ We'll keep pushing for the best possible protection of human rights and we'll continue to focus on the demands that boil down to empowering affected people with a framework of accountability, transparency, accessibility and redress, drawing limits on harmful and discriminatory surveillance by national security, law enforcement and migration authorities, and pushing back on Big Tech lobbying by removing loopholes that undermine regulation.



NADIA BENAISSA
Bits of Freedom



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- UN CYBERCRIME CONVENTION: COULD THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE DISEASE?

UN REFORM: AN AGENDA FOR THE SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE

New treaties and those under negotiation show that the global governance system continues to evolve, if too slowly. Civil society will keep pushing proposals for UN reform as the best hope of tackling global problems and developing international standards to advance human rights.



A civil society representative delivers an oral statement at a UN session.

The next opportunity is the September 2024 Summit of the Future, **pushed back a year** by global south states keen not to divert attention from the SDGs summit. Civil society is engaging with the preparatory process as much as it's able to and will be looking for genuine reform decisions rather than well-worked platitudes. The lack of follow up to the 2020 Call to Action mustn't be allowed to happen again.

“ The Summit of the Future will be a crucial opportunity for young people and human rights defenders to contribute to shaping the UN we aspire to and need if we are to have the future envisaged in post-2015 agendas.



MARTA BENAVIDES
Peace campaigner, El Salvador

“ Through a combination of critical mass, quality ideas, enlightened global leadership and deft multilateral diplomacy, civil society can team up with champion governments, alongside dynamic leaders in global and regional institutions, to ensure that this literally once-in-a-generation Summit of the Future makes a meaningful difference in people's lives. Together, governments and their partners in civil society and multilateral institutions must work quickly and resolutely to leverage this opportunity to realise the future we want and the UN we need for present and future generations.



RICHARD PONZIO
Global Governance, Security and Justice Programme, Stimson Center

“ We have moved from lack of recognition to some formal acknowledgement of civil society's role in global governance to calls for networked and inclusive multilateralism. But the extent of civil society's involvement is still constantly being debated. For example, the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report calls for greater UN system engagement with civil society through focal points, but consultations for the Summit of The Future have been held behind closed doors. There is a tension between the need for member states to have candid discussions and the call for transparency to enable civil society to provide input and hold member states accountable.



NUDHARA YUSUF
Global Governance Innovation Network, Stimson Center

The summit has many issues to consider, and one current focus of civil society advocacy is the **New Agenda for Peace**, which Guterres presented last July. It presents a 12-point plan to improve the UN's ability to offer a collective response to prevent and resolve conflict. There's an urgent need to rebuild trust, made even harder by Israel's assault on Gaza. It doesn't seem possible to move forward on this front without taking on board the case for Security Council reform.

If trust is to be rebuilt, that includes trust in the UN itself, and that means change. Many CSOs are working together to advance a reform agenda. The Unmute Civil Society initiative, backed by multiple CSOs and some states, led by Costa Rica and Denmark, makes **five calls** to improve civil society's participation in UN processes: to use digital technologies to broaden participation and inclusion, bridge digital divides by focusing on connectivity for the most excluded, amend procedures and practices to ensure effective and meaningful interaction and participation

at all stages, create an annual civil society action day as an opportunity to stocktake and assess progress on civil society's participation, and appoint a UN civil society envoy.

The idea of a **civil society envoy** or champion is a relatively modest proposal that could serve as a first step towards enabling further progress. Over the years UN secretary-generals have created various envoy roles to signal an issue is important and help coordinate cross-UN action. Among other things, a civil society envoy could encourage best practices on civil society participation across the UN, ensure a diverse range of civil society is involved in the UN's work and drive the UN's engagement with civil society groups around the world.

At a time when the deficits of current global governance arrangements are clear but civil society is under intensifying attack, by creating the role the UN could both improve its effectiveness and signal that civil society matters. The UN's failure to take this proposal on board is beginning to offer another yet symbol of civil society's exclusion.

 The envoy could explore ways of engaging people with digital and non-digital approaches and explore civil society engagement with the UN and also the World Bank, regional banks and other regional institutions. The envoy could also track the allocation of funds, and draw attention to the extremely low levels of funding – such as development and climate funding – that goes to groups such as grassroots women's organisations.




NATALIE SAMARASINGHE
Open Society Foundations

Many in civil society also support a proposal to introduce a **world citizens' initiative**. Modelled on processes in the EU and in several countries, this would enable people to mobilise to collect signatures to put an issue on the UN's agenda. It could ensure that issues proved to have a high level of global public support are given consideration, including during the General Assembly high-level opening week and at the Security Council.

A reform such as this could make it easier for the UN to focus on pressing issues – and give extra weight to the efforts of states pushing for progress – while encouraging people to identify with the UN, as they come to see it as an institution that can take on board and embody their concerns.

A further reform proposal backed by many in civil society is to develop a **UN parliamentary assembly** to complement the General Assembly and give a voice to citizens as well as governments. This could serve as a valuable corrective to the state-centric nature of decision-making and act as a source of scrutiny and accountability over the decisions the UN makes – or fails to make.

 If it followed the federal model, the UN would still have a General Assembly representing the interests of nations. But it would also have a parliamentary assembly, representing the people, making decisions to serve the common good of humanity. The dysfunction of global governance is not fundamentally about civil society having poor access. That's a symptom of the core dysfunction, which is about decision making and legitimacy. If there were a world parliament, by virtue of its role it would give a voice to civil society.



JOHN VLASTO
World Federalist Movement

“ I believe in the principle of equal global citizenship, which means that every person on the planet should have an equal opportunity to participate in decision-making on matters that affect everybody. And I don't see how anything other than a parliament and universal global elections could achieve this. Global challenges are becoming overwhelming, particularly the climate crisis, and it is clear that the current modus operandi is not working. That's because there is a vacuum at the global level: there is no decision-making authority. A global polity with such authority is needed but it must be designed in a democratic way.



ANDREAS BUMMEL
Democracy Without Borders

So far, civil society has been broadly disappointed with the preparatory process and evident lack of substance of the summit's proposed Pact for the Future – but if the will's there, there's still time to change that. A UN-Civil Society Forum to be held in Kenya in May 2024, presenting a key date to assess progress and the quality of consultation.

What the world doesn't need right now is yet more self-interested diplomatic wrangling and posturing that makes the Summit of the Future yet another missed opportunity. Civil society – and a wide range of civil society – must take every opportunity to contribute and make a difference. Civil society with expertise and knowledge of the UN system has a particular responsibility to use its status and levers to push for genuine dialogue.

Civil society's suggested reforms are all just steps towards making the global governance system more open, democratic and accountable. They're no magic bullets, but should be the start of a journey. The UN the world has today isn't the UN the world



A civil society representative speaks at CSW63, the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, held at UN headquarters in New York, USA in March 2019.

needs, but civil society needs to engage with the UN that exists and try to change it, because there's no blank slate and things would be even worse if the UN didn't exist.

Supportive states must step up and show their willingness to embrace the change civil society urges. Otherwise, global leaders risk allowing the world to fragment as the UN becomes irrelevant and repressive states create authoritarian alternatives. Global crises like conflict, climate change, inequality and poverty will spiral out of control because states can't solve them alone. It's time for leaders to create the systems the world needs, a shift that's only possible if they work with civil society.



CLIMATE: REPRESSION AS DENIAL





Activists lay on the dry ground during a Global Climate Action demonstration in La Vinuela reservoir, in the province of Malaga, Spain on 22 March 2023.

Photo by Jorge Guerrero/AFP via Getty Images.

The need to act on the climate crisis has never been clearer. 2023 was the **hottest year ever** – and brought with it the clearest possible evidence of what living with climate change means. Seemingly every week brought news of another extreme weather event, imperilling countless lives, affecting the most vulnerable people the worst. In July, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres grimly **announced** ‘the era of global boiling has arrived’.

What states and the private sector are doing in response is nowhere near enough. Current plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions fall far short of what’s required to achieve the Paris Agreement’s aim of limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Fossil fuel firms are banking soaring profits and spending very little on renewable energies, while governments keep approving new extractive projects. International climate funding continues to be grossly insufficient.

Calls to break the destructive cycle are coming loudest from

civil society, which has long sounded the alarm and raised public awareness of the need for climate action. In 2023, those calls were as loud as ever – but they faced growing pushback. Even in countries that broadly respect civic freedoms, it’s getting harder to protest to demand climate action. In the global south, climate and environmental activists working close to the sites of extraction face extensive violence.

It’s getting harder for civil society to demand climate action, and the window for action that will make a difference is closing. The restriction of climate activism must be acknowledged as a form of climate denial.

Outright climate denial is becoming rare, increasingly taking more subtle forms such as states and companies delaying action, playing up the risks of changes required and promoting limited symbolic actions. Civil society calls this denial what it is and demands it ends – and this is a key reason it’s being targeted.



2023 WAS THE HOTTEST YEAR ON RECORD – 1.48 DEGREES WARMER THAN THE LONG-TERM AVERAGE



AROUND 7% OF GLOBAL GDP WAS INVESTED IN ACTIVITIES WITH DIRECT NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS



GLOBAL WILDFIRE CARBON EMISSIONS INCREASED BY 30%



MILITARY FORCES ACCOUNTED FOR 5.5% OF GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS



AT LEAST 2,456 FOSSIL FUEL LOBBYISTS WERE PRESENT AT COP28

COP28: A STEP FORWARD, BUT SO MUCH FURTHER TO GO


Climate denial also comes when major fossil fuel states and companies are allowed undue influence on political processes. When climate summits are held in countries with major fossil fuel industries and closed civic space, it prevents civil society playing its legitimate role. And this keeps happening.

As the record-breaking year came to an end, all eyes fell on the COP28 climate summit, hosted for the second year in a row by a state with closed civic space. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed in the footsteps of Egypt, the COP27 host. Oil and gas extraction is the cornerstone of the UAE's economy. And it's happening again in 2024: COP29 is being hosted by Azerbaijan, yet another petrostate with closed civic space.

Civic space at COPs matters because these meetings are key annual rallying points for advocacy. Representatives of every state are forced to sit around the table and confront the reality of climate change. Civil society needs to be in the room and able to speak out and hold states to account on the agreements they've signed up to.

What made COP28 more important than most was that it centred on the **global stocktake** – the first comprehensive assessment of the state of play since the 2015 Paris Agreement. This made clear just how far off-track efforts are: if implemented, under current commitments temperatures will rise by between 2.4 and 2.6 degrees. This would subject **many more millions** to catastrophes and potentially trigger **tipping points** for runaway climate change. There's no way to prevent this without much further and faster cuts to greenhouse gas emissions, and no way to make these without keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

As a direct result of civil society's advocacy, states at COP28 were finally forced to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Incredibly, almost three decades after the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was agreed in 1992, for the first time the summit's final declaration acknowledged the need to move away from fossil fuels.

 The biggest influence of civil society was in agenda setting. Fossil fuel phase out was never an official agenda item at this COP, but we managed to make it the number one topic for the global stocktake, and the main benchmark for success. Civil society played a crucial role setting the agenda at COP28, successfully steering the focus of world governments towards the urgent need for a fossil fuel phase out aligned with the Paris Agreement's 1.5 degrees warming limit. This shift in attention, sustained for almost two weeks, marked an unprecedented achievement during a UN climate summit. There's no way back now. Despite its weak language, the declaration sent a clear signal that the fossil fuel era will come to an end.



KAISA KOSONEN
Greenpeace Nordic

Agreement awash with qualifications

As ever, the devil was in the details. Decisions at COPs are made by consensus rather than voting, something that tends to produce lowest-common-denominator agreements, since any state can insist on watering down the language. Petrostates – notoriously Saudi Arabia – have taken great advantage of this over the years. This meant that even though civil society's advocacy paid off with 130 out of UNFCCC 198 parties backing a commitment to 'phase out' fossil fuels, the weaker **final text** only commits to 'transition away from' them.

The agreement ended up offering a shopping list, with states being called on to 'contribute to' transitioning away from fossil fuels as one of eight possible methods of cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The Alliance of Small Islands States – many of

which face an existential threat from sea-level rise – denounced a '**litany of loopholes**'.

The agreement makes a welcome commitment to 'accelerating action in this critical decade', since to make a big difference, emissions cuts are needed as soon as possible. But the reference to fossil fuels focuses only on their role in 'energy systems', a formulation that appears to leave scope to retain them in anything else, including agriculture, industry and transport, as well as in defence, with military emissions, vast in scale given today's many conflicts, exempt from the Paris Agreement.

Then there's the agreement's reference to the potential for carbon capture and storage, something pushed by the oil and gas elite, with the UAE to the fore, even though scientists say the technology is unproven, likely unscalable and potentially only ever partly effective. It's just a fantasy to enable continuing extraction.

There are many more problems. Although the agreement commits to tripling renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency, crucial detail is undefined. A reference to 'transitional fuels' could be used to justify expanded gas extraction. The text on coal, the dirtiest fossil fuel, goes no further than at **COP26**. On the huge problem of fossil fuel subsidies, the wording is awash with qualifications, referring to 'inefficient' subsidies, with states free to interpret what this means.

Flawed process

Ultimately the text, while making some advances, reveals the limits of COPs. On their own they won't break down the fierce resistance of petrostates and fossil fuel corporations, determined to continue their lethal and lucrative business for as long as possible.



Photo by Giuseppe Cacace/AFP via Getty Images.

Climate activists demand an end to fossil fuel subsidies at COP28 on 12 December 2023.

The power of the fossil fuel industry was reflected in the presence of **at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists** at COP28, many as part of state delegations – an almost fourfold increase on the previous high, set just a year before at COP27. Clearly, global temperatures aren't the only records being shattered. The desperation to prevent change was revealed in **leaked letters** from the OPEC cartel urging its members to reject any text targeting fossil fuels.

Representatives of oil and gas companies are unofficially involved in climate negotiations. They have no title, they do not appear as such on attendees' lists, but we know they are there because we have seen them take advantage of COPs and pre-COPs to request informal meetings with heads of delegations or with the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.



MARÍA REYES
Indigenous Futures, Mexico

With the summit concluded, plans for a **massive expansion** of fossil fuel extraction continue. At the forefront of such plans is Adnoc, the UAE's state-owned oil and gas company. When the summit ended, COP28 leader Sultan al-Jaber returned to his day job as head of Adnoc, **confirming** the corporation's plan to boost its investments in oil and gas extraction.

While some praised al-Jaber for his diplomatic efforts, for many in civil society putting an oil head in charge of the summit made a mockery of the climate crisis. Ahead of the meeting al-Jaber **faced accusations** that the UAE planned to use the summit to strike oil deals, and during COP28 he **appeared** to let the greenwashing mask slip and indulge in denial of climate science.

Money matters

Ahead of the summit, states struck a deal on the fund to compensate global south countries for the loss and damage caused by climate change, agreed in principle at COP27. Civil society pushed for this for years, but is concerned about the fact that the fund will, at least in its early years, be hosted by the World Bank. Civil society had argued against this, not least because the World Bank has a track record of supporting

environmentally destructive initiatives with poor human rights protections. Civil society has also pointed to the high cost the World Bank charges for managing funds – on one fund it charged 17 per cent – which amounts to a lot of money that should be going to global south countries.

The biggest problem is that contributions to the fund are voluntary. With total pledges of **around US\$662 million** to date, it's far short of the billions needed.

Beyond this, one of the major demands of civil society and global south states going into COP28 was for much more funding for adaptation, to help countries cope with the realities of climate change. But no real progress was made here.

The hypocrisy of global north states perpetuates a great injustice. Their present-day wealth is the result of early industrialisation, in many cases underpinned by colonial exploitation, and they're the major contributors of accumulated greenhouse gases. Although many are still falling short of emissions cuts targets and have delayed phase-out plans, at COP28 they mostly pushed for language on fossil fuel withdrawal. They expect global south countries to skip a stage of development and switch to renewables straight away, but without ensuring they have enough funding to do so. Current levels of climate financing are **grossly overstated** and much of what is on offer is in the form of loans that pile on top of already high debt levels.

There's long been a particular shortfall on funding for adaptation, despite that fact that many global south states with historically low greenhouse gas emissions are expected to adapt rapidly to a problem they largely haven't caused, but that disproportionately affects them.

The system is broken – and that didn't change at COP28. The text of the agreement recognises that trillions of dollars are needed,



Activists from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development network protest during COP28 on 4 December 2023.

but doesn't say where they'll come from. It urges global north states to compile a report on their progress towards the target of doubling adaptation financing by 2025 but notes that, even if this were achieved, much more would be needed.

Civil society's role denied

COP28 processes also reflected the growing trend of repression of climate activism.

Many of the COP28 draft agreement's references to human rights and justice **never made** it into the final statement. The text contains no mention of environmental and land rights defenders. Clearly the summit's host had no interest in pushing for strong human rights recognition. The UAE criminalises dissent and routinely detains activists. The authorities commit widespread **torture** in jails and detention centres and hold at least 58 prisoners of conscience **in prison** despite them having completed their sentences. Brazenly, during COP28, they launched a **mass trial** of over 80 people on trumped-up terrorism charges.

The government carried its hostility towards civil society into the summit, just as Egypt did at COP27. Summit organisers made sure spaces for civil society events were isolated from the rest of the meeting. They **imposed** strict limits on protests, forcing people planning them to clear tremendous hurdles on threat of expulsion if they didn't comply. Due to heat levels, the organisers didn't permit protests at **lunch breaks** – normally a key opportunity to interact with delegates. They **banned** national flags at protests, hindering people wanting to show solidarity with Palestinians. They used extensive video surveillance. Unusually, civil society organised no protests outside the sole UN-administered official protest zone, so sure it was of the punishments that would follow.

Many in civil society judged this to be the most restrictive COP ever. And shockingly, it's set to happen again when Azerbaijan hosts COP29 this November. In 2023, underpinned by its vast oil wealth, Azerbaijan decisively triumphed in its long-running conflict with Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory through forced migration and ethnic cleansing ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#). It followed this with yet another wave of **domestic restrictions** against civil society and the media. Azerbaijan has long sought to launder its international reputation by hosting prestigious international events. COP29 threatens to be just another of these.

Reform needed

While inadequate and insufficient, COPs are still the only annual opportunity for all states to get round the table and negotiate on climate change. They need to be made better.

One obvious flaw is the requirement to work by consensus. UN General Assembly resolutions can be passed by a majority, and the same rule should apply to COPs so that regressive states like Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia can no longer force lowest-common-denominator agreements.

Fossil fuel lobbyists must be kept away from COPs and instead those on the frontlines, living with the impacts of climate change, should be given privileged access. At the very least much more clarity is needed about who's involved and whose interests they represent.

COPs should no longer be held in petrostates, but in states that show climate leadership. Nor should they be held in states with highly restricted civic space – something **characteristic** of many countries with major extractive industries – so that civil society

can't be denied the chance to mobilise fully. COP hosts should have to commit to respecting human rights and enabling full and diverse participation from domestic and international civil society, and be held accountable if they fail to do so.

Ambitious agreements won't result unless civil society is free to act as the world's conscience and voice demands for the climate action humanity needs.



READ MORE

- COP28: ONE STEP FURTHER
- COP28: ANOTHER CLIMATE SUMMIT IN CLOSED CIVIC SPACE

CIVIC SPACE UNDER PRESSURE

Civil society is taking action at every level – not just at COPs. It is active on the frontlines of resistance against extraction, in protests and direct action and in national-level and transnational advocacy. And climate denial, in the form of repression of civic space, is coming in backlash to all these actions.

Activists are being made targets because of the focus of their work. They're being penalised for defending the environment and demanding climate action because this puts them on a collision course with powerful economic and political interests.

In contexts where civic space is heavily restricted, repression is long-established. But climate activists are increasingly experiencing backlash from states, politicians and companies

in countries where civic space is otherwise broadly respected – and where political and corporate leaders publicly acknowledge the need for transition. Mainstream politicians and the private sector pay lip service to climate action, but their words are often betrayed by a reality of restriction. This growing trend became impossible to ignore in 2023.

While climate change is a collective reality, the experience of repression is personal. States, politicians and companies are targeting activists with the aim of raising the costs of activism, deterring people from speaking out and making it harder for people to protest in numbers. Common tactics of restriction include harassment, threats, physical aggression – a tactic particularly used against Indigenous activists –, public vilification, the criminalisation of protest tactics and the violent suppression of protests.

Backlash in the global north

One of the most alarming current trends is the growing criminalisation of climate activists in global north countries that are home to vibrant protest movements.

This trend has intensified as states have backtracked on their commitments to reduce fossil fuel use in response to the impacts on energy costs and supplies of Russia's war on Ukraine. Some, such as Germany, have fallen back on coal use, while some with oil and gas reserves, such as the UK and USA, are pursuing increased extraction. Climate activists are being silenced for pointing to the contradiction between statements and practice.

On top of this, in many global north countries right-wing populist and nationalist politicians are on the rise ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. These

politicians vilify climate campaigners just as they demonise activists for women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights, accusing them of being part of a shadowy elite **engaged in a global conspiracy**. They spread disinformation, claiming climate policies have the aim of controlling the public. Once-fringe views are entering the mainstream, and the restrictions that democratic states impose on climate activists can have the effect of legitimising extremist attacks.

Climate activists face growing restrictions in Germany, Europe’s now-struggling economic powerhouse, where a far-right party, Alternative for Germany, has surged in the polls. Government restrictions on climate activists are one of the main reasons the CIVICUS Monitor **downgraded** Germany’s civic space rating from open to narrowed in 2023, signalling a clear regression in Germany’s decades-long practices of broadly respecting protest freedoms.

Through direct action, such as disrupting traffic through street blockades, Germany’s Last Generation movement has raised awareness and started conversations. It has gathered growing numbers to demand climate action while making practical recommendations, such as proposals to cut food waste and make public transport more affordable. Its actions have sparked constructive discussions with local government bodies.

But the national-level response has been criminalisation – including through laws intended to tackle organised crime. In 2023, Last Generation activists had their homes raided, laptops and phones confiscated and bank accounts frozen.

Violent policing of protests is also a problem. In January, German police **used violence** to evict activists occupying land to try to prevent a coalmine expansion and then against a protest at the police’s actions. There are, however, signs that this heavy-handed approach is backfiring, helping rally support for the movement.



A Just Stop Oil activist lies on the ground in handcuffs after being arrested in Parliament Square in London, UK on 30 October 2023.

Photo by Daniel Leal/AFP via Getty Images.

The criminalisation of peaceful protests organised by people who aren't trying to hurt anyone but who want to protect lives elicits instant solidarity. Thousands of people have joined Last Generation's protest marches. Frozen funds have been almost fully replaced by donations pouring in. People contact us to ask how they can play their part in climate activism.



ZOE RUGE
Last Generation, Germany

Last Generation is also active in Italy, where it too embraces non-violent civil disobedience to demand the government stop its funding for fossil fuels, cut emissions, increase renewable energy use and improve energy efficiency. But Italy's **far-right government** is in no mood to listen and is criminalising protesters.

The Italian government criminalises climate activists because by doing so it can continue avoiding its responsibilities regarding the wellbeing of its citizens. It introduced a new law specifically to punish climate actions seen as damaging monuments or cultural sites with fines and possible imprisonment for those caught in the act. It also uses indictments for 'criminal conspiracy', a charge historically used against the mafia.



GABRIELLA ABBATE
Last Generation, Italy

Things could be about to get worse in the Netherlands, which took a rightwards turn at its **November general election**. Negotiations to form a government continue at the time of writing, but right-wing populist Geert Wilders won the most seats and he's promised to rip up environmental regulations, retreat from international agreements and increase oil and gas extraction.

The backdrop is a vociferous campaign by climate activists to demand an end to government fossil fuel subsidies, which **amount** to around US\$39.9 billion a year. The Dutch government committed to ending them in 2020 but hasn't done so. Campaigners have communicated this demand through non-violent direct action, repeatedly blocking a major highway in The Hague, the country's administrative centre. Protests grew during 2023 with many thousands taking part in a march on 9 September. Police used water cannon and **detained** around 2,400 people.

As in Germany, attempts to limit the protests backfired, causing even bigger numbers to turn out.

The right to protest is a fundamental right that should be protected, respected and fulfilled. The authorities should take the peacefulness of protesters as a starting point and facilitate protests as much as possible. Restrictions should be the exception rather than the rule.



SIEGER SLOOT Extinction Rebellion, The Netherlands
MARJOLEIN KUIJERS Amnesty International, The Netherlands

In the UK, direct action groups have also sought to keep climate in the headlines through **nonviolent direct action** and civil disobedience. The government's reaction has been to **pass** restrictive laws that criminalise disruptive protests.

In January 2024, the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders, Michael Forst, **condemned** the government's 'regressive new laws'. Numerous climate activists have been jailed for peaceful actions that, until recently, wouldn't have attracted prison sentences. People have been banned from citing the climate crisis as a justification for their actions in court, and **found** in contempt of court for doing so.

Among those criminalised are activists from Just Stop Oil, one of the UK's highest-profile direct-action groups, demanding that the government stop licensing fossil fuel projects.

I was arrested on 19 July for slow marching in Parliament Square. I was only on the road for a matter of seconds before my arms were forcibly yanked behind my back, and handcuffs put on. I was detained in a police cell for 13 hours. The UK legal system is allowing big polluting companies, such as oil giant Valero, to buy the law in the form of high court injunctions. I'm one of several people who face spiralling costs and potential bankruptcy because civil injunctions are being bought to stop peaceful protests at oil terminals and on roads. Many of us have already spent time in prison and paid fines in criminal courts, and now civil courts also want to convict us all over again and get us to pay their legal costs.



MITCH ROSE
Just Stop Oil, UK

Criminalisation and top-down political vilification of climate activists have come at the same time as the government **announced** it will grant over 100 new oil and gas drilling licences. Activists point out that the ruling party has received sizeable donations from fossil fuel interests, and the anti-protest laws adopted have been influenced by a **right-wing think tank** that also receives such donations.

Several Australian states have also passed anti-protest laws to target and jail climate activists. Among them is New South Wales, home to activist Deanna 'Violet' Coco of the Fireproof Australia group. Her sentence was overturned on appeal in March; she'd faced 15 months in jail for blocking a lane of traffic on Sydney Harbour Bridge. Several others **have been**

jailed under this law. Some welcome news came in December, when parts of the law were **ruled** unconstitutional in response to a civil society lawsuit.

The harm caused by the climate crisis staggeringly outweighs the inconvenience of one climate protester blocking one lane of traffic for 25 minutes. The right to peaceful protest is fundamental to democracy, and many of the freedoms and rights we cherish were won and defended through peaceful protest.



NELLI STEVENSON
Greenpeace Australia Pacific

In the USA, violence has been the response of authorities to protests defending forested lands in Atlanta against the construction of a huge police facility branded 'Cop City'. In January, Indigenous activist Manuel Paez Terán, known as 'Tortuguita', was shot dead by police. Tortuguita had been camping in the forest to protest against the development, which on top of having environmental impacts represents an extension of police presence in a predominantly Black and low-income area. In October, the state's district attorney **announced** that no charges would be brought against the police responsible. Protesters have also faced terrorism and money laundering charges. In November, journalists were **teargassed** while reporting on a Stop Cop City march in Atlanta.

 READ MORE

- AUSTRALIA: STILL SILENCING THE CLIMATE ALARM
- THE NETHERLANDS: CLIMATE ACTION FACES BACKLASH
- UK BACKTRACKS ON CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

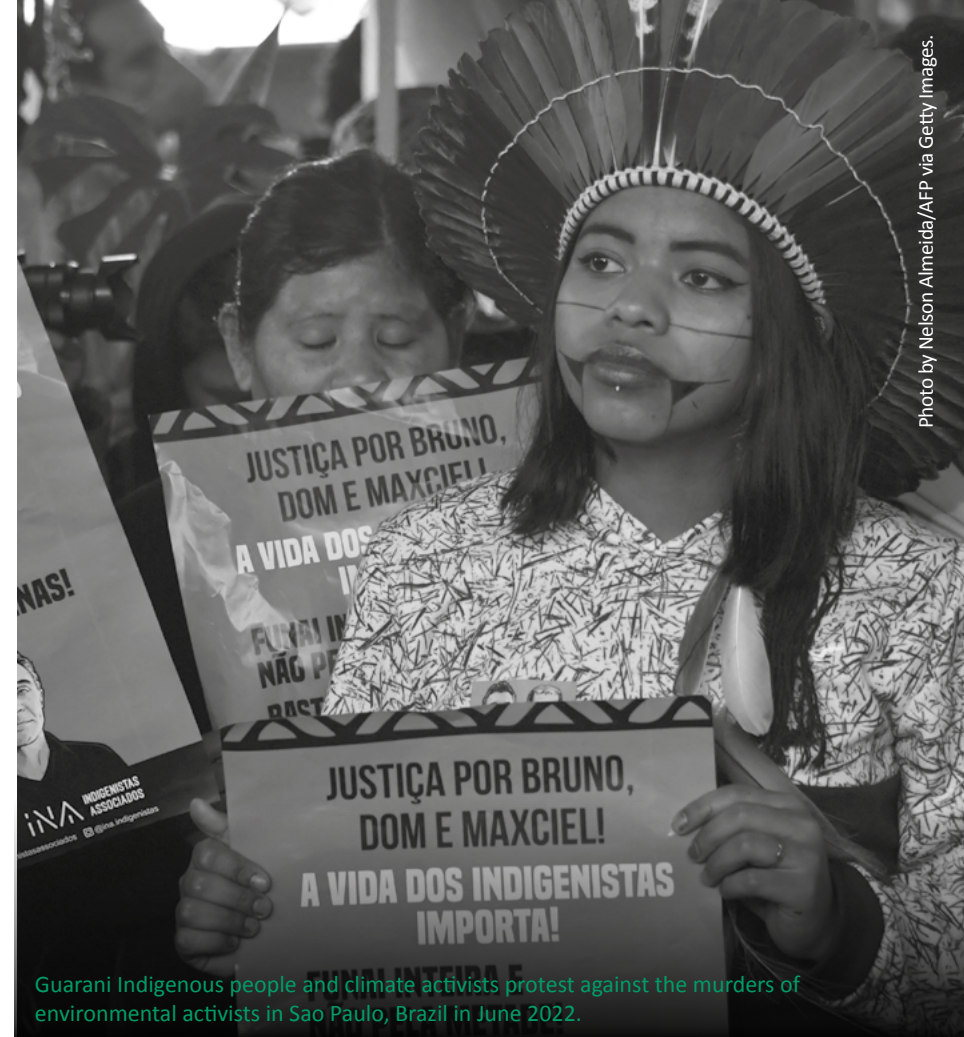
Deadly danger in Latin America

While the direction of travel in the global north is alarming, the greatest dangers continue to be faced by people who defend environmental, Indigenous and land rights in global south countries blessed with abundant natural resources – and cursed with rapacious interests determined to plunder them.

Activists have long been on the frontlines of resistance to fossil fuel extraction and projects that cause climate and environmental harm – and have long been targeted with deadly repression. Aggressors view and target people regardless of whether they define themselves as climate activists or defenders of the local environment and the rights of communities. No matter how they characterise themselves, activists confront powerful economic and political interests, often closely linked through corruption, that support exploitation and extraction, and are on the receiving end of violence. The repression of environmental, land and Indigenous rights defenders should be understood as part of the global pattern of climate denial through civic space restriction.

Indigenous rights defenders, for example, often stand in the way of powerful state and private sector forces that want to exploit land. When Indigenous rights are attacked, the climate suffers. When the rights of Indigenous people are recognised and they're free to manage Indigenous territories, the climate benefits. The best-preserved areas of the Amazon rainforest – limiting the deforestation that's a key source of carbon dioxide emissions – are those legally recognised and protected as Indigenous lands.

According to **Global Witness**, around the world almost 2,000 land and environmental defenders were killed in retaliation for their work between 2012 and 2022: one every two days. Indigenous



Guarani Indigenous people and climate activists protest against the murders of environmental activists in Sao Paulo, Brazil in June 2022.

people account for 34 per cent of deaths, even though they make up around five per cent of the world's population.

Latin America is the most lethal region, home to 88 per cent of killings in 2022, the last full year for which information is available. Things may be getting worse: the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights **reported** that between January and April 2023, at least 33 human rights defenders were killed in the region, most of them Indigenous, environmental and rights defenders, up from 27 over the same period in 2022.

In Brazil, which contains the largest part of the Amazon rainforest, deforestation dramatically increased and violence and threats towards Indigenous people mushroomed under the four-year rule of climate-denying far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. Brazil saw **34 killings** in 2022, and at least **eight** in the first four months of 2023 after Bolsonaro was gone.

The progressive government that **came to office** in January has restored and strengthened institutions that protect Indigenous rights and expelled thousands of miners illegally operating in Indigenous areas. The pace of deforestation has dramatically decreased.

But powerful economic interests, well represented in politics, are pushing back. When Brazil's Supreme Court ruled in September against a principle that limited the demarcation and titling of Indigenous lands to a specific occupancy date – a rule that denied the reality of past evictions – it was an important step forward. But members of congress, many of them linked to agribusiness, responded by passing a law defying the court's ruling. President Lula da Silva partly vetoed it, but Congress overturned the veto and the restrictive new law **came into force** in December.

Civil society saw some success in 2023 in another Amazonian country, Ecuador, where people voted in **two referendums** to halt two extractive projects: oil exploitation in Yasuní National Park – a key Indigenous territory – and metal mining in the Andean Chocó.

This was a historic outcome, with the Yasuní result said to be the first in the world where people have voted to keep fossil fuels in the ground, dealing a significant blow to extractive industries. But it remains to be seen whether people's wishes are respected, given that successive Ecuadorian governments have embraced extraction.

Participation by Indigenous people in conservation and development decision-making in Ecuador remains insufficient and inadequate. In June, Indigenous and environmental groups submitted a Constitutional Court complaint over a **presidential decree** passed the month before that changed the rules on environmental consultation, making it easier to grant mining licences. At a protest against this the following month police reportedly **fired teargas** and rocks at protesters.

In Ecuador as elsewhere, the lack of recognition of Indigenous land rights remains a key enabler of mining, oil extraction and deforestation, destroying ecosystems that people rely on. Resistance is dangerous, bringing threats, harassment, physical aggression and lethal violence.

For some time now we have been living in conflict with an oil company that invaded our territory. We experience threats and harassment from both the company and the state. Every day more and more of our leaders and social activists are being threatened. Many have been kidnapped and some have been killed. But none of this silences or stops us, as we fight to save our territories, our living space.



FAUSTO DANIEL SANTI GUALINA
Sarayaku people of the Ecuadorian Amazon

Violence is also commonplace in several Central American countries. In Honduras, two land rights activists were **found dead** in the Gama River in 2023. Unidentified assailants **shot dead** two more, Jairo Bonilla and Aly Domínguez. They were part of the Guapinol community, whose people have been criminalised, attacked and harassed for resisting a polluting mining project. Afro-Indigenous Garifuna people have also reported systematic violence.

We have experienced reprisals for our work, which have included death threats, kidnapping attempts and criminalisation processes. In 2023, we counted 125 attacks against our organisation and its members. In August, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures in favour of 11 our members, but more than five months have passed and the government has yet to implement anything in response to these precautionary measures.



CHRISTOPHER CASTILLO
Alternative for Community and Environmental Vindication of Honduras

In El Salvador, **populist strongarm president** Nayib Bukele has led an all-out assault on dissent under sweeping state of emergency powers. Leaders of the Indigenous Nahua community are among those subjected to **intimidation** by security forces for protesting against construction on Indigenous land. Other Indigenous groups have complained of **military presence** in their territories. As part of a widespread campaign of mass detention, the state has harassed and arbitrarily detained environmental leaders. In January 2023, authorities **detained** five environmental activists from the Santa Marta community on concocted homicide charges after resisting a mining project. Protests followed calling for their release. People evidently connected with Bukele's party have harassed and stigmatised women environmental activists on social media.

The threats are real in Mexico too. Two environmental activists, Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca, **disappeared** in Colima state in January 2023. They'd been part of negotiations between the local community and a mining company. Their families accused the company of being involved in their apparent abductions. In June, unidentified assailants **killed** two

more environmental activists, Álvaro Arvizu and Cuahtémoc Márquez, in separate attacks that appeared premeditated. They're sadly among a long line of victims: **at least 93** environmental and land rights defenders, most of them from Indigenous communities, were victims of enforced disappearances between December 2006 and August 2023, with 58 coming under the current populist administration, in power since December 2018.



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- BRAZIL: BACK ON THE GREEN TRACK
- BRAZIL: A STEP FORWARD FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

On the frontlines in Africa

Activists face similar challenges in multiple African countries where there's a rush to extract fossil fuels and exploit forested areas. Threats come from state and private sector interests alike, with the two often tightly connected, resulting in corruption and impunity.

Throughout 2023, climate and environmental activists encountered a barrage of restrictions for opposing the construction of the 1,500 km-long East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) connecting Tanzania and Uganda. Activists believe the project, imposed without any real consultation with affected communities and at odds with the two governments' emissions cuts commitments, will have devastating impacts. State-owned corporations in both countries have a stake in the project, meaning the backlash is particularly fierce. Police have **beaten, detained and criminalised** protesters.



Ugandan police arrests an environmental activist at a protest against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline in Kampala, Uganda, on 15 September 2023.

But local activists haven't given up and continue working with international allies and mounting public campaigns to put pressure on potential financiers, raising the reputational costs of involvement with the project – and with some success. So far **27 banks**, including several in South Africa, have pledged not to support the project.

Just because we tried to make ourselves and the affected communities heard regarding the environmental and human rights consequences of the pipeline, the government has smeared us and called us 'anti-government' and 'anti-development'. As a result of this branding, we've been intimidated, threatened and arrested by the police. The kind of work we do has led us to clash with the powerful interests of government agencies and private companies. EACOP is a huge project in which powerful state and private forces have a lot at stake, so we are facing a lot of restrictions from both of them.

 **IREEN TWONGIRWE**
Women for Green Economy Movement Uganda

Four of our activists were forcibly arrested on charges of 'inciting violence', transported in police vehicles and kept in jail overnight for protesting against the pipeline. The activists were protesting peacefully but their arrests were unnecessarily violent. Several of our members maintain a fund to secure bail or engage lawyers whenever activists are arrested. We arrange legal representation and explore the possibility of anticipatory bail when possible. We've also partnered with organisations that specialise in security training so that we can provide tools for advocates to voice their concerns without jeopardising their personal safety.

 **ZAKI MAMDOO**
Stop EACOP, Uganda

Elsewhere in Africa, environmental activists have come under attack for standing in the way of economic interests. In recent years several South African community leaders have been shot dead. In August, two men **shot dead** land rights defender Jomo Keromeng in front of his family. In January, the Amadiba Crisis Committee, which seeks to protect a coastal area, **received information** from a whistleblower of a plot to assassinate two of its leaders.

Violence is enabled by top-down vilification, which is becoming increasingly common. In a recent example, government minister Gwede Mantashe used his speech at an oil and gas conference to **accuse civil society organisations** (CSOs) of being foreign agents working to block development.

In Cameroon, one of the countries that share the Congo Basin, the world's second-biggest rainforest after the Amazon, powerful private corporations and organised criminal groups are targeting civil society working to protect the rainforest and resist deforestation.

Despite all the legal measures in place to protect Cameroon's forests, forest exploitation, often carried out in partnership with private companies, gives rise to numerous abuses, resulting in serious human rights violations fuelled by well-organised criminal networks, and generally leading to the dispossession of the lands of these peoples and communities.



ESTELLE EWOULE LOBÉ
Action for the Protection of Environmental Refugees and Internally Displaced People in Africa, Cameroon



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- ▶ GAME NOT OVER: RESISTANCE AGAINST EAST AFRICAN CRUDE OIL PIPELINE

Intensifying repression in Asia

Several Asian states under authoritarian rule, including one-party regimes like Cambodia and Vietnam, are aggressively pursuing top-down policies of industrialisation and extraction and treating climate and environmental activists as threats to their interests.

Climate and environmental activists used to have relative freedom in Vietnam, but that's changed in recent years. In September, high-profile climate activist Hoàng Thị Minh Hồng received a **three-year jail sentence** on bogus tax evasion charges – a tactic the regime often uses to lock up dissenters. At least seven other climate and environmental activists have been jailed on the same pretext.

Some of those arrested had previously worked with the government. Ngo Thi To Nhien, **detained** in September, has worked on energy policy for over 20 years, including with the World Bank, and heads an independent think tank on energy transition. Her detention suggests that independent efforts on energy policy are no longer tolerated.

Climate and environmental organisations helped the government secure significant funding for environmental projects. But the government has continued emphasising coal-powered development, putting it at odds with its international commitments, including under the Paris Agreement and a Just Energy Transition Partnership signed with a group of global north states in 2022. Despite agreeing with international partners to involve civil society in climate transition, the state locks away those who expose inconvenient truths.

The authorities have benefited massively from the diverse activities of Vietnamese associations in the fields of development and environmental protection, as well as from the substantial contributions of international CSOs working in Vietnam.

But the Vietnamese government hates losing face. It tolerates activists when they support government development programmes but has zero tolerance for criticism, especially in the international arena, so it silences critical voices by any means. To avoid international condemnation, instead of charging people under national security laws, they have resorted to the old pretext of tax evasion charges.



PENELOPE FAULKNER
Quê Me: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

In neighbouring Cambodia, where land-grabbing by state officials is common, environmental and land rights activists are

attacked for standing in the way of elite economic interests closely associated with the ruling family.

Among those targeted is the youth-led environmental group Mother Nature, which the state **calls** an illegal organisation. In September, three Mother Nature representatives serving suspended jail sentences in punishment for their activism were **denied permission** to travel to Sweden to receive the **Right Livelihood Award** – a prize recognising their activism.

The problems aren't limited to one-party states. In countries with a level of democratic competition such as India and the Philippines, the restriction of climate and environmental activism comes as part of elite efforts to consolidate power.

Enforced disappearances are a constant danger for environmental activists in the Philippines. In April, two Indigenous rights activists, Dexter Capuyan and Gene Roz Jamil 'Bazoo' de Jesus, went missing. State security forces were suspected. Their families and supporters continue to **protest** for their return. In June, the government **designated** five Indigenous leaders and activists as terrorists, a status that enables it to freeze their bank accounts. In September, two students active in environmental protests were **abducted** and missing for almost two weeks.

In India, the Hindu nationalist government is pursuing economic development at all costs, and stamping down on dissent in the process. Activists from the youth-led Fridays for Future climate movement are among those it has targeted.

The consequences can be fatal. Sendhu Munda, a campaigner against illegal tree-felling, died in detention in May, reportedly after being beaten by his captors. Munda was a member of a forest protection committee in Jharkhand state.

Indigenous people in Odisha state are also subject to a police **crackdown** that has included abductions, arbitrary arrests, torture and the use of force against protesters opposed to two mining projects. Activists say the projects – for which the national government granted permission after amending a law on forest management to remove consultation rights – will displace over 200,000 people from tribal groups.

Repression is sure to increase in the run-up to India's April-to-May 2024 general election.

Being an activist in India is scary. India is the sixth most dangerous country in the world for environmental activists. Traditionally, threats and prosecutions loomed over environmental defenders living in rural areas. However, the scope of these threats has evolved, now extending to encompass urban activists like me as well. The tide has shifted, and we are increasingly perceived as formidable adversaries to the government's agenda.



DISHA RAVI
Fridays for Future India

Even in countries like Mongolia, where respect for civic space has recently improved, environmental activists face risks. The government has attempted to silence criticism of mining operations, and environmental activists **have reported** that state and non-state sources have subjected them to judicial harassment, intimidation, threats and violence.

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> VIETNAM: ANOTHER TURN OF THE SCREW

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Climate change shot up the global agenda as a result of the wave of mass protests that unfolded **from 2019 onwards**. The speed at which the agenda changed proved the value of protest. Climate activists continue to use protests and non-violent direct action to keep climate in the headlines.

Recently, some groups, such as Extinction Rebellion in the UK, have **moved away** from disruptive tactics, fearing these might alienate the audiences they're trying to reach. Others, such as Just Stop Oil in the same country, continue to use them, seeing no evidence they reduce support for climate action. News coverage of stunts such as the disruption of high-level sporting events or the targeting of famous artworks – without causing damage – may be the only time climate change makes front-page news. And while they may cause public backlash, these actions can also have the effect of **legitimising** the more conventional actions of other activists advancing the same cause.

The climate movement is broad and offers a range of responses. What's crucial is that there be solidarity, constructive dialogue over tactical differences and a clear logic behind interventions. Activists need to refresh tactics as the struggle continues because repeated actions can lead to diminishing returns, as may now be the case with the targeting of artworks.

Civil society knows that action can't be limited to protest and must encompass every available peaceful means to advance change, including advocacy and campaigns, calls for international solidarity, litigation and the growing field of shareholder activism.



Students take part in a Fridays for Future protest in New Delhi, India on 25 September 2020.

Photo by Jewel Samad/AFP via Getty Images.

Civil society plays critical roles in pushing for new laws, programmes, policies and strategies on climate change, holding governments accountable for their commitments, identifying the lack of coordinated government responses to climate change and ensuring that national policymaking does not forget the poor.



CAROLINE OWASHABA
Action for Youth Development Uganda

Legal action against states and companies offered one fruitful front for civil society action in 2023. In November, the Brussels Court of Appeal **imposed** a binding emissions cut target on the Belgian authorities. That same month, a German court **ruled** that the government must immediately adopt an action programme on emissions targets for construction and transport. In August, 16 young activists **won a case** in Montana, USA, with the court ruling that the state government's policies in support of fossil fuels violate their right to a healthy environment. Many other court cases are underway, including one brought by **six young Portuguese activists** against 32 European governments at the European Court of Human Rights.

Our case is part of a wider trend and sets an important legal precedent that is already today being used in other jurisdictions to try to impose similar climate targets. Steep national emission reduction targets are urgently needed for climate policies to have a chance of being effective. Our case is already being consulted and referenced by civil society in other countries.



SARAH TAK
Klimaatzaak, Belgium

Activists are also successfully using corporate annual general meetings (AGMs) to advance climate resolutions. In 2023,

major funders **supported resolutions** to cut emissions at the AGMs of some of the biggest oil and gas companies. Activists are also putting pressure on institutions to divest from fossil fuel investments. In response to sustained student advocacy, New York University **committed to divest** in September. In the UK, **72 per cent** of universities have so far pledged to divest. The pressure continues.

TIME TO RESPECT FREEDOMS

There's no doubt that repression is taking its toll in sapping the energies of the global climate movement. But climate denial through civic space restriction ultimately can't hold back the tide. Governments and companies are making short-term decisions, evidently deciding they can get round to addressing the crisis later. But there's no hiding the problem: people around the world are experiencing the impacts of climate change. And while political currents in many countries are presently unpromising, **opinion polls** in country after country also show that the climate crisis has become a major concern, particularly among young people prepared to use their voices and votes.

In many countries acts of repression have backfired, generating sympathy for climate activists, attracting support for the movement and fuelling further protests. Even amid repression, the global climate movement continues to grow.

The climate movement owes its resilience to its ability to make connections between different facets of the problem and productively combine a variety of networked responses, including building coalitions, producing knowledge, sharing information and advocating locally, nationally and internationally.

Last Generation is part of the **A22 coalition**, an international network of nonviolent civil disobedience campaigners. This network is a great source of support. We help each other increase the visibility of our campaigns. It has certainly helped us attract more people to **Non Paghiamo il Fossile** (We Don't Pay for Fossil) and other environmental campaigns in Italy and beyond.



GABRIELLA ABBATE
Last Generation, Italy

But the movement is increasingly having to focus on defensive strategies in response to repression. This implies an opportunity cost: much of the energy that could be invested in advancing creative climate solutions is instead spent on fending off restrictions. If all civil society can do is resist repression, no one will be left to keep the climate crisis on the agenda. And that will tell. In the absence of civil society pressure, for instance, COP28 wouldn't have been forced to reckon with fossil fuels.

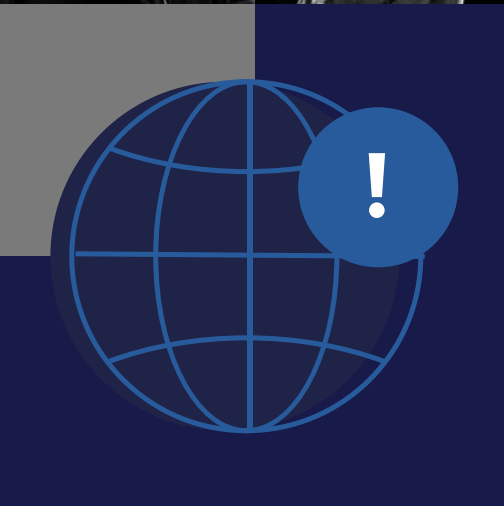
Ultimately, states and the private sector need to recognise that people have a right to use every peaceful means possible, including protest. It's one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in international conventions that almost every state has signed up to. It must be understood that protests that cause disruption can still be peaceful protests, and should be treated as such. Protests are a key means by which recognition of fundamental rights has historically been won.

Last December, the new UN **human rights head**, Volker Türk, acknowledged the role of protest in driving climate action, expressing gratitude to the many young people who've mobilised. He **added** 'we should make sure that the civic space for them is protected and safeguarded, and not crack down in a way that we have seen in many parts of the world'.

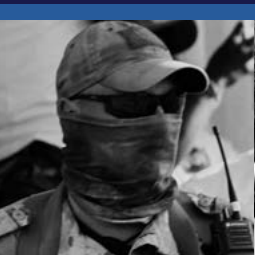


A Greenpeace activist in the Spree river holds up a sign calling for more funding for climate protection at a protest during the parliamentary debate on the 2024 federal budget in Berlin, Germany on 30 January 2024.

States should heed his words. There's no hope of overcoming the powerful vested interests that prevent climate action unless civil society is able to play the full spectrum of its vital roles. Open and enabled civic space is essential to addressing the climate crisis and confining climate denial to history.



DEMOCRACY: CONTESTED TERRITORY





People taking part in the Pride march in Madrid, Spain on 1 July call on voters to 'vote with pride' to protect their rights from the far right.

Photo by Juan Carlos Rojas/picture alliance via Getty Images

Democracy is in decline, with the year's multiple conflicts and crises exacerbating a multi-year regressive trend. In several countries in Africa, Europe and the Middle East, conflicts made prospects of democratic change more distant ► [GO TO CHAPTER.](#)

In war-torn Sudan, hopes for democracy, repeatedly denied since the 2019 overthrow of dictator Omar al-Bashir, receded further as elections announced for July 2023 were made impossible by the civil war between the military and militia that erupted last April.

Russia's sustained assault on Ukraine has brought intensified repression of domestic dissent, and a non-competitive election will approve another term for Vladimir Putin in March 2024. In Ukraine in contrast, civil society is playing vital humanitarian and accountability roles, but elections due in 2024 are likely to be deemed impossible under martial law, amid security concerns and with many people displaced or in occupied territory.

The ineffectiveness of civilian governments in dealing with jihadist insurgencies was the justification used by military leaders to take or retain power in Central and West Africa. As a consequence, coups are in danger of becoming normalised in some regions, after decades in which they appeared a thing of the past. A 'coup belt' now stretches coast to coast in Africa. None of the states that fell victim to military rule in recent years returned to civilian government in 2023, and two more – Gabon and Niger – joined their ranks. People continue to live with violence and instability in these countries.

A security threat of a different kind – gang violence – has prompted El Salvador's slide towards populist authoritarianism. Violence linked to drug trafficking could lead Ecuador down a similar path.

Global advances in democratisation achieved over more than three decades have been **wiped out** in recent years. In 2023, no authoritarian state became a democracy, and while some



ALMOST 3 OUT OF 4 PEOPLE LIVE IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES



ONLY 2.1% OF PEOPLE LIVE IN COUNTRIES WITH OPEN CIVIC SPACE



2 FURTHER COUNTRIES HAD MILITARY COUPS



10 AUTHORITARIAN STATES ACCOUNT FOR 80% OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF ACTIVISM



MORE THAN 50% OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION CAN VOTE IN 2024

countries made marginal improvements in the quality of their democracies – by improving civic space, making inroads on corruption or strengthening institutions – many more experienced declines, often with serious setbacks. Regressive trends are coming in every global region, but declines are particularly marked in Central and West Africa, Central America and the Middle East. Success stories are scarce.

Authoritarian regimes that experienced mass protest movements in recent years, including Iran, Nicaragua and Venezuela, regained their footing and hardened their grip. In states long characterised by autocratic rule, many civil society activists, journalists and

political dissidents have sought safety in exile to continue their work. But they often didn't find it, as regressive states – with China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Egypt and Russia the worst five abusers – increasingly using transnational repression against them.

Too many of the numerous elections that took place in 2023 – a preview of 2024's bumper election year, when roughly half the world's population has a chance to vote – were nowhere close to being reasonably free and fair.

Several non-democratic states of various kinds – including Cambodia, the Central African Republic, Cuba, Eswatini, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe – held elections in which the autocratic power was never in question. Voting was ceremonial, its purpose to add a veneer of legitimacy.

Many more countries with systems that combine democratic and authoritarian traits were home to elections with less predetermined results, where there was at least some chance of the ruling party being defeated. But incumbent advantage reflected in the fact that change rarely materialised, as seen in Nigeria, Paraguay, Sierra Leone and Turkey. The outlier was Maldives, where voters have a history of rejecting sitting presidents.

Some such regimes, notably El Salvador, experienced further **democratic backsliding** through the erosion of freedoms and institutional checks and balances – a road typically travelled by populist authoritarians who claim to speak in the name of the people and insist they need to concentrate power to deal with crises.

In contexts where democratically elected leaders disregarded constitutional rules and sought to override checks and balances, on top of its usual roles of educating voters and watching over

the integrity of elections, civil society took to the streets in protest. This was seen **throughout 2023** in Mexico.

“ Civil society’s reaction to defend against institutional erosion and the deterioration of the separation of powers was recently seen on the streets when many people mobilised in Mexico City and other cities in the ‘March for Democracy’. People mobilised against the government’s attacks on the National Electoral Institute, in defence of the independence of the judiciary and autonomous bodies and against the president’s undue influence on the electoral competition and his polarising attitudes.



CARLOS G GUERRERO OROZCO
Human Rights and Strategic Litigation-Mexico

In Europe and the Americas, troubling results came from several free and fair elections, including in countries where democratic principles and fundamental civic freedoms are historically strongly respected. When given a real choice, voters often rejected incumbents and an array of mainstream parties and politicians. They expressed disappointment with what democracy has offered them so far. At a time of high inflation, they were willing to embrace ideas that packaged themselves as new, radical and anti-elite.

Far-right political entrepreneurs have proved adept at manipulating anxieties and vulnerabilities. In 2023, they intensified their scapegoating of migrants and backlash to the increased visibility of demands for women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights. Right-wing populists took control of Argentina, came first in elections in the Netherlands and Switzerland and entered government in Finland. But the regressive threat failed to make a breakthrough in Spain, while in Poland, the desire of many voters to turf out incumbents saw the right-wing nationalist ruling party replaced by a broad progressive coalition.

But in many cases, the far right was able to win even when it lost, its ideas increasingly embraced by mainstream parties, ostensibly to keep it at bay. It’s expected to make big gains in the European Parliament elections in June 2024.

The biggest election cycle in decades has begun. 2024’s elections are already showing themselves to be testing grounds for evolving AI-enabled tactics offering unprecedented levels of manipulation. The year’s first vote, in Bangladesh on 7 January, offered a troubling beginning. An election packed with incumbency biases and lacking real competition, and rife with **AI-generated disinformation**, turned Bangladesh into a de facto one-party state.

But the other side of the coin was on display soon after, when in the face of China’s concerted attempts to derail the vote, including through cyberattacks, **Taiwan** held a free and fair election characterised by a vibrant, highly active campaign. In troubling times for democracy, Taiwan continued to show the region – and the world – that democratic elections and open civic space are possible.

MILITARY RULE NORMALISED

Military rule risks increasingly becoming the regional norm in Central and West Africa, with two countries – Gabon and Niger – joining the ranks of military dictatorships in 2023, and unsuccessful coup attempts in two more, **Guinea-Bissau** and **Sierra Leone**.

On 26 August, Gabon went through the motions of a general election. Official results were announced four days later, in the middle of the night, with the country under curfew and amid an internet shutdown. Incumbent President Ali Bongo, in power



People celebrate the end of Ali Bongo's dictatorship in Libreville, Gabon on 30 August 2023

since the death of his father and predecessor in 2009, was duly handed a third term. Fraud allegations were rife, as in previous elections. But this time something unprecedented happened: under an hour later the military had taken over, and the Bongo family's 56-year reign was history.

People took to the streets to celebrate the end of over half a century of dynastic rule. Gabonese civil society, long the victim of repression, expressed its **relief**. But the enthusiasm can't last: overturning an oppressive regime isn't the same as achieving democratic freedom. It's rare for a military takeover to be followed by the rapid establishment of free institutions. Most often new authoritarian regimes emerge, bringing even higher levels of state-sanctioned violence and human rights abuses.

Niger's and Gabon's were the seventh and eighth successful military coups in Central and West Africa over the past five years, and the seventh in Francophone Africa. Two took place in **Mali** in 2020 and 2021, and two in **Burkina Faso** in 2022. Coups also were staged in **Chad, Guinea** and **Sudan** in 2021.

In Niger, as previously in Burkina Faso and Mali, the ostensible motivation of coup leaders was the failure of civilian governments to tackle jihadist insurgency. They capitalised on the despair of people forced to live with violence and angry at the ineffectual military presence of the former colonial power, France. Many supported coups in the hope the military, already shifting its international alliances towards Russia, would do a better job of combatting insurgency – although there's little evidence to back that ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

In none of these countries have the military retreated to the barracks after implementing the supposedly temporary measures they promised. Sudan's junta is the most notorious for backtracking on agreement after agreement to bring about a democratic transition before the outbreak of war, but it's no exception: it's common for the military to set themselves long-term goals that flatly contradict promises of short-term transition.

■ In Niger, the junta has set itself a number of long-term objectives and, although it hasn't yet given any indication of how long it intends to stay in power, it doesn't appear to be planning to leave in the near future.



CLÉMENT KOCOUBEBEY
West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

In all the army-controlled countries, juntas have deepened repression. Military authorities have targeted independent media and critical journalists with threats, intimidation and arrests,

and shut down some media outlets and banned broadcasts by others. They've shut down the internet and limited access to websites and social media platforms. In Burkina Faso, the junta has increasingly **abducted** activists, including Rasmané Zinaba and Bassirou Badjo of the grassroots civil society group Balai Citoyen. In February 2024, several armed assailants in civilian clothes took Zinaba from his home in Ouagadougou, the capital. Men in plainclothes claiming to be government security officers abducted Badjo from a government office the next day.

Following the 2021 military coup, conditions for the media and journalists have deteriorated sharply. Several journalists and commentators have been imprisoned for expressing opinions considered to be offences against the state. The High Authority for Communications suspended numerous media outlets. At a time when the media and journalists most need to organise and work together to protect themselves, it's becoming increasingly difficult for them to do so. Pressure on dissenting voices and threats of repression limit their ability to come together and act collectively to defend their rights.



NAFISSATOU MAIGA
Women and Initiatives for Development, Mali

Rule by junta has entered its fourth year in Myanmar, and it's proved a particularly bloody experience. People rejected the takeover by taking to the streets in protest and embracing civil disobedience, while longstanding ethnic militia groups joined the ousted government to mount armed resistance.

In the face of an underwhelming regional and international response to the army's many atrocities, Myanmar's civil society joined together to develop a **five-point agenda** that includes calls for a strategy to end military violence through sanctions, an arms

embargo and a referral of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court. The plan also urges the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the key regional body, to consult beyond the junta, and particularly with civil society and other democratic forces including the continuing democratic government in exile. But so far the international community and states in the region don't seem to want to listen to civil society.



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- > MYANMAR: MILITARY JUNTA GETS A FREE PASS

AUTHORITARIANISM CONSOLIDATED

Several authoritarian regimes strengthened their grip in 2023, regaining their control following protests or other forms of activism challenging their power. This could be seen with Iran's theocracy, Bahrain's monarchy and Nicaragua's and Venezuela's left-wing dictatorships.

But no matter how bloody the regime or how closed the civic space, civil society kept resisting, even if in subdued and covert ways or by moving operations abroad.

In Iran, 16 September marked a year since the start of a wave of mass protests against the theocratic regime, triggered by the morality police's killing of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, due to

alleged infractions of the strict dress code women are forced to adopt ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#). The widespread protests represented an existential threat to the regime, reflected in the brutality of its repressive response.

Iranians are less scared of the consequences of their activism. They dare to take action against the regime. The voice of protest is louder and the severity of the crackdown only shows how scared of the protest movement the regime is. The regime understands it won't be easy to shut down this protest movement, which threatens the legitimacy and therefore the existence of the regime.



SOHRAB RAZAGHI
Volunteer Activists

The regime killed hundreds, injured thousands and arrested tens of thousands. It subjected many in detention to torture, sexual abuse and denial of medical treatment. It weaponised the criminal justice system against them, holding express trials behind closed doors in '**revolutionary courts**' presided over by clerics, with zero procedural guarantees. It sentenced hundreds of activists, protesters and journalists to years in jail and handed out several death sentences, with at least **seven executions** carried out by May 2023. According to the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Iran, Javaid Rehman, some of the regime's human rights violations could constitute crimes against humanity under international law.

Protest has had to become subtler, but hasn't gone away, focusing on small daily acts of disobedience, including subtle defiance of hair, dress and behaviour codes. Rejection of the regime was also communicated through a **record low turnout** in a February 2024 election engineered to keep the hardliners in control. Open activism, however, can only continue in exile.

Repression by the regime of the Islamic Republic has escalated with executions of protesters, aimed at creating fear to suppress any attempt at new mobilisations. But the struggle continues under the surface. Although the Islamic Republic and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps severely suppress any attempt at a protest, people continue embracing civil resistance despite potentially serious costs.



ASAL ABASIAN
Iranian journalist and queer feminist activist in exile

In Bahrain, a Gulf monarchy home to mass democracy protests in 2011, the consequences of the severe **crackdown** that followed are visible to this day. Many of those arrested in the aftermath of the protests remain behind bars. According to **estimates** from the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, over the past decade the government has arrested almost 15,000 people for their political views, and between 1,200 and 1,400 are currently behind bars.

Just as petrostates such as the United Arab Emirates and Azerbaijan have sought to launder their reputations by hosting global climate summits, Bahrain, a country with a rubber stamp parliament and no semblance of democracy, was home to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global assembly in March 2023. Its autocratic government tried to boost its international standing by projecting a false image of a democratic moderniser. But civil society took advantage too, shining the international spotlight on Bahrain's systematic violations of civic freedoms and human rights and calling for it to release political prisoners. Visiting parliamentary delegations from several democratic states loudly **echoed** these demands, derailing the regime's plan to project a positive image.

A few months later, Bahrain's biggest protest in years emerged from the catacombs of its repressive system, when hundreds



A girl holds up a sign with a photo of jailed human rights defender Abdulhadi al-Khawaja at a protest in the village of Jannusan, Bahrain on 5 September 2014.

of political prisoners started a hunger strike to demand improvements in inhumane prison conditions. As many times before, their families **took to the streets** to call for their release, and international civil society backed their demands.

But not for the first time, ostensibly pro-democratic states have continued to put their stability and security concerns first. Bahrain is a strategic ally of the USA. It hosts the headquarters of the US Naval Forces Central Command and its navy's Fifth Fleet. This means the US government chooses not to see in Bahrain the human rights violations it condemns when they happen in non-allied states.

Still against the odds, activists in Bahrain and in exile continue to work together to open cracks in the system to push for democratisation.

■ Bahrain has closed civic space. We can't exercise our right to peaceful assembly, let alone openly campaign for freedoms of association and expression, the release of prisoners unfairly tried and imprisoned or a moratorium on the death penalty. Yet engaging in civic activism isn't totally impossible. We engage with allies and like-minded activists as well as the few civil society organisations that openly but cautiously raise human rights concerns so that the wider Bahraini society hears our message. We're a catalyst: we help Bahraini activists access platforms to reach domestic and international audiences.



JAWAD FAIROOZ
Salam for Democracy and Human Rights

In both Nicaragua and Venezuela, democratic regression and the repression of civic space accelerated when governments faced a spike in dissent.

In Nicaragua, this happened in April 2018, when President Daniel Ortega announced changes to the social security system that triggered a wave of protests. The plan was soon withdrawn, but multiple discontents converged on the streets and weren't deterred by state forces and armed pro-government groups offering their usual show of power. As images of repression spread on social media, more people joined protests. In response, the state stepped up its violence, killing **hundreds**. It imprisoned many more on terrorism and organised crime charges, among other serious offences. Over 150,000 Nicaraguans fled to exile, mainly to neighbouring Costa Rica.

In the years since, the increasingly authoritarian regime has dismantled civic space, reinforced the legal architecture of repression, criminalised any expression of dissent, jailed its critics and eliminated all traces of political competition. In a show of power, in February 2023 Ortega unexpectedly **ordered the release** of 222 political prisoners, putting them on a charter flight to the USA and stripping them of their citizenship and civil and political rights under accusations of anti-national mercenaryism and treason.

In Venezuela, too, the turning point towards autocracy was a street challenge to government power. The wave of protests began in March 2017, in rejection of the government-controlled Supreme Court's decision to strip the opposition-majority National Assembly of its powers. Demonstrations demanding the restoration of constitutional order went on for two months, intensifying in the face of a presidential decree calling for a National Constituent Assembly as an alternative to the elected parliament.

State forces caused dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries in repressing protests, and arrested close to 2,000, detaining hundreds for long afterwards. In jail, authorities reportedly tortured and ill-treated people, and the state committed numerous violations of due process guarantees, including prosecuting civilians under military jurisdiction. It also unleashed numerous attacks and arbitrary arrests of journalists, along with media censorship. Ongoing repression and economic collapse have caused people to leave Venezuela in unprecedented numbers ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

As presidential elections scheduled for 2024 have approached, the government further restricted rights and freedoms. A frontal attack on civic space came in early 2023 in the form of a draft

NGO law aimed at further controlling, restricting and potentially shutting down noncompliant civil society organisations (CSOs) and prosecuting their leaders and staff. Domestic and international CSOs emphatically **rejected** the bill, pointing out the government's aim of subordinating civil society to its interests.

Although the draft law may appear to target only human rights organisations, its impacts will be much broader, as it aims to take control of the entire associational fabric. All organisational forms, including political parties and education and academic organisations, are potential targets. Victims of human rights violations could lose all legal support. People affected by Venezuela's humanitarian emergency could lose access to civil society humanitarian programmes, which could be replaced by government programmes with restrictive access conditions.



RIGOBERTO LOBO PUENTES
Promotion, Education and Defence of Human Rights (PROMEDEHUM), Venezuela

Then in response to the opposition's strategy to promote a joint candidacy to face President Nicolás Maduro in the election, the government's puppet judiciary **disqualified** opposition leader María Corina Machado and **declared** the primaries that chose her null and void. Faced with pressure to hold free elections he'd likely lose, Maduro also sought to **capitalise on nationalist fervour** by reigniting a territorial dispute with neighbouring Guyana.

As a result of the growing restrictions, the CIVICUS Monitor **downgraded** Venezuela's civic space rating from repressed to closed in December 2023.

Civil society has good reason to fear the 2024 elections will be a simulation – but one the international community may be willing

to take at face value, consequently reducing its solidarity with Venezuela's beleaguered civil society.

Venezuela's ruling movement is forced to hold elections, not least because it needs a certain degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. But Maduro is unwilling to organise an election he might lose, so he'll go to great lengths to divide and discourage the opposition vote. A negative message we're receiving is that the 2024 elections, regardless of how they are organised, will be a milestone for normalising relations with Venezuela.



RAFAEL UZCÁTEGUI
Venezuelan Programme for Human Rights Education Action



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Exiled activism and transnational repression

In the face of longstanding authoritarian regimes, civil society activists, journalists and political dissidents are often forced to leave to continue their work. Most interviewees from

autocratic countries with highly restricted civic space, including **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burundi, Egypt** and **Iran**, were in exile, pushing for democracy and human rights from afar. They do so by supporting those who remain, mostly underground, documenting human rights violations and amplifying their voices in international forums.

In the extreme case of **North Korea**, a hermetically closed totalitarian state, CSOs, mostly based in South Korea, dedicate much of their work to supporting North Korean escapees. Exiled activists often face enormous difficulties in working with people back home. In many cases, as in **Hong Kong**, the challenge is that those they're in contact with will likely be arrested if discovered. In some, such as **Eritrea**, there's also the problem of internet restrictions. But even in the most difficult of circumstances, exiled activists persevere.

Members of CSOs who've remained in Belarus are being persecuted. All human rights organisations have already been deprived of registration, so it's impossible for them to work legally inside Belarus. To keep functioning, most human rights CSOs, Viasna included, have been forced to leave Belarus and continue their work from abroad. Almost all meetings and legal consultations with people who've been subjected to repression are now taking place online. The regional branches of our organisation have also only been able to continue working from abroad, collecting information on repression in their regions through local volunteers who put themselves in harm's way every day, as well as through open-source investigation techniques.



ANASTASIYA VASILCHUK
Viasna, Belarus

Recent exiles have tried to seamlessly continue the work they were doing in Iran, aided by virtual tools. And many more have joined the struggles from a distance, staging protests in cities from Berlin and Paris to Sydney and Toronto.

Others have helped activists in Iran challenge online surveillance and the filtering of online content by the Iranian regime by setting up and paying for virtual private networks (VPNs). These allow users to bypass controls by connecting to a remote server owned by a VPN provider outside the country. They also create secure channels for activists by masking the user's IP address and encrypting personal data.



ASAL ABASIAN
Iranian journalist and queer feminist activist

Being an exile is extremely frustrating because it makes our work less effective. Connecting with people inside Eritrea is very hard as internet penetration in Eritrea is only two per cent. The government basically controls all media: all independent media ceased to exist in 2001. This is why most information is brought to us by people who've recently left the country. But while the work is challenging, it's still possible to get information. And when the government reacts to our work, we know what we do is making an impact.



HELEN KIDAN
Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights



Members of the Iranian diaspora gather in front of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, Germany on 27 January 2024 to protest against executions in Iran.

Photo by Echo Iran/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images.

But activists don't always find safety in exile. Authoritarian states are increasingly guilty of transnational repression. Hong Kong offers a case in point. China's reaction to democracy protests that mobilised in 2019 effectively ended the 'one country, two systems' promise that had enabled people in Hong Kong to access vital civic freedoms long suppressed in mainland China. In the prolonged crackdown that followed, the authorities arrested hundreds under the **National Security Law**, with most denied bail. Several democracy activists were subjected to multiple trials and handed long sentences. Exile was the only way others avoided this fate.

But Hong Kong's police then started issuing international arrest warrants against high-profile exiled activists. Among them was Nathan Law, the former student leader active in the 2014 Umbrella Movement who founded a pro-democracy party and became his country's youngest-ever legislator. The targeted exiles are in Australia, the UK and the USA, all countries that suspended their extradition agreements with Hong Kong in the wake of the National Security Law, meaning China can't use channels it traditionally abuses, such as **Interpol's red notice system**.

Hong Kong has placed bounties on their heads, and chillingly, Hong Kong's leader, John Lee, **said** the activists would be pursued for life, under accusations of colluding with foreign governments, including by calling for sanctions, and other charges under the National Security Law. The state is exerting additional pressure by intimidating their families at home.

This is far from the only way China internationalises its repression. In 2022 it was revealed that China maintained a network of over 100 secret '**police stations**' in 53 countries – including those where Hong Kong's targeted activists live – that are used to intimidate exiles and in some cases capture and

return them to China. In April 2023, US authorities **charged** over 40 Chinese operatives with 'transnational repression' against US-based Chinese nationals, including for operating a secret police station in New York.

It's important to keep speaking up for people in Hong Kong and human rights defenders in exile. For example, recently the Hong Kong national security police issued five arrest warrants offering HK\$1 million (approx. US\$ 128,000) bounties for exiled pro-democracy Hong Kong activists based in the UK and USA. We strongly condemn this illegal attack against our friends and colleagues. We urge governments to take a stand and protect Hong Kong human rights defenders within their jurisdictions.



ANOUK WEAR
Hong Kong Watch

China is also using its economic influence in Southeast Asia to get local authorities to arrest and deport dissidents, activists, journalists and human rights lawyers. A recent target was human rights lawyer **Lu Siwei**, arrested in Laos on his way to Thailand, where he meant to take a flight to the USA to reunite with his wife and daughter.

Where it has less direct influence, as in the USA, the Chinese state still has means to harass its citizens. Recently a **Chinese student** in Washington DC was harassed by China's state security police for his democracy activism while his family members in China were hauled in for police questioning and released with a warning. Chinese students abroad are also pressured to self-censor for fear of being reported by fellow students from their country, with Chinese students' associations encouraging them to keep an eye on each other.

China is far from the only transnational repressor. According to a **Freedom House** report analysing eight years of data from 2014 to 2022, the top five perpetrators are China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Egypt and Russia, followed by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Belarus and Rwanda. These 10 account for 80 per cent of recorded cases.

Exiled activists based in Europe or Canada are relatively safe, whereas those in Rwanda may encounter additional pressure. The Burundian government has taken advantage of recently improved relations with Rwanda and pressured the host country to silence exiled Burundian journalists or hand them over. The Rwandan government gave some of these journalists an ultimatum to either remain silent or leave, forcing some to halt operations from Rwanda and relocate again. Some of these journalists were among a broader group, including other human rights defenders, who were tried and sentenced in absentia.



CARINA TERTSAKIAN
Burundi Human Rights Initiative

Activists who work from abroad are being targeted through their families. For example, the Egyptian-American human rights advocate Mohamed Soltan, who filed a case against former prime minister Hazem el-Beblawi, saw his five family members harassed and arrested as a result of his activism. The father of Belgium-based journalist and human rights advocate Ahmed Gamal Ziada has recently been detained and accused of misuse of communication, spreading false news and joining a banned group. This strategy aims to silence activists and impose an even higher personal cost for doing their work.



AHMED ATTALLA
Egyptian Front for Human Rights



Exiled Belarusians march in Warsaw, Poland on 9 August 2023, the day of the third anniversary of presidential election stolen by dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

When you continue working in exile, you sacrifice a lot as a person and as a family. There've been many cases of activists who've had members of their extended family arbitrarily detained. They've been harassed and thrown in jail. For example, a mother of an exiled journalist receives regular visits by security forces at midnight or in early morning, inquiring about her son's journalistic activities. The family has no part in the person's professional work, yet they're harassed because of it. My family shouldn't be punished even if I've committed a crime. Activists pay a high price to continue their work.



ZAMAN ASHRAF
Bangladeshi human rights defender

Exiled Iranian activists in multiple European countries have experienced hacking, cyberattacks and online harassment, death threats, surveillance and intimidation, with Iranian security agents apparently behind these. Two activists in different countries reported having car tyres slashed, and several described being followed home from meetings by suspicious men.

Belarus authorities recently found a new weapon to use against exiles, barring them from renewing their passports and other essential documents outside Belarus. The aim is to force them home to face certain detention. **Myanmar's** junta has started voiding the passports of nationals living in Singapore, making it impossible for them to travel internationally.

Some don't shy away from murder. **Bounsuan Kitiyano**, a member of Thailand-based Free Lao, a network of migrant workers and activists from Laos, was found dead in a Thailand border town in May. He'd participated in human rights meetings and peaceful protests at the Laos Embassy in Bangkok. In August, Algerian journalist and opposition activist **Abdou Semmar** survived an assassination attempt in Paris, where he's lived in exile since 2019.

Thailand, home to thousands of exiled Burmese, Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese activists, is no longer a safe haven. Its authorities are increasingly collaborating with their counterparts in the region or allowing their intelligence agencies to operate on their soil.

Duong Van Thai, a prominent Vietnamese blogger and YouTuber seeking asylum, was abducted by Vietnamese intelligence agents in Thailand and forcibly returned home last April. Cambodian activist **Thol Samnang** of the banned Candlelight Party was arrested by Thai authorities as he arrived in the country seeking

asylum in July. In December, Thai police also arrested Vietnamese human rights activist **Lù A Da**, two weeks after he publicly denounced the Vietnamese government's systematic repression of Indigenous Hmong people.

Freelance Pakistani journalist **Syed Fawad Ali Shah** also had his exile cut short. In March 2023, he was found to have been jailed in Pakistan several months after going missing in Malaysia, where he'd lived for 13 years. He reported being abducted by Malaysian immigration officials in a joint operation with Pakistani intelligence services and deported before spending six months in clandestine detention. Syed was eventually handed over to the Federal Investigation Agency's cybercrime wing, which slapped him with several bogus charges before granting him temporary bail, keeping him constantly afraid of being returned to jail.

“ I'm unable to sleep due to fear. Every time there is a knock at the door I panic. I urge organisations working for the rights of refugees and journalists around the world, as well as the heads of all states that have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, to provide me with protection and immediately relocate me to a safe country under special circumstances. I also urge the leaders of democratic states to put pressure on the Pakistani government regarding my situation and provide me with a way to leave the country safely.



SYED FAWAD ALI SHAH
Pakistani writer and journalist

Against attempts by their repressive governments to infiltrate them, exiled activists and organisations form tight networks of support and equip themselves to respond to threats. They adopt digital security measures and self-protection strategies and work to report violations when the UN Human Rights Council examines their countries' human rights records.

But they need much more **support** from host governments and the broader international community, including credible warnings against those operating illegally on foreign soil, greater respect for the right to seek asylum, enhanced protections for activists at risk and a more nuanced approach to extradition requests and Interpol notices issued by states known to engage in transnational repression.



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Authoritarian elections

In 2023, several authoritarian governments held elections in which their power was never in question. These elections served a legitimising purpose, domestically and internationally, for repressive regimes seeking to pretend they're democracies. In some cases, they also enabled dictators to co-opt and mobilise supporters and demoralise opposition.

In these contexts states invariably denied civil society its proper roles, such as voter education and monitoring electoral conduct and vote counting. In some cases the authorities banned all forms of observation, including by international missions, while in others, they allowed limited access, expecting enhanced credibility to result. Civil society continued to denounce fake elections and demanded the international community stop lending authoritarian regimes legitimacy and instead support embattled civil society activists and journalists.

The uncertainty of a democratic election was absent in Cuba last March, when people were summoned to appoint members of the National Assembly of People's Power. Cuba is a one-party regime in which the Communist Party of Cuba is indistinguishable from the state, so people weren't able to choose their representatives. Their only option was to **ratify** the people the party selected to stand.

People could abstain, but at their peril. In this communist republic where the government claims to represent the interests of the people, citizens are expected not just to acquiesce but to show active support, preferably accompanied by public displays of enthusiasm. Political opposition and democracy activists promoted abstention, with social media campaigns mobilising around hashtags such as #YoNoVoto (#IDoNotVote) and #EnDictaduraNoSeVota (#NoVotinginDictatorship). The government spared no propaganda effort to prevent a repeat of high abstention rates seen in 2022 municipal elections: it made heavy use of social media, stuck posters with its own counter-hashtags on city walls, sent its candidates on tour, distributed merchandising and organised cultural and sporting events and commercial fairs.

In July, Cambodia held parliamentary elections without competition, led by one of the world's **longest-ruling** autocrats, Prime Minister Hun Sen. This former military commander had ruled since 1985, presiding over a de facto one-party system – which has now become a dynasty.

With the only credible opposition party banned on a technicality, the ruling party claimed over 80 per cent of the vote and almost all parliamentary seats. One of these was taken by Hun Sen's eldest son, Hun Manet, who was quickly announced as the next prime minister. The electoral farce, held amid a years-long crackdown on dissent, served the purpose of engineering family succession.

In August, Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa of the ZANU-PF party, in power since independence, had another term confirmed through an election in which he used every trick in the book to ensure a favourable result. The authorities banned opposition rallies, jailed key opposition politicians and detained opposition activists, while ZANU-PF supporters unleashed threats, intimidation and political violence.

Ahead of the election, the government introduced new laws that further restricted civic space. The Patriotic Act, which came into force in July, created a new crime of 'wilfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe'. Intentionally broad and vague, the government could use this to criminalise pretty much anyone who disagrees with it.

Another law, the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill, sailed through the ZANU-PF-dominated parliament in February. Under **the guise** of complying with international anti-money laundering standards, it **extended** the state's powers over civil society groups, enabling it to place them under surveillance, take them over and close them down.

“ We were expecting both a democratic and an economic breakthrough after years of dictatorship and economic stagnation. But we were disappointed. Civil society tried to engage with the electoral process and play a monitoring role but was criminalised. In the run-up to the election we also did a lot of voter education. We managed to generate excitement among voters, but on voting day they were frustrated. This was a sham, not an election. It was a circus and a waste of resources that subverted the will of the people and illegally kept the incumbent in power.



OBERT MASARAURE
Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition



A Russian mercenary stands guard as part of the presidential security detail during the campaign for the constitutional referendum in Bangui, Central African Republic on 16 July 2023.

Photo by Leger Kokoakpa/Reuters via Gallo Images.

In September it was the turn of Eswatini, ruled by Africa's last absolute monarch, King Mswati III. An election without parties was held for the House of Assembly, the country's parliament, which has a mostly advisory role. The king continues to pull all the strings, and his promises to hold a dialogue following mass democracy protests in 2021 remain unfulfilled. Nobody has been held to account for lethal security force violence, and politicians who broke ranks to call for reform were found guilty on absurd charges by a judiciary the king controls. In the clearest indication nothing was to be expected of the election, human rights lawyer **Thulani Maseko**, a leader of Eswatini's democracy movement and a public thorn in Mswati's side, was shot dead in January 2023.

As the year neared its end, **deeply flawed elections** were held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, amid a surge of rebel violence and as UN peacekeeping forces began to withdraw after more than two decades in the country, on the request of President Félix Tshisekedi. Following a vote marred

with irregularities, Tshisekedi was recorded as winning an unprecedented 73.5 per cent support, contrasting sharply with pre-election polls. The electoral commission found numerous irregularities in parliamentary and municipal elections held at the same time and with the same ballot papers, but claimed to uncover none with the presidential vote. Civil society mobilised to try to ensure a fair vote – but to no avail.

“ The presidential election was held to show the world that the government conducted it within the constitutional deadline, but it was marred by fraud and irregularities. In the run-up to the election, we launched awareness campaigns to promote a peaceful vote. We trained civil society groups and journalists in election observation and media coverage. We observed the polls and contributed to the resulting civil society report. However, this report wasn’t taken into account by the relevant bodies.



JONATHAN MAGOMA
Congoese human rights activist

As well as ceremonial or fraudulent elections, some presidents held staged referendums to prolong their stay in power, as, seen in the solidly authoritarian Central African Republic (CAR) and Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, an April 2023 referendum approved a package of constitutional changes, extending presidential terms and resetting the two-term limit to allow President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to hold office until 2040. There was never any question about the vote’s outcome: with dissent tightly controlled in closed civic space conditions, there was no prospect of genuine debate, a campaign against, or a no vote. The referendum’s reported turnout and voting totals were at around the same levels as for non-competitive presidential elections held two years before: according to official figures, 90-plus per cent endorsed the changes on a turnout of almost 85 per cent.

Given the state’s total control, voting figures can’t be trusted. Despite lack of access for independent civil society and media observers, forced voting was reported. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers **pointed out** that conditions lacked competition, with an entirely one-sided campaign that mobilised all the state’s power in support and provided no opportunity to express dissent.

Similar constitutional changes were introduced through a referendum in the CAR, allowing President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, about to finish what should have been his second and final term, to stay in power for as long as he wishes. The new constitution was developed with minimal consultation and opposition protests were banned during a campaign that offered few opportunities for debate.

President Touadéra knew he could pull this off because he has very powerful friends. The CAR is ground zero for the extensive African involvement of **Russian mercenaries**, believed to be playing some kind of role in at least **18 African countries** ► **GO TO CHAPTER.** Touadéra reached out to Russia shortly after taking power, and received its military instructors and weapons. Mercenaries soon followed, helping keep Touadéra in power in a country where civil war has lasted over a decade.

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HYBRID REGIMES OFFER A MIXED PICTURE

In much of the world in 2023, elections had a less straightforward meaning than in either fully democratic states, where results are fair and respected, or outright authoritarian regimes, where winners are picked beforehand and people's choices don't matter. In many countries around the world, 2023's elections sat somewhere in between.

Generally speaking, elections in hybrid regimes – which combine democratic and authoritarian characteristics – tend to have substantial irregularities that prevent them being free and fair, but they're not facades.

They may offer some windows of opportunity for political change, but those who seek renewal often struggle to pry those windows open because of heavy restrictions on civic space and the pressures incumbent governments can exert on opposition. Hybrid regimes are often characterised by power imbalances, with disproportionately powerful executives and subordinate judiciaries. As a result, corruption is usually widespread and the rule of law is weak. Civil society faces the struggle of checking the government's power and ensuring elections reflect public opinions.

2023 offered examples from every continent of elections in such contexts failing to live up to democratic standards, dashing hopes for change and preserving status quos. Two Central American countries showed the challenges and opportunities involved. One, El Salvador, is rapidly sliding towards authoritarianism as a result of the hollowing out of democracy by an elected leader. But in the other, Guatemala's civil society helped ensure an unprecedented change that brings hope for the future of the country's democracy.

Hopes for change dashed

Hopes of change came to nothing in Turkey, where strongarm President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a narrow but decisive runoff in May, defeating a united opposition that aimed to restore democratic standards. The result came after a deeply polarising campaign in which Erdoğan mobilised anti-LGBTQI+ culture war politics and both sides appealed to nationalist, anti-migrant sentiment.

Erdoğan uses language that is completely against human rights and his Justice and Development Party has retained its parliamentary majority by coalescing with an extremist party. The situation will now become dangerous, particularly for women, LGBTQI+ people and Kurdish people.



EREN KESKIN
Human Rights Association, Turkey

A severely unequal media landscape greatly contributed to Erdoğan's victory. State media and private media owned by business leaders closely connected to the government dominate, and they focused coverage almost entirely on Erdoğan, starving the opposition of airtime. OSCE observers **concluded** that while the election was competitive, the playing field wasn't level, with freedom of expression restrictions and media bias advantaging Erdoğan. Some opposition supporters also experienced harassment and intimidation, with instances of violence, such as rocks thrown, against opposition rallies.



Protesters call on Thailand's senators to respect the result of the 14 May general election in Bangkok, Thailand on 29 July 2023.

■ The new press law, which was recently introduced by the government under the pretext of 'combatting disinformation', has led to a new period of repression of anyone who expresses a critical stance towards the regime. Lawsuits are filed against us for news and articles published in our print newspaper and on our website. Our website is frequently subjected to access-blocking orders.

 **FATIH POLAT**
Evrensel newspaper, Turkey

It was a similar story in Paraguay. Polls predicted change, but the ruling Colorado Party, which has dominated Paraguayan politics for decades, comfortably won April 2023 elections and even increased its parliamentary representation and share of **provincial governorships**.

The vote was seemingly clean, although the electoral court **rejected** applications for national observer status by two

domestic civil society groups, Alma Cívica and Decidamos. But the campaign saw personal attacks, corruption allegations and anti-rights narratives prevail over informed debate about alternatives. It was also plagued by **disinformation**, including fake opinion polls, conspiracy theories and narratives of electoral fraud, which forced civil society and digital media to undertake intensive fact-checking and disinformation-debunking **efforts**.

■ The election winners are anti-rights: they define themselves as 'pro-life', they're against equal marriage and sexual and reproductive rights and they attack all issues related to gender rights. I think civil society is in for a very tough few years. Organisations working on rights issues are going to have to make big efforts to join together and take collective action.

 **MARTA FERRARA**
Seeds for Democracy, Paraguay

Incumbent parties also retained power in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In Nigeria, popular dissatisfaction, particularly among young people, resulted in a credible third-party candidate emerging for the first time. However, the ruling All Progressives Congress party saw the threat off in an election with the lowest turnout in the country's democratic history and marred by numerous irregularities. The two main defeated candidates rejected the results. With only 37 per cent of the votes cast, winner Bola Tinubu received a weak mandate.

In Sierra Leone, by comparison, elections produced a clear win for the incumbent president and ruling party. The runner-up **claimed fraud**, as is customary for defeated candidates, but international and civil society observers pointed to inconsistencies in the count and lack of transparency in the election commission's functioning.

Irregularities may however not have been so marked as to affect the outcome, and civil society highlighted significant progress in improving the integrity of elections. But the attempted coup carried out by dissident military officers in November showed that democracy's foundations may still be shaky. The government should expand rather than restrict democratic practices and principles as the safeguard.

Sierra Leone welcomed international election observers who provided an impartial assessment and promoted transparency. Civil society played a crucial role in promoting voter education, monitoring the electoral process and advocating for electoral reforms.



JOHN CAULKER
Fambul Tok, Sierra Leone

Change was more blatantly thwarted in Thailand, where the party that won the vote was excluded from government. The progressive, youth-led Move Forward party campaigned on a change agenda, promising to limit royal and military power and introduce economic and social reforms. Many found this an appealing package, but military-appointed senators stopped it forming a government. Instead, they backed an uneasy coalition of a party twice deposed by military coups with military-aligned parties. Many who invested in the election process were disappointed at what transpired – but the election revealed an appetite to participate actively to seek renewal that offers some hope.

People not only cast their votes but also participated in the observation process. People understood their participation was important and didn't let public officials report the results all by themselves, without any checks and balances.

A new political culture has emerged and there's no way back – it will remain regardless of the results.



YINGCHEEP ATCHANONT
Internet Law Reform Dialogue, Thailand

Maldives was the outlier in 2023. Its September presidential runoff saw incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed defeated by challenger Mohamed Muizzu. Ahead of the vote, civil society drew attention to an uneven playing field. The Elections Commission lacked independence and the government placed judicial obstacles in the way of opposition parties. Media coverage **resembled** government propaganda and the government made attempts to buy off voters with promises of land.

But still the incumbent lost, the fourth time in a row this has happened. Change at the top signalled a shift in the country's international relations, with the new president closer to China than his pro-India predecessor. The campaign focused on this issue, but too little attention was paid to the fact that neither candidate offered any plan to improve civic space and the quality of democracy or work meaningfully with civil society.

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Democracy eroded from within

El Salvador offers the clearest Latin American example of the erosion from within that causes the slow death of democracy. The danger signs come when democratically elected, often populist leaders concentrate power by co-opting institutions, curtailing civic freedoms and human rights guarantees and attacking civil society, independent media and political opposition.

El Salvador tilted dangerously towards authoritarianism as its highly popular president, Nayib Bukele, stepped up attacks on democratic checks and balances ahead of a general election held in February 2024.

Bukele won re-election by a landslide, but he shouldn't have been a candidate in the first place. Salvadoran presidents have a one-term limit, but he was able to run for a second term thanks to judicial manoeuvres that violated the constitution. And the vote was far from fair. It was held under an extended state of emergency entailing suspension of freedoms of association and peaceful assembly and due process guarantees.

Under the state of emergency, attacks against journalists have risen and many have been driven into exile. In April, investigative outlet El Faro moved its operations to Costa Rica. The potential for reprisals has driven widespread self-censorship. Senior public officials and social media trolls have systematically vilified critical voices, something that also discourages companies from advertising in independent media, further challenging the financial sustainability of the few remaining sources. President Bukele, in contrast, was able to abuse state media and resources at will during the campaign.

Some CSOs continue to denounce the lack of a free environment for the expression of opinions, but their complaints have had little effect. Freedom of expression has continued to erode. And a country without freedom of expression, where human rights are violated and human rights defenders are persecuted, is nothing short of a dictatorship.



CAROLINA AMAYA
Salvadoran freelance journalist

Ruling party supporters have spread accusations of gang links against civil society activists, who've also been increasingly criminalised. In November, Salvadoran civil society groups **stated** that this was one of the worst situations since the end of the 1980 to 1992 civil war, due to police harassment, censorship and the closure of channels for dialogue with the government.

But there was no election fraud: most people chose to reward Bukele's seemingly successful 'war on gangs' in the polls because it made them safer, despite its steep human rights costs.

Following the vote, we're officially entering a dictatorship. These days dictatorships are not like those of the 1970s and 1980s. In many cases, such as this, they're not the result of military coups, but of power grabbing by leaders who are initially democratically elected. Tactics have also changed, becoming much more subtle. Our democracy is dying because of the deterioration of civic space.



CÉSAR ARTIGA
Global Call to Action Against Poverty, El Salvador

Popular authoritarians pose a monumental challenge to democracy. When they're riding high, savouring their policies' success, people may be willing to reward them with overwhelming power. But at some point people want change,

and they'll find it hard to get because the autocratic leader they once supported will have dismantled democratic institutions and put them at the service of perpetuating their power.

Another Latin American country plagued by security problems, Ecuador, held a presidential election in 2023. Ecuador's government institutions are riddled with corruption and have proved ineffective in the face of **organised crime** and the resulting violence.

The reasonably free and fair election took place in a context of rising violence that saw several candidates **assassinated**, including anti-corruption presidential hopeful Fernando Villavicencio. The runoff winner, Daniel Noboa, was elected for a short 18-month term, aimed at completing his predecessor's, which he'd cut short by dissolving congress to avoid impeachment. Insecurity was one of the campaign's key issues, with Noboa offering a strong security focus, emphasising police and military response and the imposition of penalties and punishments.

One and a half years is very little time to tackle violence and insecurity along with other complex problems and Noboa lacks a legislative majority, just like his predecessor. But he's used other tools to assert power. Soon after taking office, Noboa decreed a 'state of internal armed conflict' to allow armed forces to combat drug trafficking gangs by treating them as terrorist targets, and imposed a 60-day curfew. He signed several agreements with the USA, including to grant immunity to US military. He proposed building additional prisons and called a **constitutional referendum**, to be held in April, on issues including extradition, specialised courts and the role of the military in combatting organised crime, along with a popular consultation on amending laws to increase penalties for a variety of serious crimes.



Presidential candidate Christian Zurita of Construye party votes under heavy security in Quito, Ecuador on 20 August 2023.

Photo by Martin Bernetti/AFP via Getty Images.

A hundred days into his term, Noboa continued to enjoy approval ratings above 80 per cent.

It's too early to say whether Noboa will go down Bukele's path, but the 'Bukele model' is popular in Ecuador and several of Noboa's early measures resembled Bukele's despite the differences in context. There may be a large degree of electoral calculation in Noboa's decisions so far.

With people increasingly concerned about insecurity, the president responded to the violence triggered by prison riots by declaring a state of emergency and imposing a 60-day curfew. These measures were also possibly intended to boost his popularity and improve his government's rating in view of next year's elections, in which he's expressed his intention to run. The government's position has been echoed by the mainstream media and apparently endorsed by broad segments of public opinion. In the face of this, the political opposition has remained virtually silent.



MAURO CERBINO
FLACSO Ecuador

A reason for hope from Guatemala

Guatemala, a hybrid regime whose faint democratic features were all but gone, offered a reason for hope when it went in the opposite direction to its neighbour El Salvador. It was a major civil society victory.

A state co-opted by corrupt self-serving elites, Guatemala held elections on 25 June in a context of great public scepticism. But the unexpected happened: Bernardo Arévalo, a presidential candidate not part of the political class, made the runoff vote as leader of Movimiento Semilla ('Seed Movement'), a new party born out of mass 2015 **anti-corruption protests**. Entrenched elites, which Guatemalans call 'the corrupt pact', orchestrated multiple judicial manoeuvres to try to overturn the results and exclude him from the runoff.

Sustained public protests piled pressure on key institutions to ensure Arévalo could stand in the 20 August runoff, which he won by a landslide. During the protracted hiatus between election and inauguration days, elites continued to try to stop Arévalo being sworn in by any means possible – but people kept up their protests for months and didn't lower their guard until they saw him take office.



READ MORE

- EL SALVADOR: A VICTORY FOR POPULAR AUTHORITARIANISM
- ECUADOR: STAKES HIGH AHEAD OF PRESIDENTIAL RUNOFF
- ECUADOR: AN END TO INSTABILITY?
- GUATEMALA CLINGS TO DEMOCRATIC PROMISE
- GUATEMALA: CHANGE WITHIN REACH
- GUATEMALA'S CHANCE FOR A NEW BEGINNING



The mere fact that the election took place was a milestone. That the winning candidate had clear democratic and progressive views made it all the more remarkable. Bernardo Arévalo's victory represents society's repudiation of the corrupt political elite. We were at a historic crossroads, between an authoritarian past and a possible future in which we could build a democratic state.

The new government will have to confront one of the continent's most conservative and backward oligarchies, responsible for the crime of genocide. Stripping these groups of their privileges will be no easy task. Continued support and vigilance by the international community will be extremely necessary.



JORGE SANTOS

Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (UDEFEQUA)



People celebrate Bernardo Arévalo's victory in the presidential runoff in Guatemala City on 20 August 2023.

Photo by Luis Acosta/AFP via Getty Images.

FAR RIGHT'S RISE DRIVES POLARISATION

In 2023, Europe was the epicentre of opportunistic politicians using culture war strategies to profit from polarisation

► **GO TO CHAPTER.** Nationalist and populist forces promoted multiple forms of denial – of climate change, science, systemic racism, gender diversity and the realities of migration – to boost their standing in election after election.

Right-wing nationalists have long been in power in Hungary and, until recently, Poland, and 2022 saw victory for the Brothers of Italy, a party that sprang from the neofascist movement, with its leader Giorgia Meloni becoming **Italy's** prime minister. The Sweden Democrats, once on the political fringes, came second in **Sweden's** 2022 election and the government that resulted depends on its support.

The trend continued in 2023, with far-right parties speaking to and stoking people's anxieties in the face of economic strife and social change, making electoral advances as a result. Everywhere they rose, they brought bad news for excluded groups – migrants and refugees, women, LGBTQI+ people, religious minorities – and the civil society that defends their rights, along with further setbacks for climate action.

Following Finland's April election, the Finns Party took control of seven ministries and placed its anti-migrant rhetoric at the heart of the new government's pledges to slash social welfare funding as part of a package of spending cuts. The change in government was also expected to bring international repercussions due to drastic changes in international development funding priorities– which, as Finland's national civil society platform Fingo **noted**, immediately excluded reproductive rights.



People protest in reaction to the election victory of far-right leader Geert Wilders in Utrecht, the Netherlands on 23 November 2023.

The far-right and Eurosceptic Swiss People's Party (SVP) also dominated the campaign in Switzerland's October election with its anti-immigrant rhetoric. It was rewarded with **28.6 per cent** of the vote and 62 of 200 seats in the National Council, Switzerland's lower parliamentary chamber. Having learned from the experience of others, Swiss civil society sought to convey the need for non-extremist parties to work together and limit the far right's influence on government.

Right-wing populists pose a true threat when other parties meet their demands, a trend already observed in countries such as Germany. It would be a great mistake for conservative parties to respond to the election results by aligning even more closely with the SVP. The SVP must be treated as a radical outsider so it remains a minority – albeit a large one that received 28 per cent of the vote. Swiss liberals must distance themselves from the SVP, which often conceals its populist and extremist nature behind a conservative facade.



LEA SCHLENKER
Operation Libero, Switzerland

In the Netherlands, maverick far-right populist Geert Wilders came first in the November election. While the long process of government formation is **ongoing**, he could become his country's next prime minister. Any role in government could only mean further attacks on the rights of migrants and religious minorities.

Wilders' key issue, the one that has made him most popular, concerns migrants and asylum seekers. Wilders wants to shut down the asylum system and not let any new asylum seekers into the Netherlands. By doing this, the Netherlands would breach its obligations under international law to provide safe haven for refugees. We're calling of potential coalition partners to stand up for the Netherlands' international reputation.



NIELS HOOGERHEIJDE
Partos, The Netherlands

A similar kind of regression came in Slovakia, where the September election saw former prime minister Robert Fico make a comeback. A nationalist populist hailing from the supposedly leftist Smer party, Fico was forced to resign in 2018

amid mass anti-corruption protests triggered by the killing of young investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová. Infamous for his virulent attacks on LGBTQI+ rights and vilification of civil society, Fico promised to take a pro-Russia line and reverse support for Ukraine. Following a campaign rife with hate speech and conspiracy theories, he formed a three-party **coalition government** including the left-wing Hlas ('Voice') party and the far-right ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party.

In Austria, which holds parliamentary elections in 2024, and Germany, where regional votes are due in the country's east, **Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)** and **Alternative for Germany (AfD)** are surging in the polls. Strongly anti-immigration and anti-Muslim, these parties are also engaging in culture war issues, particularly on gender rights. From the pandemic onwards, they've increasingly tapped into people's financial anxieties and the legitimate concerns of those left behind, such as farmers mobilised against agriculture subsidy cuts.

In early 2024 it was revealed that in **secret conference** in Germany in November, far-right politicians, business leaders and even some members of mainstream conservative parties – such as the Christian Democratic Union, Angela Merkel's party – discussed 'remigration' plans: the deportation of asylum seekers, foreigners with residence permits and German citizens deemed to be 'unassimilated'. Also present was notorious Austrian far-right activist Martin Sellner.

This was a wake-up call. People took to the streets in protest in numerous German towns and cities, which **inspired Austrians** to protest in Vienna and other cities across the country. Protesters **came** from many walks of life, including civil society groups of various kinds, different political parties, churches and unions, united to resist a far-right resurgence.



Far-right presidential candidate Javier Milei of La Libertad Avanza raises a chainsaw, symbolising his promise to reduce the size of the state, at a rally in Buenos Aires, Argentina on 25 September 2023.

Over the past two decades, western states have invested billions in the global south to foster democracy, facilitate peacebuilding and deter violence that poses a threat to western interests. However, the largest current threat is posed by right-wing extremist movements operating within western countries. This situation requires an urgent shift in approach. Given the internationally networked character of violent far-right groups, our response must also be globally interconnected.



PETER ANHALT AND MAXIMILIAN RUF
Violence Prevention Network, Germany

Across the world in South America, the far right burst into the Chilean constitution-drafting process in May and a right-wing libertarian won the Argentinean presidency in November.

In Chile, the far right came first in the vote to choose the body tasked with producing a new constitution. The Republican Party, led by defeated presidential candidate José Antonio Kast, came first overall and in 70 per cent of municipalities, gaining veto power over the process. This election came as part of a traditional, closed-doors constitution-making process after a first attempt at replacing the dictatorship-era constitution with a progressive, rights-oriented alternative produced through an inclusive and participatory process, was rejected in a referendum. The new draft was however **rejected** in a December referendum, sending the process back to square one.

In Argentina, polarisation reached a new level in the presidential election runoff, won by right-wing libertarian Javier Milei, a political outsider leading the recently founded far-right party La Libertad Avanza, offering a radical, libertarian ultra-free-market agenda.

Generally speaking, Argentina's democratic institutions work. The elections took place normally and the results were out very quickly. However, we've seen a huge setback in terms of public debate. Intolerance and verbal violence have increased. Supporters of different parties can hardly talk to each other. There's a lot of aggression on social media. These are all medium-intensity warning signs that, if not addressed, will only pave the way for more violence and authoritarianism.



YANINA WELP
Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy



People rally in defence of democracy in Sao Paulo, Brazil on 9 January 2023, in reaction to attacks on federal government buildings by supporters of former far-right president Jair Bolsonaro.

Photo by Carla Carmel/Reuters via Gallo Images.

An irate economist who entered politics only two years before, Milei campaigned on two promises: stripping what he characterised as a parasitic political class off its privileges and, borrowing Trump’s rhetoric, ‘making Argentina great again’. In his narrative, the shock economic measures required, including tight fiscal austerity, would hurt political elites rather than the people he claims to speak for.

While his libertarian philosophy put him at odds with traditional conservatism, Milei made a marriage of convenience with the socially conservative right to win the election, threatening hard-won sexual and reproductive rights and gender mainstreaming policies.

But nowhere in the region did the far right show an uglier face than in Brazil. A week after taking office on 1 January 2023, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva faced an insurrection

by disgruntled followers of his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro. Although Bolsonaro didn’t appear to be personally involved in organising the invasion of the headquarters of Brazil’s major federal institutions, he set the scene by consistently sowing disinformation, stoking doubts over the election’s integrity and demonising his opponents, making their rule illegitimate in the eyes of his supporters. The attacks indicated deep division on basic principles among Brazilians – a split far from settled, as revealed by a **large demonstration** of support for Bolsonaro, currently subject to police charges, in São Paulo in February 2024.

Democratic consensus has been eroded and the out-of-control forces unleashed by Bolsonaro threaten to be a lasting presence in Brazil’s political life.

Setbacks for the far right in Poland and Spain

The European far right also experienced setbacks in 2023. The biggest came in Poland in October, when despite efforts to skew the election in its favour, the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) lost its majority. Although it came first, it was unable to form a government. Three opposition groups committed to put their differences aside and form a joint administration to end PiS' eight-year rule, and with it its attacks on judicial independence, the rule of law, civil society and women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

The change owed a lot to civil society, whose support the new government will continue to need as it works to restore civic freedoms and democratic safeguards while dealing with a PiS-aligned president and an administrative and judicial machinery packed with PiS loyalists.

Civil society played a crucial role in ensuring the fairness of the election. Several organisations conducted extensive training for thousands of people who volunteered to become electoral observers, empowering them to oversee the elections and ensure compliance with the law. Civil society educated voters on election participation and organised several extensive campaigns to encourage turnout, particularly dedicated to women and young people, resulting in a remarkable 74.4 per cent voter turnout, a Polish record.



SONIA HORONZIAK and FILIP PAZDERSKI
Institute of Public Affairs, Poland

Another setback for the forces of regression came in Spain, where far-right party Vox lost over half its seats in the snap July



Pedestrians walk past a poster depicting the socialist candidate with the word 'Forward' and the conservative and far-right candidates with the word 'Backward' during the election campaign in Madrid, Spain on 9 July 2023.

election. Vox's ferocious anti-rights campaign evidently backfired, bringing major losses.

This election campaign was plagued by expressions of homophobia and transphobia. We've seen politicians refuse to address trans people in a manner consistent with their gender identity and threaten to abolish laws that have enshrined rights, such as the Equal Marriage Law and the Trans Law. This has been reflected in an increase in harassment of LGBTQI+ people.



EMILIO DE BENITO
LGTB+ Collective of Madrid, Spain

Against all predictions, Vox didn't enter the government alongside the mainstream conservative Popular Party, whose victory over the incumbent Socialist Party (PSOE) was far narrower than expected. With no other party prepared to support a government that included Vox, it was the PSOE that led the coalition formation process that pieced together a new administration.

But dangers still lurk around the corner, with Vox poised to take advantage if the PSOE-led minority government, propped up by various regional pro-independence parties, unravels.



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WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

AI challenges

Roughly half the world's population has a chance to vote in 2024, making it the **biggest** election year ever. Some of the most highly populated countries on earth are holding elections: India, the USA, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia and Mexico, although Russia's only superficially resembles an election. But in the competitive votes, there's a lot at stake. And troublingly, the **potential** of AI to wreak electoral havoc has already started to show.

In **Slovakia's** tight race, fake audio recordings released days before voting may have had decisive impact. The AI-generated deepfake mimicked the voice of the Progressive Slovakia party leader discussing election-rigging tactics. He and the journalist he was supposedly speaking with immediately denounced the audio as fake, but it was posted during a 48-hour moratorium ahead of polls opening, making it difficult to debunk. Because it was in



A billboard depicting the AI-generated avatars of presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto and running mate is illuminated at rush hour in Jakarta, Indonesia on 12 January 2024.

Photo by Willy Kurniawan/Reuters via Gallo Images.

audio form, it exploited a loophole in Meta’s regulations, under which only faked videos are against the rules.

Similar abuses of AI for election purposes surfaced in the **USA** even before the real election season began. Ahead of New Hampshire primaries in January, an AI-generated robocall impersonating President Joe Biden urged voters not to turn out and instead ‘save’ their vote for the general election.

And it isn’t only anonymous wrongdoers using AI tools; official campaigns are doing so too. In **India**, long-dead respected figures have been resurrected through AI to shower praise on politicians. In **Indonesia**, the winning candidate – a former general accused of human rights abuses – used an AI-generated avatar to rebrand himself as a ‘cute grandpa’ TikTok star who captivated Gen Z voters. In **Pakistan**, campaigners used AI to create messages from former prime minister Imran Khan, currently in jail.

In January ChatGPT published **new rules** banning the use of the tool for political campaigning. This included a ban on creating images of real people, including politicians. It’s clear regulation is lagging far behind events, and it doesn’t appear technology companies are ready to meet the challenges of this super election year.

Problems **AI presents** to the integrity of elections include disinformation campaigns fuelled by deepfake videos and the micro-targeting of voters through the exploitation of their data, among others. Civil society is doing what it can to tackle these – sometimes in partnership with governments, sometimes on its own – through **combinations of tactics**. These include supporting local journalism, running media literacy education campaigns, fact checking, labelling social media content, developing counter-messaging strategies, improving cybersecurity for elections and

campaigns and changing recommendations algorithms. Civil society is also calling for better international AI regulation

▶ **GO TO CHAPTER.**

Troubling beginnings

This biggest election year kicked off with Bangladesh – a country with closed civic space – going to the polls on 7 January. Its election saw the ruling Awami League retain power and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina start her fourth consecutive term. The outcome was never in doubt, with the main opposition party refusing to run over well-founded concerns about electoral integrity. For all practical purposes, Bangladesh is now a one-party state.

Voting was preceded by an intense pre-election crackdown in which the authorities harassed, criminalised and jailed thousands of opposition activists and met protests with **violence**. The lack of electoral choice was reflected in ballots padded with fake opposition candidates and a plummeting turnout.

“ The space for civil society in Bangladesh is closed. CSOs are free to operate only as long as they don’t challenge the ruling system. Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly are being restricted and forcefully violated. Extremely politicised state institutions are being used as an extension of the ruling party, a trend many argue could lead to the materialisation of a totalitarian state. This was a one-sided election in which we already knew who the winner would be.



DR MUBASHAR HASAN

Bangladeshi academic and social justice activist

A month later, **Pakistan** – a country with repressed civic space – held what may have been its **least clean** election since the 1980s. The most popular politician, Imran Khan, had been thrown in jail under fabricated charges. The authorities did everything they could to block his party, and election day was marred by violence. Khan’s party still managed to win the most seats, and in response, the two establishment parties, trailing in second and third, quickly announced a coalition, installing a government that’s unlikely to speak to the unhappiness many voters expressed about military power, political dynasties and economic strife.

Then came Indonesia, with its 200 million-plus registered voters. The outgoing incumbent, President Jokowi, undermined the rule of law to pave the way for his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, to become Prabowo Subianto’s running mate – and win. The state’s repression of government critics, journalists, activists and academics intensified ahead of voting. Government officials from the president down used and abused state resources to back the official campaign. They got the result they wanted.

Democratic decline has been evident over the past five years under the Jokowi administration, and Prabowo’s victory is unlikely to improve the situation. Prabowo’s victory represents the worst-case scenario for the future of human rights in Indonesia. Not only does he lack perspective and commitment to human rights, but he was also involved in the abduction of activists in 1998 when he was the commander of Indonesia’s special military forces.



RIZKY ARGAMA and VIOLLA REININDA
Centre of Indonesian Law and Policy Studies

Much more of this can be expected, because attacks on the conditions that enable free and fair competition are underway in many countries that will soon hold elections, including **India**, **Mexico** and **Senegal**.

Where people can vote freely, in contexts of great anxiety and an uncertain future, voters increasingly dissatisfied with the current state of affairs will continue to opt for alternatives that present themselves as radical. It’s to be expected that many of 2024’s elections will result in a collapse of support for incumbents and the political establishment, and maverick politicians with simplistic and sensationalist answers to complex problems will win power. In power they’re bound to disappoint, and they’re certain to attack civil society. And even if they don’t win they’ll help make the political weather.

Civil society will continue to press for governments to call overdue elections, for elections to take place in free and fair conditions, for people to have the information they need to make informed choices, for votes to be properly counted, for losers to accept defeat and for winners to govern in the interests of everyone rather than just their supporters, doing so with respect for people’s rights and freedoms.

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GENDER STRUGGLES: RESISTANCE AGAINST REGRESSION





Thousands of people take to the streets of Toulouse, France on International Women's Day, 8 March 2023.

Photo by Alain Pitton/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

After decades of steady progress, gender is now bitterly contested territory. Global movements for women's and LGBTQI+ rights brought about profound change in consciences, customs and institutions. They elevated more than half of humanity, excluded for centuries, to the status of holders of rights.

But these gains brought brutal backlash that has all but halted further progress. In 2023, women's and LGBTQI+ movements had to devote increasing efforts to defending rather than expanding rights. They still managed to achieve some memorable victories, such as the legalisation of abortion in Mexico and the recognition of same-sex marriage in Estonia – but strong regressive trends overshadowed these and other gains. From Russia's LGBTQI+ crackdown to Uganda's anti-gay law, and from Afghanistan's gender apartheid system to record levels of femicide in numerous countries, 2023 saw rights under attack.

Prospects of equality have receded. The 2023 United Nations (UN) report on gender progress across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals confirmed gender equality will by no means be achieved by the target date of 2030 ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. Instead, the World

Economic Forum estimates that, at the current rate, it will take another 131 years to achieve gender parity. The Gender Social Norms Index **reports** that nine out of 10 people of all genders are biased against women. The figure hasn't budged in a decade.

Crises – which invariably hit women and girls **the hardest** – worsened in 2023. The number of women and girls living in conflict contexts reached **614 million** in 2022, up 50 per cent from 2017, and the multiple conflicts raging in 2023 are pushing it even higher ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. In war after war, women's bodies have become battlefields, weapons and bounty – but women have refused to be pigeonholed as victims, standing at the forefront of humanitarian response and peacebuilding efforts, including in **Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine**.

Women are likelier to live in extreme poverty than men, and when food is scarce, they're often the ones eating last and least. **Sixty per cent** of an estimated 690 million people currently facing food insecurity are female, and growing food insecurity caused by climate change will **affect** women and girls disproportionately.



AT THE CURRENT PACE, GENDER PARITY WILL TAKE **131** MORE YEARS



ONLY ABOUT **10%** OF STATES ARE LED BY WOMEN



1 IN 3 WOMEN EXPERIENCE PHYSICAL OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR LIVES



65 COUNTRIES STILL CRIMINALISE SAME-SEX RELATIONS



SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IS NOW LEGAL IN **37** COUNTRIES

A regressive political current worsened the situation in 2023. Throughout the year, anti-gender narratives made headway on all continents and across cultural and ideological divides, driven by well-organised and well-connected anti-rights movements. Supported by powerful conservative foundations, anti-rights movements are **much better funded** than their progressive counterparts, and have coopted human rights language to shift the narrative. In 2023, this fuelled more violence and harassment of gender activists and LGBTQ+ people.

Just as feminist struggles became more necessary than ever, they also became harder. Three quarters of activists **surveyed**

in 67 countries reported threats or harassment against them or their organisations. A third reported incidents targeting their families and a quarter reported they'd received death threats. Reflecting democratic setbacks in many countries, almost 60 per cent identified state authorities as the source of heightened risk. Conditions for activism have declined steeply and quickly and, in a global context where gender-based violence remains pervasive, politically motivated harassment now tends to pass off as part of the everyday violence against women or LGBTQI+ people, when it's a specific weapon of repression – and one taking a severe toll.

Still, civil society resisted by supporting activists under threat, reclaiming the human rights narrative, campaigning for social change, promoting legal reform, demanding accountability and challenging impunity. Alongside the victories in Estonia and Mexico, campaigners in Mauritius claimed a crucial court victory decriminalising same-sex relations. In the USA, the source of so much of the global anti-abortion and anti-gender backlash, civil society and allies have stepped up, creating networks of support and passing laws to protect abortion and LGBTQI+ rights. While they didn't make up for the rollback on rights, these efforts improved many lives and proved that the struggle for equality is far from over.

THE GENDER GAP

Even before 2023 brought further regression, gender equality was still a long way off. As the year began, the **gender gap** – the unfair disparities between women and men in status and opportunities – had barely returned to pre-pandemic levels, with only nine countries, five in Europe, having closed it by at least 80 per cent. Just 14 countries— 13 in Europe plus Canada—legally guaranteed equal rights for women and men. Likewise, just 61.4



Photo by Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images.

Students raise candles and red roses during a 'Dark Valentine' vigil to commemorate the lives of young victims of femicides at the University of Nairobi, Kenya on 14 February 2024.

per cent of prime working-age women were in the global labour force, compared to 90 per cent of men. On average, the next generation of women will still spend over two hours extra a day on unpaid care and domestic work than their male counterparts.

Parity in decision-making remains a long way away. Although by early 2023 there were **more women than ever** in positions of power around the world, women were still vastly underrepresented in leadership. Only 9.8 per cent of countries had female heads of state and 11.3 per cent women heads of government, representing hardly any progress over the last

decade. Only 13 countries, mostly in Europe, had gender-equal cabinets, while there were nine with no female ministers.

2023 wasn't a year of firsts, but 2024 will likely see **Mexico** elect its first-ever woman president, as the two front-runners are women. However, women who take these roles aren't necessarily feminists or champions of women's rights, as seen with **far-right prime minister** Giorgia Meloni in Italy – and when they are, they often experience relentless **gender trolling**, as was the experience of former **New Zealand prime minister** Jacinda Ardern, who resigned in January 2023.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE TO THE FORE

Among the many daily struggles of women's movements around the world, gender-based violence was undeniably at the top of the agenda in 2023. Throughout the year, women's movements provided support for victims and survivors and took to the streets to demand government action to put an end to violence.

A **femicide epidemic** is underway. **Around 48,800** women and girls were killed by intimate partners or other family members in 2022. These killings represented over half – 55 per cent – of all female homicides, compared to only 12 per cent for men. Estimates indicate Africa and Asia had the highest prevalence of femicides, although no national bodies seem to be keeping count.

While fresh global estimates aren't yet available, there are no reasons to expect things improved in 2023. If anything, the year's multiple conflicts and crises likely made things worse. Countries in Latin America, including **Argentina** and **Brazil**, reported record numbers of **femicides** in 2023. Even where the total number fell,

as in **Mexico**, the number of people murdered for their gender remained staggeringly high. Overall, **no country** came close to eradicating intimate partner violence in 2023, and only 27 have comprehensive systems to track and provide funding for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

It’s **estimated** that almost one in three women — a dizzying 736 million — have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence at least once in their lives. Given likely under-reporting, numbers could be much higher.

“ I personally don’t know a woman who has not been affected by some form of this insidious violence. Women have the right to feel free and safe in their own bodies, at home, in the streets and in any public spaces, but unfortunately that is not – and has never been – their reality. We need to start believing survivors so that perpetrators can be brought to justice. When women see the law is on their side, more will be encouraged to speak up.



LINA ABIRAFEH
Arab Institute for Women, Lebanon

If women were the ones making policy, a problem of this magnitude surely wouldn’t be ignored. But with women shut out of political power almost everywhere, it’s no wonder governments provide ridiculously insufficient budgets to respond to and prevent gender-based violence. Many don’t even recognise it as a problem.

In the face of this injustice, women’s organisations and activists all over the world work daily to create safe spaces, support victims and survivors, increase public awareness and mobilise and advocate for the adoption and implementation of policies to tackle the problem. Some paid a steep price, targeted with the

violence they strive to eliminate. Among them was **Lilia Patricia Cardozo**, director of a women’s rights organisation in Colombia’s Boyacá region, injured in an acid attack in April.

One of the most dangerous things women’s rights activists do, particularly in contexts of closed civic space, is take on ingrained discriminatory values that underpin violence against women. Harassment and criminalisation are common responses, as seen in countries including **Afghanistan**, Iran, **Saudi Arabia** and **Syria**.

Protests against gender-based violence

Protests focused on gender-based violence on key dates in the women’s movement’s calendar. When women took to the streets on 8 March, International Women’s Day, gender-based violence often shared the spotlight with other issues, and 25 November, Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, was dedicated exclusively to the problem. People also protested when instances of gender-based violence struck a chord.

Gender-based violence was front and centre in many International Women’s Day events in Asia, Europe and Latin America. This focus was particularly prominent in **Italy**, **Mexico**, **Pakistan** and **Turkey**. Even in countries where protests are relatively rare due to restrictions, such as **Kyrgyzstan**, people marched on 8 March to demand an end to gender-based violence.

Again on 25 November, women’s rights organisations around the world joined UN experts in **calling on states** to increase efforts and dedicate resources to preventing violence and helping survivors. Women **mobilised** across Latin America, including in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, **Uruguay** and Venezuela. They took to the streets in numerous **French, Italian and Spanish cities**, and across Europe from Portugal to Turkey.

In Italy, this year's march reflected a fresh wave of anger at the femicide of 22-year-old student Giulia Cecchetti, who'd been reported missing before her body was found on 18 November. Countering media coverage that sympathetically portrayed her controlling ex-boyfriend, suspected of **killing** her, feminists **insisted** that '**femicide** is not a crime of passion, it is a crime of power'.

Pressure worked, and on 22 November Italian lawmakers unanimously **backed** a raft of measures to clamp down on violence against women. The Ministry of Education presented an initiative that included awareness-raising activities in schools and information campaigns, but was criticised for not involving gender-based violence experts in its design.

When the education minister called for a minute's silence to honour Giulia in schools and universities, many students chose to make a minute of noise instead, symbolising their demand to break the silence surrounding femicides. In the run-up to 25 November, feminist collectives in several cities **organised** torchlight walks and 'angry walks'. On 25 November, up to half a million people marched in a national protest held by the **Non Una Di Meno** movement in Rome.

Anger at femicides following a **rise in killings** also fuelled protests in Kenya in January 2024. Much like in Argentina in 2015, when a string of gruesome femicides set off the #NiUnaMenos movement that became a regional watershed, it was Kenyan civil society that sounded the alarm. While state institutions weren't paying attention, a civil society organisation, Femicide Count Kenya, steadily **documented cases** to force the issue onto the agenda and urge the state to produce the public policies needed to address it. The crimes that triggered mobilisation followed a common trend: they were mostly perpetrated by men who were in intimate relationships with their victims.

This element was similarly at the centre of the debate in Bulgaria, where an infamous case of gender-based violence triggered large demonstrations and brought about positive change.

Following years of efforts by women's rights advocates, in July 2023 Bulgaria's parliament finally reformed the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act to criminalise violence in intimate relationships. The change was met with instant anti-rights backlash, with those against claiming it sought to implement what they call 'gender ideology' – a **catch-all term** used by opponents around the world to vilify advocacy for equal rights. They also claimed the intent was to force the ratification of the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe treaty against gender-based violence that Bulgaria, unlike most European states, hasn't ratified. The Bulgarian Socialist Party **collected signatures** for a referendum against 'gender ideology' in schools.

The changes didn't satisfy the women's movement either, because they were based on a narrow definition of what constitutes an 'intimate relationship', leaving those in relationships other than marriage or domestic partnerships unprotected. This included an 18-year-old woman beaten and disfigured by her boyfriend in the city of Stara Zagora. The attack happened in June, but only became public in late July, when her family talked to the media out of frustration with the slow pace of the investigation. Unprecedented mass protests that followed in the capital, Sofia, and across the country, forced parliament to amend the law to widen its scope.

Still, protections under the new version of the bill only apply to relationships at least 60 days old. Additionally, a last-minute change inserted the words 'man' and 'woman' into the definition, excluding people in same-sex relationships. Women's rights activists continue demanding further change.



Activists of feminist group Femen stage a protest against femicides in Madrid, Spain on 27 January 2024.

Photo by Oscar del Pozo/AFP via Getty Images.

There was a shift in public sentiment that revealed heightened awareness and empathy for victims. The usual response in these cases is often victim-blaming. This time, however, many more people sided with the victim. Although some anti-rights voices questioning the victim's innocence emerged, particularly on social media, most public figures refrained from such insensitivity. As a result, we have started to see more and more domestic violence cases being reported on the media.



VICTORIA PETROVA
Bulgarian Fund for Women

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› INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2023: NOT ONE STEP BACK

#METOO STRIKES BACK

Eight years after it first erupted, #MeToo made waves again in 2023. In **Taiwan**, a TV series on sexual harassment in politics opened up a long-overdue conversation on the issue and gave several female ruling party employees the courage to accuse powerful politicians of sexual harassment and assault. As the movement spread to cultural and academic circles, more women came forward with allegations against hundreds of celebrities, doctors and professors who'd long taken advantage of their positions to abuse women.

Soon after, **Spanish football** had a #MeToo moment, unleashed by the non-consensual public kissing of a female player by the male president of the football federation when Spain won the Women's World Cup. Reflecting a polarised political environment ahead of an election in July in which the far-right

Vox party hoped to make strides, opinions split between those who supported the women’s movement’s demands and those who judged their outrage misplaced or exaggerated. Three weeks after the scandal erupted, the culprit **resigned**.

Public opinion has been divided. There are those of us who believe we have a responsibility to work for equality in sport and to eradicate all expressions of sexist violence. However, others have trivialised, minimised, denied, ignored and ridiculed this episode.



ISABEL ABELLA RUIZ DE MENDOZA
lawyer and equality consultant, Spain

There are obviously some who think we women are overreacting. But the reality is that we are no longer willing to tolerate disrespect or abuse of power. There is no turning back now.



ELEONORA GIOVIO
El País newspaper, Spain

A few months before, the Spanish parliament had passed a law on **paid menstrual leave**, allowing women to call in sick if they experience ‘incapacitating menstruation’. The same polarisation could be seen: feminists celebrated the change but the far right decried it as a step too far. The backlash is telling. According to **polls**, the number of Spaniards – overwhelmingly but not only men – who think equality has gone ‘too far’ and see it as anti-male discrimination is increasing.

In Spain and beyond, ‘men’s rights’ influencers are on the rise, shaping the worldviews of boys and young men who get sucked into the ‘**manosphere**’, the online universe of anti-feminist men’s groups.

These groups are multiplying beyond Europe and North America, increasingly in Latin America and also Africa and Asia. In South Korea, this kind of anti-feminism has weighed decisively on politics. In its **2022 presidential election**, the candidate who narrowly won appealed to disaffected young men who see limited progress made in addressing women’s inequality as coming at their expense. Despite blatant persisting gender inequalities, the new government **announced** it would abolish the gender equality ministry, triggering a reaction to the reaction, as women took to the streets to protest. **Harassment** of women viewed as feminists has increased under its watch.

GENDER APARTHEID

The most extreme expressions of anti-women repression in 2023 were seen in Afghanistan and Iran. The year saw the Taliban, back in power since August 2021, consolidate their rule in Afghanistan, and the theocratic regime of the ayatollahs recover its footing in Iran. These may be outliers, but they show how far the backlash can go if left unchecked.

In Afghanistan, the year began with the Taliban **banning** women from universities and civil society jobs. In July the authorities ordered the closure of **beauty salons**, one of the few places left for women to gather outside their homes. By the two-year mark, the regime had stripped women of all their rights, almost succeeding in erasing them completely from public life.

But Afghan women still refused to comply and remained at the forefront of acts of defiance against the regime. The announcement of the forced closure of beauty salons prompted a small **women’s protest** in Kabul on 19 July. In August, ahead of the second anniversary of the Taliban’s return, a group of women

in burqas **gathered** to demand the right to education in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif.

The authorities pre-emptively suppressed other planned protests, such as those around Independence Day in September. Activists adjusted their activities to reduce risk, holding **indoor rallies** in private homes and sharing photos and videos of their events on social media and through their **networks** at home and abroad. Navigating restrictions, they have continued producing information and advocating for their rights through an **online magazine** and a **radio** station.

It's a similar story in Iran. A brutal government crackdown that extended into 2023 suffocated the wave of protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the morality police in September 2022. With more than 500 dead, Iranian acts of civil disobedience became more subtle. But they never went away.

Despite the authorities' success in regaining control, we have continued to see acts of civil disobedience across Iran. Activists, artists and academics express themselves through social media and make public displays of protest not wearing hijab. The fact that the voices of protesters have not been silenced sustains hope for change.



SOHRAB RAZAGHI
Volunteer Activists, Iran

Iranian activists, in the country and among the diaspora, kept up the pressure to try to focus international attention on the plight of Iranian women even as many other tragedies unfolded elsewhere. Women all over the world **expressed solidarity** with their Afghan and Iranian sisters on International Women's Day, and again shortly after the first anniversary of the protests, when the Nobel Committee awarded the **2023 Peace Prize** to Narges Mohammadi, an imprisoned Iranian woman activist who for

more than 20 years has demanded democracy, human rights and women's rights in Iran.

However, the international community hasn't taken any fresh action over Iran's treatment of women. The surge in conflict in the Middle East enables Iran to exploit its strategic regional role, strengthening the theocracy and dampening down the prospects of international pressure ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

The people of Iran are unfortunately not receiving the international support that they need. The Islamic Republic will retain its power as long as international support for internal struggles doesn't materialise.



ASAL ABASIAN
journalist and queer feminist activist, Iran

While resisting at home, Afghan and Iranian women sought international support to have **gender apartheid** recognised as a crime under international law so those responsible can be prosecuted and punished. The 1973 UN Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid only applies to racial hierarchies, but they want it extended to the specific and extreme form of gender-based discrimination and exclusion they suffer on a daily basis. Their demands have found an echo in pronouncements by **UN experts** and the **European Parliament**, while civil society has **warned** about the potential of similarly restrictive regimes to be imposed elsewhere, notably in parts of Yemen under Houthi rebel control.

 **READ MORE**

- **AFGHANISTAN: GENDER APARTHEID MUST BE STOPPED**
- **IRAN, BACK TO THE GRIM NORMAL**



Feminist activists demand the decriminalisation of abortion in Mexico City on International Safe Abortion Day, 28 September 2023.

Photo by Silvana Flores/AFP via Getty Images.

FIGHT STILL ON FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

Backlash from well-organised and lavishly funded international networks of ultraconservative forces placed abortion at the centre of culture wars in 2023, forcing women’s movements increasingly on the defensive.

The long-term trend in abortion rights is progress, with **over 60 countries** liberalising their abortion laws over the past three decades. In contrast, only four have gone the other way. But regression has accelerated in recent years. El Salvador imposed a total ban in the late 1990s and Nicaragua did so in 2006. Poland

tightened its laws to eliminate nearly all exceptions in 2020 and the US Supreme Court eliminated abortion as a federal right in 2022. Reversals are rare but, particularly with the USA, highly consequential in slowing down global progress.

As the ultimate expression of a woman’s right to make decisions about her body and life, abortion remained at the heart of the struggles of women’s rights movements in many parts of the world, particularly the Americas. While the recent backlash has forced many to focus on resistance, others have been able to keep pushing for more. They’ve often faced disappointment – as in **Chile**, where hopes were dashed for a progressive new constitution that would have recognised sexual and reproductive rights – but sometimes decades of struggle finally paid off, as in Mexico.

Even in the USA, ground zero of the anti-rights backlash, it’s far from game over for sexual and reproductive rights, as abortion rights advocates have raced to enact protections faster than anti-rights forces could introduce prohibitions.

In 2023, the first full year since the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the Guttmacher Institute **documented** that US states enacted 417 provisions to protect reproductive rights or expand access to reproductive health, compared to 148 restricting access or curtailing rights. In reaction to bans, 22 states and the District of Columbia passed measures to protect abortion access, including **‘shield laws’** – laws that protect healthcare professionals who provide abortion medication – that abortion rights advocates are using to reach out to women who need abortions in states where they’re illegal.

But at the year’s end, 14 states had total abortion bans and seven had limited access. Abortion bans have already had catastrophic impacts, with tens of thousands of **rape victims**

unable to terminate pregnancies caused by rape, women who've experienced miscarriages **exposed to** criminalisation and those with serious pregnancy complications **risking their lives**. Due to its key role in circumventing bans, abortion medication has increasingly become the target of **legal challenges**.

Abortion rights in the USA are at their weakest point in half a century, but there are early signs the backlash is backfiring. Pregnant women are taking **leading roles** in legal challenges to abortion bans, having become activists after experiencing firsthand the effects of restrictive policies.

Total bans are incredibly unpopular. According to a May 2023 **poll**, only 13 per cent think abortion should be completely illegal, while 51 per cent think it should be legal under some circumstances and 34 per cent in all circumstances. This made abortion a potential electoral lifeline for the Democratic Party, and as the 2024 presidential election grows closer it's been placed **at the centre** of its agenda. Drawing from the experience of the 2022 midterms, when many voters **rejected** anti-abortion Republican candidates and measures, rights groups have launched **initiatives** to put abortion rights on the ballot in several states, seeking to enshrine them in state constitutions.

Things went differently south of the border. After Argentina in 2020 and Colombia in 2022, Mexico, Latin America's second-biggest country, became the fifth to enshrine abortion rights.

In response to legal action taken by a women's rights organisation, on 6 September the Mexican Supreme Court declared the Federal Penal Code articles criminalising abortion unconstitutional. Abortion had already been decriminalised in a dozen Mexican states, but this ruling effectively decriminalised it in all 32, forcing federal health institutions to provide access to anyone requesting

the procedure. Now Mexican feminists continue to push for changes in the laws criminalising abortion that remain on the books of 20 states, while monitoring compliance so resistance in bureaucracies and medical institutions doesn't obstruct access, particularly for people from excluded groups.

There are conservative reactions and resistances all the time, but unlike what used to happen until a few years ago, these are no longer so up-front. The most important barrier we face today is the absence of service guarantees. Although there are never guarantees that backsliding won't occur, we currently have the advantage of very pro-choice public opinion.



BRENDA RODRIGUEZ
Information Group on Reproductive Choice, Mexico

The Mexican win had a strong regional dimension, as Latin American feminists work together to push for liberalisation in countries with total bans such as **El Salvador**, where women from poor backgrounds can receive long prison sentences for miscarriages and other obstetric emergencies.

Our movement is part of a broader movement that encompasses all of Latin America and the Caribbean. The green tide has been an inspiration for the whole region, and has even reached the USA. The tide has already become a tsunami that won't stop. We are deeply engaged with what is happening in Central America, where abortion is extremely criminalised. We have worked intensely to achieve the decriminalisation of abortion and effective access to this right in Mexico and across the region.



ALBA ADRIANA JIMÉNEZ PATLÁN
Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Mexico

The Salvadoran women's rights movement is hoping for good news from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The regional court is believed to be close to issuing a ruling in the case of **Beatriz v. El Salvador**, centred on a 21-year-old woman with health complications who carried a foetus that wouldn't survive outside the womb but was refused a request to terminate her pregnancy. Women's rights advocates argue the state violated multiple rights under the American Convention on Human Rights. The ruling is expected to establish that absolute abortion bans violate human rights, which would have positive regional repercussions.

Along with the USA, Poland is a notorious outlier in the long-term trend towards abortion liberalisation. In March 2023, a Polish court **convicted** abortion rights activist Justyna Wydrzynska, a member of the Abortion Dream Team organisation, for helping a pregnant woman access abortion pills. The work of her organisation, and the broader cause of abortion rights, was vindicated in December when the European Court of Human Rights **ruled** that Poland's restrictive legislation, which prevented a woman accessing an abortion and forced her to travel abroad, violated her right to privacy and family life, protected under the European Convention on Human Rights.

But change may be coming in Poland, where Prime Minister Donald Tusk **returned to office** in October 2023 on promises to liberalise abortion laws within his first 100 days ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. It's not a done deal. **Opposition** comes both from the far-right nationalist Law and Justice party, the former ruling party that brought in the ban, and within the new ruling coalition. But mobilised women, on the frontlines of the three-year resistance against the ban and a key factor in Tusk's victory, are **determined** to hold him to his promise.

The balance is tipping in favour of women's rights elsewhere in Europe. In October 2022, Finland's parliament passed a **law** eliminating the requirement for women seeking abortions to state their motivations and seek approval from two doctors. The updated legislation entered into force in September. And in France, in reaction to global regression, on International Women's Day President Emmanuel Macron **announced** an initiative to enshrine abortion rights in the constitution so they'd become '**irreversible**'. The **change** materialised in early 2024.

 READ MORE

- MEXICO ON THE RIGHTS PATH
- USA: BATTLE STILL ON FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

PRIDE, REGRESSION AND DEFIANCE

The same forces pushing regression in women's rights are driving attacks on LGBTQI+ rights. Against this challenging backdrop, LGBTQI+ people around the world keep mobilising to assert visibility, demand respect for diversity and claim equal rights.

LGBTQI+ rights follow a long-term trend of progress similar to that of women's rights, with most countries decriminalising same-sex relations in the second half of the 20th century and early 21st, initially in Europe and the Americas and then in other global regions, with a peak in the 1990s and a steady trickle afterwards. Recognition of further rights followed decriminalisation, including equal marriage and adoption rights, the right to legally change gender, recognition of genders beyond the male-female binary and bans on multiple forms of discrimination.

But still today, **65 countries and territories** – most in Africa, followed by Asia and the Middle East – still criminalise private, consensual, same-sex sexual activity, particularly between men. In 12, people found guilty can be handed the death penalty, and six have applied it.

The good news is that the list of criminalising states no longer includes Mauritius and Nepal, both of which liberalised their laws in 2023. But some countries that criminalise same-sex relations took the path of further regression, notably Uganda followed by Ghana, states that are increasing penalties and pressure to the point of making life unbearable for LGBTQI+ people.

Progress was achieved on another key front, with same-sex marriage now legal in 37 countries– including Estonia, which legalised it in 2023, and **Greece**, which did so in February 2024. Progress has been swift: the first country to recognise equal marriage rights was The Netherlands in 2001, with many making the change around the mid-2010s.

Although there've been some disappointments – notably in the Caribbean, where a decriminalising trend that swept three countries in 2022 didn't spread further in 2023 – most global regions saw some progressive change over the past year. But progress has significantly slowed down, with a powerful backlash making the situation of LGBTQI+ people much worse in numerous countries, notably in Commonwealth Africa and parts of Europe and the USA.

But rather than covering LGBTQI+ activism into quitting, the anti-rights reaction only encouraged it to push harder – through legal advocacy, public campaigning, mutual assistance, solidarity and protest. In the face of attempts to deny LGBTQI+ people's right to exist in public, LGBTQI+ movements responded by defiantly asserting their visibility.

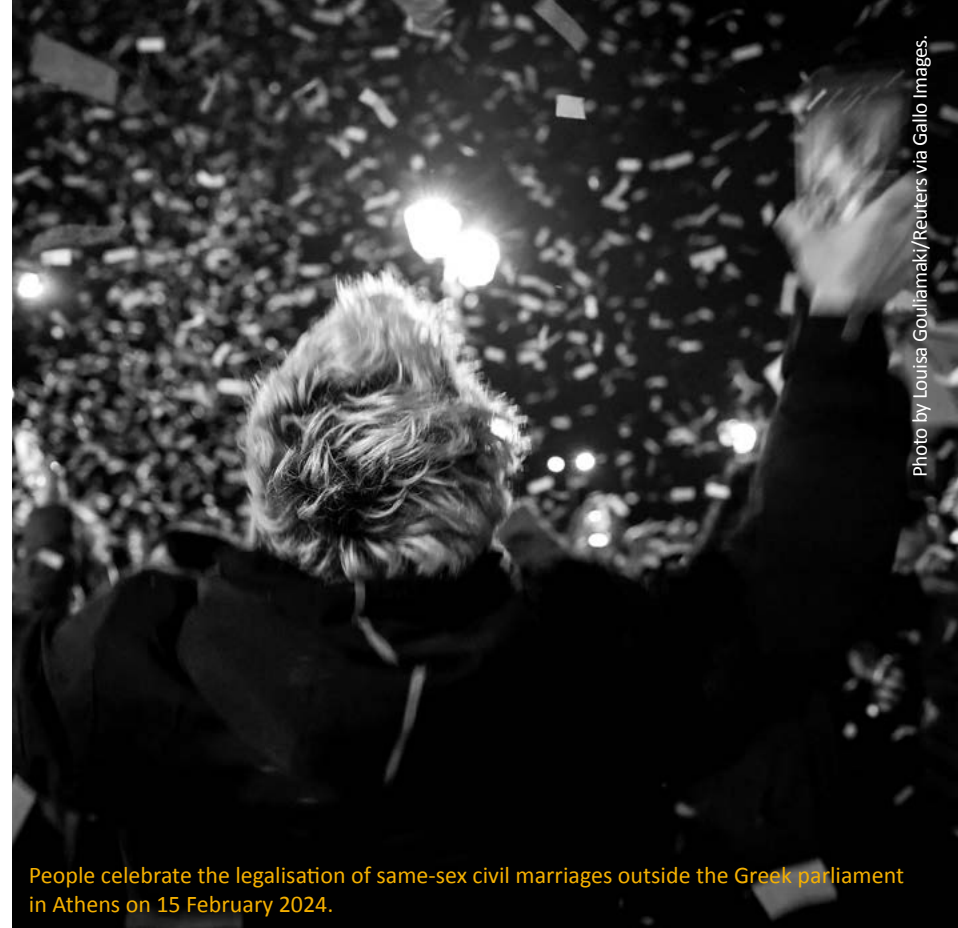


Photo by Louisa Gouliamaki/Reuters via Gallo Images.

People celebrate the legalisation of same-sex civil marriages outside the Greek parliament in Athens on 15 February 2024.

Where they could be held, Pride events were a key response. Underneath all the glitter, they were clearly still protests. Participants used them to celebrate hard-won victories, build the unity that offers the strength to fight back against setbacks and express solidarity with people in more restrictive environments unable to mobilise.

 READ MORE

➤ PRIDE 2023: DEFIANT JOY AGAINST ANTI-RIGHTS BACKLASH

Anti-trans hysteria in the USA

Anti-LGBTQI+ reaction in the USA, long a source of inspiration and funding for anti-rights forces around the world, focused obsessively on trans rights. Under one per cent of people are transgender, but the issue offers a lightning rod to mobilise regression in what anti-rights movements insist is a 'war on woke'.

Culture wars played out largely in US state legislatures, where the American Civil Liberties Union tracked a record total of **506 anti-LGBTQI+ bills** put forward in 2023. Of these, 140 aimed to restrict student and educator rights, while 80 focused on healthcare, mostly seeking restrictions and bans on access to gender-affirming care for young trans people. Sixty-five weakened civil rights laws, including by embracing narrow definitions of gender identities and undermining non-discrimination legislation through religious exemptions, while 25 contained free speech and expression bans, including to prohibit or censor performances like drag shows. Nine limited people's ability to update gender information on public documents while seven banned transgender people from public facilities such as public bathrooms. Sixty-nine additional bills included bans on same-sex marriage and a mix of other restrictions. Overall, 214 of these bills were defeated but 84 passed into law.

More than half of these restrictive bills targeted young trans people, **almost 100,000** of whom now live in US states that have recently banned their access to healthcare, sports or school bathrooms.

As was sure to happen, receding legal protections have been accompanied by **intensifying violence** against LGBTQI+ people.

But LGBTQI+ activists, including parents of young trans people, haven't simply let rights slip away. Their continuing fight for recognition and against discrimination and violence resulted in an even bigger number of progressive initiatives. Some states banned '**conversion therapies**', pseudoscientific practices aimed at changing people's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that UN experts consider akin to torture. Others passed shield laws to protect doctors and parents who prescribe or seek access to healthcare for transgender young people. An estimated half of US young transgender people now live in states with these protections.

As with the anti-abortion backlash, which has left the USA split between reproductive rights deserts and haven states, battles over LGBTQI+ issues are causing a situation where access to rights increasingly depends on place of residence. The fact that some people are **switching states** to those that confirm their worldviews can only reinforce bubbles and perpetuate culture wars.

Disappointment in the Caribbean

While 2023 saw deepening division in the USA, it brought disappointment in the Caribbean, underscoring the broad trend of mixed results following years of progress. After a year of unprecedented change that buoyed hopes, there was no further progress on LGBTQ+ rights in the Caribbean.

In 2022, courts in **three countries** of the Commonwealth Caribbean – Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados and St Kitts and Nevis – struck down regressive British colonial-era laws criminalising same-sex relations. After this crucial step, activists in these countries are pushing for more, **putting forward**

demands for states to recognise trans people and introduce effective anti-discrimination protections.

Six Caribbean countries still criminalise gay sex: Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines. In February 2024, to activists' disappointment, the high court of St Vincent and the Grenadines **rejected** a civil society lawsuit against decriminalisation. But advocacy continues across the Caribbean. In 2023, Guyana's Pride Festival explicitly raised the **banner** of decriminalisation. So did Pride events in Jamaica, which **framed** the struggle for LGBTQI+ rights as a fight for full citizenship, **linking** liberation from repressive colonial-era legislation to the country's potentially imminent break from the British monarchy.

But civil society has experienced backlash rather than further progress, coming from an unlikely source: the signing of a cooperation agreement between Caribbean states and the European Union (EU).

The **Samoa Agreement** between the EU and members of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States focuses on poverty reduction, trade cooperation and migration management – but also includes references to climate change, human rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Commonwealth Caribbean **countries**, some governments read this as code for pressure to legalise abortion, sex education, same-sex marriage and other LGBTQI+ rights, which they view as opposed to local values and traditions, playing to the idea that demands for rights are western impositions.

Governments signed, but not without making clear to domestic LGBTQI+ movements they would keep setting the agenda with no plan to concede civil society demands.

The anti-rights offensive in Africa

In Africa, the already bleak outlook for LGBTQI+ rights mostly worsened, with some states that criminalise same-sex relations pushing for stronger enforcement of existing restrictions and the imposition of new punishments.

Thirty-one African countries criminalise same-sex relations. In many of them, LGBTQI+ activism is fully in resistance mode. LGBTQI+ people strive to connect and sustain one another but are often forced to stay in the closet, unable to assert visibility as LGBTQI+ activists and openly advocate for rights without fearing for their lives.

In many African countries, a slow but consistent long-term trend towards decriminalisation has brought anti-rights reaction. In country after country, politicians have introduced near-identical repressive bills following templates created by the US conservative organisation **Family Watch International**. Behind these are opportunistic politicians making a name for themselves, church leaders concerned with losing their relevance if society changes and government heads seeking to appeal to social conservatism to dampen potential threats to their power. While the anti-rights narrative in Africa denounces LGBTQI+ rights as 'un-African' and 'foreign imports', the role of US-based foundations in reinforcing a legacy of British rule leaves no doubt that it's the anti-rights reaction that's been imported from the global north.

Uganda has taken the lead. In May 2023, its parliament passed the Anti-Homosexuality Bill with near-unanimous support. Under the guise of protecting traditional church culture and family values against 'depravity' and 'promiscuity', the law increased jail terms to up to 20 years for people identifying as LGBTQI+ and made 'aggravated homosexuality' – a broad term than includes



Protesters march against Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill at the Uganda High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa on 4 April 2023.

Photo by Frennie Shivambu/Gallo Images via Getty Images.

those considered 'serial offenders' – punishable by death. In August, **the first** person, a 20-year-old man, was charged with 'aggravated homosexuality' under the law. Others followed.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act's main impact has been to enable abuses against LGBTQI+ people. A **report** by the Convening for Equality, a civil society coalition, found that the law and the rampant homophobic rhetoric that preceded its passage radicalised people against the LGBTQI+ community to the point that almost all the recent abuses documented – including torture, rape and eviction – were perpetrated by private individuals rather than state agents. Tracking by the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum also showed a **marked increase** in human rights violations against LGBTQI+ people since the law came in.

Ugandan LGBTQI+ activists haven't cowered in the face of injustice and violence. The Strategic Response Team, a group of five LGBTQI+ organisations, documented the effects of the new law while coordinating community responses and offering referrals to providers of safe shelter and legal, safety and protection services. LGBTQI+ groups have also **challenged** the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda's Constitutional Court.

The ruling is pending at the time of writing, but while waiting for it, activists face relentless violence. In January 2024, Steven Kabuye, head of the community action group Uganda Key Populations Consortium, was stabbed and left for dead in what was labelled a **hate crime**.

As the Anti-Homosexuality Act was being debated in parliament, Uganda hosted the first **Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Family Values and Sovereignty**. Held under the motto 'Protecting African Culture and Family Values', the meeting **brought together** numerous Christian fundamentalist, anti-rights hate groups and pseudo-experts from around the world, including conservative US foundations. Addressing politicians from at least 22 African states, President Yoweri Museveni spoke of his country as the spearhead of the 'fight against vice' and for the 'survival of the human race'. Many signalled they'd follow suit.

Politicians in some, like **Ghana**, were already pushing draconian anti-LGBTQI+ bills through parliament. Ghana's parliament eventually **passed** a law making it illegal to identify as LGBTQI+ in early 2024. At the time of writing presidential approval is **on hold** until the Supreme Court has ruled on its constitutionality.

In Kenya, 2023 started with the **vicious killing** of gay rights activist Edwin Kiprotich Chiloba. Violence intensified in February in response to a civil society **court victory** for LGBTQI+ rights:

the Supreme Court upheld a 2015 ruling that ordered the government to register an LGBTQI+ organisation, the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, specifying that it could keep the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' in its name.

President William Ruto and other high officials condemned the ruling with incendiary rhetoric, triggering a **violent backlash**. As the attorney-general announced the government would challenge the decision and put the matter up for public consultation, an opposition politician vowed to table a bill to increase penalties for homosexuality. In March, the Ministry of Education announced a **plan**, agreed with clerics led by the Anglican Archbishop, to set up chaplaincies in schools to address 'the spread of LGBTQI+ practices'. A few months later, the **Family Protection Bill** came before parliament, aimed at strengthening colonial-era prohibitions and increasing penalties for homosexuality, same-sex unions and LGBTQI+ activities and campaigns.

We push back on negative pervasive norms and attitudes and celebrate the limited but important progress made on the rights of LGBTQI+ people in Kenya over the last 10 years, largely obtained through victories in court. The Family Protection Bill threatens to destroy all this progress and so our work continues to be a reminder that the freedoms we fight for are for all Kenyans, and not only for the LGBTQI+ community.



IVY MERIMBA
galck+, Kenya

For LGBTQI+ people, this is an existential struggle. It's their right to exist at stake, so they don't have the luxury of giving up. This means that even in regressive times and places, progressive change can happen, because rights advocates are relentless. Activists draw strength from within, from belief in their own freedom, something no restriction can ever disprove.



We commemorated Pride and helped host the Changing Faces Changing Spaces conference organised by the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative, for which we helped secure visas and provided advice to LGBTQI+ people and sex workers from across Africa. We worked in solidarity with East African groups in the context of increasing anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments, engaged in strategic policy-oriented dialogue with other civil society leaders, made a solidarity visit to Namibia and networked to ensure that we would be prepared for whatever came next.



DUMISO GATSHA
Success Capital, Botswana

2023 saw long-term civil society advocacy and strategic litigation produce positive results in parts of Southern Africa, home to countries making some strides on LGBTQI+ rights.

In Mauritius, civil society's activism was rewarded with a Supreme Court decision decriminalising private same-sex acts between consenting adults. Issued in response to lawsuits brought by LGBTQI+ activists and organisations, the justification for this historic ruling inverted anti-rights views of LGBTQI+ rights as a western imposition, instead rejecting criminalisation, imposed under British colonial rule, as a foreign import.



This ruling paved the way for greater inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in Mauritius. But although same-sex private sexual relationships among consenting adults have been decriminalised, it remains crucial to educate queer people and people in general about the ruling and its implications for human freedom, equality, dignity and rights.



NAJEEB AHMAD FOKERBUX
Young Queer Alliance, Mauritius

But even in Southern Africa, 2023 saw mixed results. In Namibia, where sex between men is still criminalised, the Supreme Court ruled in May that the government must recognise unions of same-sex couples registered abroad. The backlash was rapid. In July, parliament's upper house passed a law banning same-sex marriage and punishing those who support it. The text of the bill defines marriage as a union between two people born genetically male and female, states that same-sex marriages conducted abroad can't be recognised in Namibia and makes it a criminal offence to participate in, solemnise, promote or advertise same-sex marriages, punishable with up to six years in prison and steep fines.

Key issues on the Namibian LGBTQI+ rights movement's agenda include decriminalisation of same-sex relations and the establishment of stronger legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, equal access to healthcare, including gender-affirming care, educational initiatives and awareness campaigns to increase understanding of LGBTQI+ issues and acceptance of LGBTQI+ people, and firm policies to address hate crimes and violence against LGBTQI+ people.



KEVIN WESSELS
LGBTQI+ rights activist, Namibia

Pre-emptive backlash against potentially positive changes also mobilised in Malawi, where in July a constitutional case challenging the criminalisation of gay sex and the ban on same-sex marriage triggered **anti-LGBTQI+ protests** in Lilongwe, the capital, and other major cities.



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- COMMONWEALTH AFRICA: LGBTQI+ RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK
- MAURITIUS BEGINS TO CORRECT A HISTORIC WRONG TOWARDS LGBTQI+ PEOPLE

Asia's patchwork

Asia offered more diverse outcomes compared to the broad regression in Africa. The LGBTQI+ movement scored progress in Hong Kong, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Taiwan, but failed to make expected gains elsewhere, particularly in India and Japan. Some countries – including Afghanistan and Iran – remained stuck in a complete denial of rights. They and several more, such as China, offered no civic space for LGBTQI+ activism. A few experienced conservative backlash – of a kind that came across as more obviously politically driven than in Africa, and which therefore achieved less impact.

Asia is still home to **22 countries** that criminalise same-sex relations. Only one, Sri Lanka, got closer to decriminalisation in 2023. Sri Lanka is among the former British colonies where criminalisation provisions also apply to women, and the process kicked off in 2018 when **civil society groups** filed a complaint with the UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, asking the government to decriminalise same-sex relations in general and specifically between women. In response, a bill was submitted to parliament in August 2022. Then Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council, in which LGBTQI+ organisations played a key role, made recommendations to decriminalise, and in February 2023 the government committed to complying.

While this process was underway, the Supreme Court issued a **groundbreaking ruling** in response to anti-rights petitions for decriminalisation to be declared unconstitutional. The decision clarified that, contrary to the arguments of anti-rights groups, decriminalisation was in line with the constitutional principles of equality, human dignity and privacy. The bill is still up for parliamentary vote, but LGBTQI+ groups believe their pressure through high-level advocacy and public campaigning will see it ultimately pass.

Our fight, even after decriminalisation is achieved, will continue to aim to integrate LGBTQI+ people into our society. When we established our organisation back in 2004, we were the only ones fighting for all LGBTQI+ people, and we remained alone in this journey for a very long time. Only after 2015 did other organisations and people start coming out and getting involved. Until then we lived under a dictatorship and it was difficult to be open, but we have held Pride celebrations since 2004. Our Pride celebrations are turning 19 this year, and so is EQUAL GROUND. We're very proud of what we have achieved so far.



ROSANNA FLAMER-CALDERA
EQUAL GROUND, Sri Lanka

Among those states that continue to criminalise same-sex relations, Malaysia moved in the opposite direction, driven by a **new ruling party** that took a socially conservative tack to ensure its election win.

The government recently **banned** Swatch watches and accessories that made LGBTQI+ references, making their possession punishable by up to three years in prison. In January 2024, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim **made clear** there'd be no recognition of LGBTQI+ rights or protections against discrimination and violence under his leadership. No public display of LGBTQI+ activism is allowed by a government that sees a brightly coloured watch as a danger to national values.

It's also hard for LGBTQI+ people to speak out publicly for rights in Indonesia. At the height of Pride season, a regional gathering of LGBTQI+ activists in its capital, Jakarta, was **cancelled** in response to harassment and death threats from religious conservatives.

Some Asian states that ban human rights advocacy in general are increasingly targeting LGBTQI+ people for political reasons. These



Activists protest against India's Supreme Court verdict on same-sex marriage in New Delhi, India on 18 October 2023.

include China, where the state once tacitly tolerated LGBTQI+ people but is now imposing **growing restrictions** on LGBTQI+ expression and **organising**. This is all part of the party-state's totalitarian enforcement of a monolithic identity, with no alternate forms of identification or belonging allowed. As the state has turned the screws on dissent, only **below-the-radar events** can now take place. In May, the authorities **forced the closure** of the Beijing LGBT Center, which had operated for 15 years. In August, government censors **shut down** key LGBTQI+ social media accounts.

Taiwan, home to Asia's **biggest Pride** event, offered the starkest possible contrast with China. It's the only Asian country with open civic space, allowing civil society to mobilise fully for change, and it's also the only one that recognises same-sex marriage, which it legalised in 2019. Following four years of civil society advocacy, the government **announced** the end of all remaining restrictions on transnational same-sex marriages in January 2023, on the basis that 'marriage equality is now the common consensus in Taiwan'.

Change in the same direction should come soon in Nepal, where in June the Supreme Court **ruled** that the government must immediately register same-sex marriages pending reform of the law.

Actual policy change will take a lot of time. But this landmark decision represents significant progress for all LGBTQI+ people in Nepal. The legal recognition of same-sex marriage will foster greater acceptance in society as a whole and among policymakers, which will have a further positive impact on laws and policies.



SANJAY SHARMA
Blue Diamond Society, Nepal

Although falling short of marriage equality, an **important decision** for LGBTQI+ rights came in Hong Kong, where

despite China's **crackdown**, courts currently retain a degree of independence on some issues. In September, the top court ordered the government to establish a framework for recognising same-sex partnerships. The ruling came in response to a claim brought by activist Jimmy Sham, who married his husband in the USA and argued that the lack of recognition of foreign same-sex marriages violated the constitutional right to equality.

However, big disappointments came in 2023 in India and Japan, where hoped-for progress on marriage equality failed to materialise.

In India, where same-sex relations were decriminalised in 2018, the Supreme Court issued an inconclusive verdict in October, criticised by civil society as a **missed opportunity**. While the court stated that discrimination against same-sex couples must end and acknowledged they have constitutionally protected rights, it refused to recognise same-sex marriage and left the issue for parliament to decide. That signals no imminent change, since strongman Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party is opposed to recognising same-sex relationships.

In Japan, the only G7 country that doesn't uphold marriage equality, April's **Tokyo Rainbow Pride** attracted over 200,000 people to – in the words of its motto – 'press on till Japan changes'. With **public opinion** showing growing support, a district court **ruled** the ban on same-sex unions unconstitutional. It was the second court ruling to that effect, but two other courts concluded that the ban was in line with the constitutional definition of marriage and therefore constitutional. Legal deadlock leaves the issue unresolved, and the ruling party is **dragging its heels**.

Following intensive civil society advocacy, in June Japan's parliament passed what was described as an anti-discrimination law but it didn't ban discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and

gender identity. **Activists** saw it at best as merely a preliminary effort aimed at promoting awareness and mandating the government to create a plan, monitor progress, conduct research and establish a liaison body to coordinate policy implementation.

Three crucial steps should be taken. First, a proper anti-discrimination law banning discrimination on the basis of SOGI must be enacted. Second, marriage equality must be recognised. And third, inhumane requirements for legal gender recognition such as sterilisation must be removed.



AKIRA NISHIYAMA
Japan Alliance for LGBT Legislation

In Japan and beyond, activists continue demanding marriage equality. This was a clear demand voiced by 2023 Pride marchers in Singapore, where the colonial-era law that criminalised sex between men was finally **repealed** in 2022. In the face of the government's refusal to countenance further progress, protesters marched under the motto '**A Singapore for All Families**', pushing back against the politically enforced notion of the traditional family.

For transgender rights, the biggest blow came in Pakistan, where a May 2023 **ruling** of the Federal Shariat Court of Islamabad stated that gender must conform to biological sex, revoking sections of the 2018 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. Transgender rights groups have filed as many as 12 **petitions of appeal** with the Supreme Court.



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> NEPAL'S SAME-SEX MARRIAGE BREAKTHROUGH

Europe's two faces

Throughout 2023, two different trends played out in Europe, with some countries scoring significant victories for LGBTQI+ rights and others seeing the deepest regression in decades. The contrast couldn't be starker than that between Estonia, where open civic space allowed activism to flourish and make it the first post-Soviet state to recognise same-sex marriage, and the country leading the anti-LGBTQI+ assault, Russia, where civic space has completely shut down under Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule.

As part of Putin's ongoing crackdown on civil society, the state's attention has focused on LGBTQI+ activism. It might seem an odd choice for Putin to attack LGBTQI+ people while engaged in full-scale war, but it's part and parcel with it. There's no place for LGBTQI+ rights, vilified as an alleged western import, in the narrow definition of national identity Putin is pushing to sustain his imperialistic war.

In December 2022, the Russian government **expanded** its 2013 ban on 'gay propaganda', making it illegal to praise LGBTQI+ relationships, publicly express non-heterosexual orientations or suggest they're normal, with **fines** up to US\$6,370 for individuals and US\$80,000 for organisations.

Another new law **prohibited** surrogacy arrangements between Russian men and foreigners, making fatherhood **inaccessible** to gay men. In July, a further law **banned** almost all medical help for trans people, including gender-affirming healthcare, as well as gender changes on official documents. It also prohibited people who've already undergone gender-affirmation processes from adopting children or serving as legal guardians, and declared their marriages void.

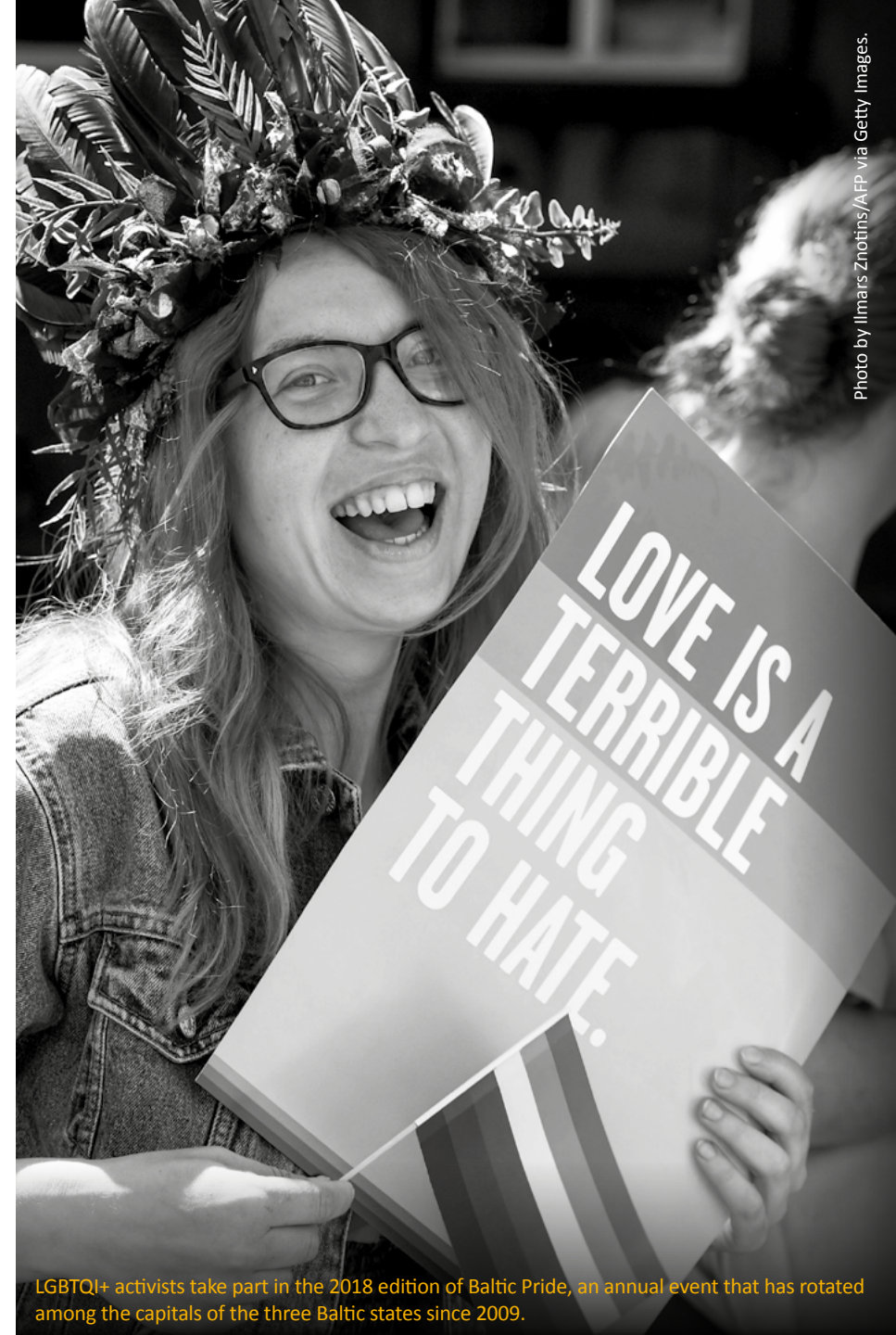
The Russian authorities have increasingly **smear**d LGBTQI+ organisations as ‘foreign agents’, a label intended to associate them in the public mind with espionage. In May they added LGBTQI+ organisation **NC SOS Crisis Group** to the ‘foreign agents’ registry.

In late November, following a **request** submitted by the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Court **outlawed** what it called ‘the international LGBT movement’ for its ‘extremist’ views, **characterising** it as a danger to the moral fabric of society. Under Russian criminal law, **participating in** or **financing** an extremist organisation is punishable with up to 12 years in prison. A person found guilty of **displaying such groups’ symbols** faces up to 15 days in detention for a first offence and up to four years in prison **for a repeat offence**. People suspected of involvement with an extremist organisation can be blacklisted and their bank accounts frozen.

As there’s no entity that can be identified as the ‘international LGBT movement’, people broadly understood the ruling to mean a blanket ban on all LGBTQI+ activism. The ruling also enabled **further violence** against LGBTQI+ people. Within days, security forces **raided** gay clubs and bars across Moscow.

LGBTQI+ activists have denounced all of this as an intimidation tactic. Some have understandably felt forced to leave, but many more have **vowed to stay** in Russia. As with other activists, they’re having to move underground, since even public acts of dissent by solo protesters are being swiftly punished.

In stark contrast, encouraging news from neighbouring Estonia raised hope that other Baltic countries could follow suit. A decades-long struggle for visibility and respect by LGBTQI+ and broader human rights groups came to fruition following the formation of an LGBTQI+-friendly government after elections in April.



LGBTQI+ activists take part in the 2018 edition of Baltic Pride, an annual event that has rotated among the capitals of the three Baltic states since 2009.

Photo by Ilmars Znotins/APR via Getty Images.

The ongoing debate and increased visibility have played a crucial role in driving cultural change and garnering support for LGBTQI+ rights. Legal changes seem to have further deepened the positive cultural shift.



KELLY GROSSTHAL
Estonian Human Rights Centre

Next door in Latvia, in November parliament passed a long-delayed package of laws granting rights to same-sex couples. While falling short of equal marriage rights, LGBTQI+ activists viewed the recognition of civil unions as a major step forward in one of the EU's most hostile countries for LGBTQI+ people. The legislative win, a response to a favourable court ruling, came after decades of civil society advocacy bolstered by the election, in May, of Latvia's first out gay president, **Edgar Rinkēvičs**. This political shift opened a window of opportunity and sent a message of encouragement to Latvian civil society to keep up the work.

But the anti-rights backlash was swift: conservative groups immediately started gathering signatures to call for a referendum to stop the new law coming into force.

We've experienced instant conservative backlash and the issue isn't settled yet. The civil partnership bill was passed by a small majority, and opposition parties asked the president not to promulgate it so they could have time to collect signatures for a referendum to repeal it.



KASPARS ZĀLĪTIS
Mozaika, Latvia

LGBTQI+ activists in the Baltics also received a boost from the European Court of Human Rights, which in January 2023 ruled that Lithuania's restriction of access to a book mentioning same-sex marriage violated the right to freedom of expression.

Campaigns for transgender rights won some progress in February as Spain became the 10th country in Europe to recognise the **free self-determination** of gender. As a result, anyone over 16 can now change their gender on official documents simply by expressing their will to do so. The law also eliminated any requirement of a medical diagnosis to legally change gender, banned conversion therapies, protected the rights of intersex minors and included measures to promote workplace inclusion and access to medical care for trans people.

The law is one of the world's most permissive and brought instant anti-rights backlash, with Vox seeking to sow alarm among parents to try to profit from the issue in the election

► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

This election campaign has been plagued by expressions of homophobia and transphobia. We have seen politicians refuse to address trans people in a manner consistent with their gender identity and threaten to abolish laws that have enshrined rights, such as the Equal Marriage Law and the Trans Law. This has reflected in an increase in harassment of LGBTQI+ people both in the classroom and on the streets. The LGBTQI+ community fears both legal and social backlash.



EMILIO DE BENITO
LGTB+ Collective of Madrid, Spain

Similar culture wars played out in other western European states. In the UK, ruling party politicians are increasingly politicising trans rights and voicing outright transphobia ahead of the upcoming election – a tactic LGBTQI+ groups say is bound to fail, believing most voters won't be swayed by culture war issues they overwhelmingly think are invented or exaggerated by politicians.

In **Belgium**, conservative groups sought to restrict the circulation of information about sexuality and sexual diversity. Controversy erupted out of the blue over a longstanding school sex education programme. Civil society defended it by campaigning to counter disinformation and dispel myths surrounding its aims, uses and effects.

“ The disinformation campaign against education in relational, emotional and sexual life (EVRAS) is being waged by a network made up of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, people immersed in paedo-criminal theories, children’s defence associations and ultra-conservative and far-right associations. Anti-EVRAS groups spread disinformation to frighten the public and parents in particular. They use moral panic to divide public opinion and sow doubt among a section of the public that is not aware of the news.



CÉLINE DANHIER
O’YES, Belgium

The situation is more tense in Eastern European countries where LGBTQI+ people and activism face more barriers and hostile governments mobilise hate for political advantage.

In Hungary, which doesn’t recognise same-sex marriage and bans same-sex registered partners adopting children, a new law passed in April enabled people to anonymously report on same-sex couples raising children, anyone defying the ‘constitutionally recognised role of marriage and the family’ or children not conforming to their sex at birth. A **presidential veto** stayed the law, **but the issue is far from over** and the threat continues to loom over many families.

The veto may have been a calculated move, enabling the ruling party to capitalise by stoking outrage without further antagonising the EU. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s anti-LGBTQI+ campaign has put him at odds with EU institutions, even as it helps him rally his base and solidify his dominant position.

Hungarian LGBTQI+ groups have resisted his assault on social media, on the streets and through engagement with EU bodies.

As a result of EU-level civil society advocacy, Hungary’s government was forced to spend the year defending its version of Russia’s ‘gay propaganda’ law, the 2021 Child Protection Act, at the European Court of Justice. This law, which conflates homosexuality with paedophilia, has resulted in LGBTQI+ topics being banished **from schools**. It made new waves in November when, at the behest of a far-right politician, it resulted in people under 18 being barred from visiting the World Press Photo exhibition in Budapest because of the inclusion of some photos featuring LGBTQI+ people.

But the cracks are showing, with President Katalin Novak and Justice Minister Judit Varga both **forced to resign** in February 2024 over their role in pardoning a senior orphanage official implicated in a sexual abuse scandal. Some have started to doubt the government’s rhetoric about protecting children, which it uses to try to justify its LGBTQI+ attacks, with former supporters **accusing** the ruling party of opportunism.

“ Public attitudes to the government’s anti-LGBTQI+ campaign are shifting both ways. On one side of the divide, people are getting outraged by the government’s propaganda and hence showing more support and understanding. On the other side, people are beginning to feel emboldened and legitimised to express discriminatory thoughts and act in discriminatory ways. We are losing the feeling of security in our own society. We feel outlawed and can’t understand how this can be happening in Europe nowadays. Many LGBTQI+ people are starting to think about whether we should leave the country before it’s too late.



IMRE ZSOLDOS
Hungarian LGBT Alliance

The Turkish ruling party also stepped up its attacks on LGBTQI+ people ahead of the **May election**, in which authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a new term. When LGBTQI+ groups took to the streets for the 2023 Pride event in June, police detained **at least 113** people.

In 2003, Turkey made headlines for becoming the first Muslim-majority country to hold a Pride event. But since 2015, with the government taking an increasingly **conservative turn**, authorities have systematically denied permission, supposedly on security and public order grounds. Every year since, hundreds and sometimes thousands have defied the ban, facing repression as a result – unwavering in the conviction that the struggle for rights must go on.

Despite facing oppressive conditions and lack of opportunities, the LGBTQI+ movement in Turkey remains resilient and strong. Alongside feminists, we are the only groups that continue to take to the streets and demonstrate for our rights, showing immense bravery in the face of police violence and detention. Simply persisting in organising demonstrations is an achievement in itself.



DAMLA UMUT UZUN
Kaos GL, Turkey

If 2023 was a disappointment for many in movements for gender rights, it's also clear things could have been much worse without civil society's steadfast defence. Across the world, civil society resisted—through protest, campaigning, protection, solidarity, litigation and legislative lobbying – and held the line. While global progress slowed significantly, most historical gains withstood the latest assaults. In 2024 and beyond, civil society will persevere, and once again look to make breakthroughs wherever it can and as opportunities arise.



An LGBTQI+ activist faces riot police during a Pride march in Istanbul, Turkey on 26 June 2022.



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- LATVIA: A VITAL FIRST STEP TOWARDS MARRIAGE EQUALITY
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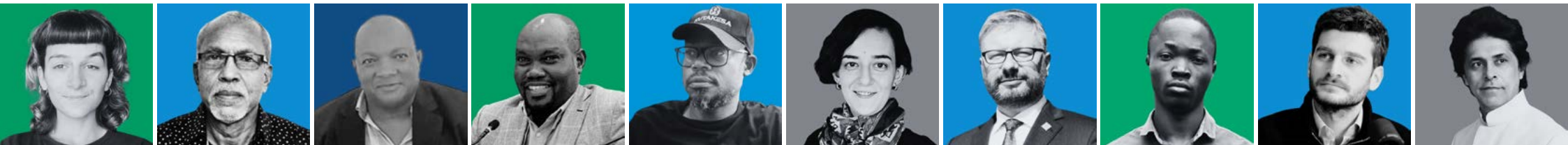
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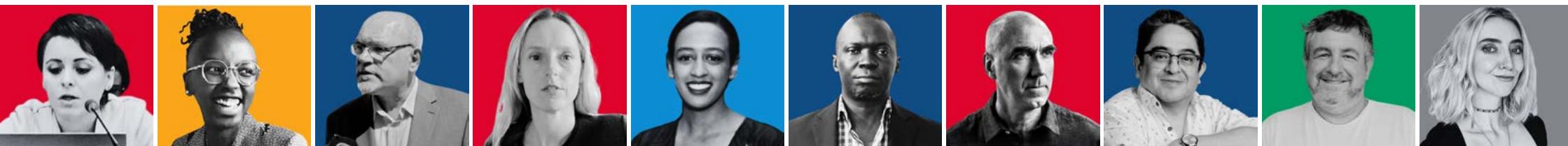
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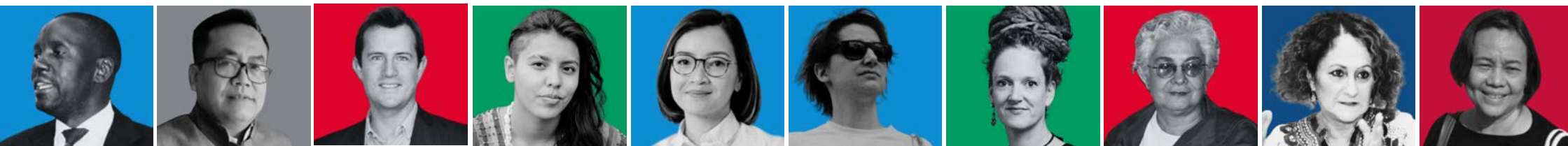
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