



# 2023 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT

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**COVER PHOTO:** People protest on 22 October 2022 outside the Iranian consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, in solidarity with Iranian women mobilised in outrage at Mahsa Amini's death. Photo by Omer Kuscu/dia images via Getty Images

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Welcome to the 2023 State of Civil Society Report from CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance. This year's report, the 12th in our annually published series, looks back on 2022 to explore trends in civil society action, at every level and in every arena, from struggles for democracy, inclusion and climate justice to demands for global governance reform.

The analysis presented here draws from our ongoing analysis initiative launched in January 2022, **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 offers a civil society perspective of the world as it stands in early 2023: one plagued by conflict and crises, including of democratic values and institutions, but in which civil society continues to strive to make a crucial difference in people's lives.



# OVERVIEW





# CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION IN A TURBULENT YEAR

## CIVIL SOCIETY IS PLAYING A KEY ROLE IN RESPONDING TO CONFLICTS AND HUMANITARIAN CRISES – AND FACING RETALIATION

Conflicts and crises left deep scars on millions over the past year. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had global impacts and political and economic repercussions in countries across the world.

But the war in Ukraine was sadly far from the only conflict that marred 2022. A two-year war has only recently come to an end in **Ethiopia**. In Syria, conflict has raged for years. Violent insurgency continues to claim lives across multiple countries of the Sahel.

These and many other conflicts are causing immense human suffering and bringing devastating costs, measured in thousands upon thousands of human lives lost and violations of human rights on a vast scale. Impacts will be felt for generations to come.

Conflict is creating humanitarian emergencies and displacing people, within and across borders. In a world where a record **100 million-plus people**

are now displaced, conflict is a key driver of **mass migration**, alongside other major problems that force people to flee, such as political persecution, economic strife and climate disasters.

It's during critical times like these that civil society is vital. Civil society provides essential services, helps and advocates for victims, monitors human rights and collects evidence of violations to hold those responsible to account.

But for doing this, civil society comes under attack. It's both caught in the crossfire and deliberately targeted. The vital role it plays was recognised with the **award** of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize to activists and organisations in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, working to uphold human rights in the thick of conflict. But acknowledgement hasn't stopped repression. The Russian award winner, human rights organisation Memorial, was ordered to close in the run-up to the war. The laureate from Belarus, Ales Bialiatski, received a 10-year **jail sentence**.

States affected by conflicts and crises often see civil society as a source of counter-power and counter-narratives and a competitor for resources,

and move to suppress it accordingly. In **Ethiopia**, activists and journalists have been detained by a state determined to control the flow of information. In **Mali**, the ruling military junta has banned the activities of civil society organisations that receive funding from France, a government it's at odds with, impacting on organisations providing humanitarian support to people affected by the conflict. In Italy civil society groups **face trial** for rescuing migrants at sea.

Lack of recognition of its crucial roles and stigmatising narratives are major challenges civil society faces around the world, not least because they enable violations of civic space and hamper its ability to do its vital work.

## CATASTROPHIC GLOBAL GOVERNANCE FAILURES HIGHLIGHT THE URGENCY OF REFORM

Too often in the face of the conflicts and crises that have marked the world over the past year, platitudes are all international institutions have had to offer. Multilateral institutions have been

left exposed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United Nations (UN) Security Council has been **hamstrung** by Russia's veto power, and while the UN General Assembly has passed resolutions on the conflict, many states have voted against or abstained – not just authoritarian states but also several democratic states in the global south.

The **UN Human Rights Council** and institutions including the **International Criminal Court** are doing what they can to collect evidence of rights violations and hold perpetrators to account, including in crisis zones such as **Afghanistan** and **Myanmar** as well as Ukraine. But **China** was able to use its economic muscle to strongarm states into closing down UN attempts to investigate its human rights crimes in its Xinjiang region.

The international system is increasingly unfit for purpose when it comes to tackling the many challenges that cross borders and can't be addressed by single states – conflicts, climate change, disasters and displacement, among others. It's held back by bureaucratic approaches and leaders unwilling to take courageous stances on contentious issues.

Civil society puts immense efforts into engaging with the international system to try to secure ambitious international commitments and human rights norms, pushing for their domestication, monitoring state compliance and using the international machinery to investigate human rights abuses. But civil society remains at the back of the queue for access, with a system still built around states, dogged by narrow calculations of interest by government leaders and with an

open door for powerful private sector interests. Without full civil society participation, global governance institutions are sure to keep falling short of their potential.

Civil society has a well-developed reform agenda. The year's failings show it still faces the challenge of having its proposals adopted by decision makers willing to take on the status quo.

### PEOPLE ARE MOBILISING IN GREAT NUMBERS IN RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC SHOCK – AND EXPOSING DEEPER PROBLEMS IN THE PROCESS

As it drove a massive surge in fuel and food prices, Russia's war on Ukraine became a key driver of a global cost of living crisis. This triggered a mass wave of protests – **over 12,500** – across most of the world: the **CIVICUS Monitor** documented protests in at least 133 countries in 2022.

Protests often mobilised in response to tone-deaf policies that further increased costs, such as subsidy cuts in Indonesia and **new taxes** that hit economically excluded people hardest in Ghana. Although many unpopular policies were quickly reversed, protests often continued regardless, because anger at deeper problems such as corruption, poor governance and economic inequality had been unlocked.

People are increasingly aware that super-wealthy elites have only got richer during the various crises of recent years, including the pandemic and the

Ukraine war. Fossil fuel firms have banked record profits as millions have struggled to pay soaring costs. This has led people to question whose interests the dominant global economic model serves, and how it can be reformed and made fairer.

Protesters often demand better social safety nets and public services, and more progressive taxation systems where those who have more pay proportionately more. People are unionising and organising in workplaces to demand higher pay and better conditions, including in big-brand companies such as **Amazon**, **Apple** and **Starbucks**. Civil society continues to push for stronger business regulation and progressive taxation, including by **advocating** for global agreements.

Civil society faces the challenges of sustaining demands for economic justice beyond protests, connecting with other struggles for justice, including climate, gender, racial and social justice, and putting forward progressive economic ideas that expand access to human rights.

### THE RIGHT TO PROTEST IS UNDER ATTACK – EVEN IN LONGSTANDING DEMOCRACIES

Many states, unwilling or unable to concede the deeper demands of protests triggered by rising prices, have responded with violence. In **Sri Lanka**, for instance, protests sparked by economic meltdown ended with the resignation of the president, but his successor instituted a violent **crackdown** characterised by detentions and torture.

State violence has been the norm when protests motivated by economic despair have erupted in repressive contexts where protests are rare, such as **Kazakhstan**.

And it isn't only protests sparked by the high cost of living that have been met with repression. The right to protest is under attack all over the world, whether people are mobilising to seek economic justice, democracy, human rights and environmental action or articulate other demands. In **Iran**, the women-led mass protests demanding the end of theocracy have been met with brutal force, including indiscriminate killings and executions along with mass arrests. In **Peru**, security forces have killed dozens of people protesting against the ousting of the president.

All kinds of states are repressing protests. Protesters are being criminalised in democracies such as **Australia** and the **UK** for demanding climate action, even when governments claim to take climate change seriously.

Although international human rights law makes clear people have a right to peaceful protest – and the vast majority of protests throughout the year were indeed peaceful – many governments are deploying a wide range of tactics to crack down on peaceful protests and using the occasional violent protest event as an excuse to restrict all protests.

Frequent tactics include disproportionate violence, all the way up to lethal violence, and harassment, arbitrary detention and criminalisation of protesters. There's increasing use of facial recognition technology and other forms of pervasive surveillance



Security forces detain a protester demonstrating against President Vladimir Putin's announcement of partial mobilisation of reservists to fight in Ukraine. Moscow, Russia, 21 September 2022.

Photo by Alexander Nemenov/AFP via Getty Images

enabled by artificial intelligence. Journalists covering protests are often targeted too. There's widespread impunity for violations of protest rights.

Civil society groups are working to defend protest rights, including by engaging with the UN human rights machinery to expose violations and promote progressive norms on the management of protests. At the domestic level, civil society groups often work to advise detained protesters of their rights and campaign for their release. But closing protest space offers a challenge for civil society, particularly in the many contexts where taking to the streets is the only means available to express dissent and try to influence decision-making.

### DEMOCRACY IS BEING ERODED IN MULTIPLE WAYS – INCLUDING FROM WITHIN BY ELECTED LEADERS

Economic strife and insecurity are providing fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian leaders fostering polarisation and attacking rights. Authoritarianism and populism remain powerful currents and come together in a political approach best described as popular authoritarianism, in which politicians speak to people's demands for change to win elections and go on to dismantle democratic institutions, restrict civic space and violate rights. El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, offers one current example of the erosion of democracy from within, concentrating power and trampling on rights in the name of combatting **gang violence**.

Authoritarian politics are also thriving elsewhere. **Hungary's** repressive leader, Viktor Orbán, consolidated his divisive rule, despite the challenge of a combined opposition. In the **Philippines**, ruthless president Rodrigo Duterte, whose so-called 'war on drugs' killed thousands, created the conditions to be succeeded as president by the son of an immensely corrupt and cruel former dictator, with Duterte's daughter as vice president.

No longstanding authoritarian regime made significant progress towards democracy in 2022. Rather than move towards civilian rule, military governments in countries such as **Burkina Faso**, **Guinea** and **Mali** consolidated power, partly by mobilising the public against perceived enemies, particularly former colonial power France.

In countries where genuine elections were held, one distinct trend was a further embrace of far-right-extremism. In **Italy** and **Sweden** far-right parties now lead or hold significant sway over governments. **France** recorded its highest-ever far-right vote – and anti-migrant political discourse has been thoroughly normalised. **Israel** now has the most extreme government in its history.

In **Brazil**, the danger of a far-right incumbent completing his destructive work through a second term was only narrowly averted. Brazil wasn't the only country where some ground was regained: right-wing populist incumbents were defeated in the **Czech Republic** and **Slovenia**, leading to civic space improvements. In the **USA**, midterm elections led to the defeat of multiple extremist candidates as people stepped up to defend abortion and voting rights.

Another emerging trend is the rejection of incumbency. In Latin America, what has been seen as a progressive turn encompassing **Brazil**, **Chile**, **Colombia** and **Honduras** may be more an expression of this rejection: unable or unwilling to tackle deep-rooted problems and deliver on their promises, ruling parties rarely won.

In some cases, a history of disappointments with incumbents translated into a rejection of mainstream politics. This was seen in countries as far apart as **Costa Rica** and **Lesotho**, where the search for new alternatives led voters to embrace candidates presenting themselves as outsiders.

The quest for novelty creates opportunities for innovation and authoritarianism alike. The challenge for civil society is to resist regression, capitalise when opportunities for progressive change come, work to make gains permanent and keep making the case for inclusive, pluralist and participatory democracy.

### DISINFORMATION IS SKEWING PUBLIC DISCOURSE, UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY AND FUELLING HATE

Disinformation played a huge role in elections in countries as diverse as Brazil, **Philippines** and **South Korea**. In **Chile**, it influenced the referendum that resulted in the rejection of a progressive new constitution. It's helping keep anti-war sentiment in check in Russia, promoting the anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism of **India's** ruling party and keeping Trumpism alive in the USA.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories soared under the pandemic, souring every area of public discourse, from vaccines to climate change to gender and racial issues, normalising hate speech and extremist ideas.

Powerful authoritarian states are pumping out disinformation to sow polarisation in democracies and foster confusion over their rights violations, such as Russia's atrocities in Ukraine and **China's** systematic abuses in Xinjiang.

Civil society is often the target of disinformation and hate speech, particularly when activists come from or stand for the rights of excluded groups. Disinformation is pervasive in the pushback against women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights: it's deployed in culture wars waged by well-resourced and influential global networks of ultraconservative, nationalist and white supremacist groups – including those that attack women's rights in the name of what they characterise as the rights of the unborn while attacking trans people's rights in the name of women's rights.

These groups are disproportionately influencing public discourse and enabling regressive moves out of sync with more moderate climates of public opinion, as in the case of abortion bans in the **USA**.

The tech industry clearly isn't up to the challenge of dealing with the problem, not least because it thrives on it: its algorithms get people hooked by feeding them increasingly extreme and simplistic content that reinforces their pre-existing views, distorts their perspectives and isolates them from diverse viewpoints.

Fact-checking initiatives are only a first step and are eclipsed by the sheer scale of the task. The challenge remains of forging a joined-up, multi-faceted global effort to counter disinformation – which must include better regulation of the social media and tech industry, developed through participatory processes and including safeguards for freedom of expression.

### MOVEMENTS FOR WOMEN'S AND LGBTQI+ RIGHTS ARE MAKING GAINS AGAINST THE ODDS

In the face of difficult odds, civil society continues to drive progress. The **USA** made global headlines when a ruling by a politically skewed supreme court restricted abortion rights, plunging millions of women into despair. But the global trend runs in the opposite direction, towards liberalisation, particularly in Latin America, where **Colombia** and many **Mexican** states have recently recognised abortion rights.

It's a similar progressive trend when it comes to LGBTQI+ rights, with the struggle focusing on two broad fronts: decriminalisation where antiquated laws against same-sex conduct remain and marriage equality where the debate has moved further ahead. In 2022, same-sex marriage became a reality in several countries, among them **Chile** and **Switzerland**, while three Caribbean states – **Antigua and Barbuda**, **Barbados** and **St Kitts and Nevis** – scrapped colonial laws that criminalised same-sex relations.

The progressive wave sweeping Latin America is the result of decades-long efforts by social movements

that are active in every arena, from street protest to regional networking and high-level engagement with government institutions. Recognition of sexual and reproductive rights has typically come through parliaments or courts, and occasionally as a result of referendums. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, progress has been won through a multi-country litigation strategy pursued in national and regional courts.

These victories have made civil society the target of a ferocious backlash. Civil society now faces the multifaceted challenge of defending itself, resisting attempts to reverse gains and building public support to ensure that legal change is backed by changing attitudes.

### CIVIL SOCIETY IS THE MAJOR FORCE BEHIND THE PUSH FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Civil society continues to be the force sounding the alarm on the triple threat of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. Civil society is urging action using every tactic available, from street protest and direct action to litigation and advocacy in national and global arenas.

The need for action was proven yet again in 2022 by another lengthy catalogue of extreme weather, including devastating floods that left a third of **Pakistan** under water.

Civil society's energy has kept the climate emergency high on the agenda and led to some steps forward.

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In 2022, the **COP27 climate summit** finally agreed to start developing a fund to compensate global south countries for the loss and damage caused by climate change, a move that came after years of civil society advocacy. Meanwhile, at another major summit states committed to a new **global biodiversity framework** to try to preserve planetary assets and arrest cycles of destruction.

The challenge here is that global decisions on climate and environment tend to go ignored. And crucially, there's still no commitment to accelerate the end of fossil fuel use. Quite the opposite: in response to pressure on supplies caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many states have made a short-term push for yet more extraction. Too little of the current record fossil fuel profits is going into genuine funding for transition to renewable energies. The political power of the fossil fuel lobby remains undimmed.

Civil society faces the challenge of sustaining the movement in the face of repression – including growing protest restrictions and violence against grassroots and Indigenous groups resisting extractive initiatives – while continuing to find new ways to keep commanding public attention and communicate the urgency of action to address the climate emergency.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY IS REINVENTING ITSELF TO ADAPT TO A CHANGING WORLD**

In the context of pressures on civic space and huge global challenges, civil society is growing, diversifying and widening its repertoire of tactics. Drawing on its special strengths of diversity, adaptability and creativity, civil society continues to evolve.

Today, much of civil society's radical energy is coming from outside the NGO universe: from small, informal grassroots groups, often formed and led by women, young people and Indigenous people. In many of today's mass mobilisation, young – sometimes very young – people are at the forefront, taking action on issues that directly matter to them – such as the lack of economic opportunities, the climate crisis that threatens to rob them of their futures and the denial of the rights of excluded groups to which they belong or stand as allies of.

Many new groups organise horizontally, adopt participatory approaches and cultivate distributed leadership. They tend to rely on voluntary engagement and can achieve a lot with little. They're often more intersectional than their more established counterparts, striving to make

connections across society's traditional fault lines, including of class, race and faith. This was seen in many of this year's protests, for example in Sri Lanka, as economic shocks with far-reaching impacts brought diverse groups of people together across deep-seated divides.

New civil society forms and practices have shown an admirable resilience, but questions remain about their long-term sustainability. They don't fit neatly into conventional civil society resourcing models and partners and allies may struggle to find the best ways to support them. There can be challenges of disconnection between different civil society elements. There are also limits to engagement, reflected in the need to avoid burnout and ensure self-care. And there will surely be boundaries on the long-term ability of people to volunteer as work and parental responsibilities kick in. A major challenge ahead will be to sustain and channel this prodigious energy to achieve the deep changes evidently needed in the world today.



## 10 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1** Civil society is responding to conflicts and crises but facing retaliation. There is an urgent need for a broad-based campaign to win recognition of the vital roles played by civil society in conflict and crisis response. Parties in conflicts and the international community must commit to recognising and respecting the rights of civil society in conflict settings and to supporting its full range of roles.
- 2** Large-scale public mobilisations have proven critical in shaping the public agenda, pushing for policy change and resisting attacks on rights. Greater emphasis is needed by civil society and supportive states on protecting freedom of peaceful assembly, including by developing preventative actions, advocating for law enforcement reforms and ensuring perpetrators of violence against protesters are held to account.
- 3** A more effective, inclusive and democratic global governance system is acutely needed. Civil society should work with supportive states to take forward plans for UN Security Council reform and proposals to open up the UN and other international institutions to much greater public participation and scrutiny.
- 4** Political shifts can create threats or opportunities for civil society. Even when progressive political change happens, civil society must stay vigilant to ensure political leaders are held accountable and stick to their promises to bring change, and must be alert to the early warning signs of regressive backlash.
- 5** Civil society participation is crucial to ensure free and fair elections and democratic governance. In the run-up to elections, civil society's roles should include the defence of electoral rights, provision of voter education, scrutiny of the integrity of voting systems, promotion of civil debate and advocacy towards candidates to commit to safeguarding rights and freedoms and acting on social justice issues.
- 6** Disinformation hampers civil society's efforts to advance change and is instrumentalised by regressive forces that attack civil society. Civil society should play a leading role in developing anti-disinformation strategies, including fact-checking, enhancement of media literacy and, crucially, advocacy for higher regulatory standards for social media companies, consistent with respect for freedom of expression.
- 7** The climate crisis and economic dysfunction are two sides of the same coin. Civil society should work to enhance economic literacy and critique the flaws inherent in a global economic system that benefits the wealthy and is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Areas for advocacy could include progressive taxation, social protection floors, universal basic incomes, union recognition, a just energy transition and effective business regulation.
- 8** Strategic litigation at the national and international levels has proven to be an effective strategy to expand rights, including in struggles for climate action and Indigenous and LGBTQI+ people's rights. Civil society should use the full set of tactics available, including litigation, to realise rights and advance progressive change.
- 9** Media engagement is crucial for raising public awareness of issues such as climate change and gender equality, and winning support for action. Civil society should develop media partnerships as part of its advocacy and campaigning strategies.
- 10** Transnational solidarity is vital in struggles to resist regression. Civil society should work to strengthen and enhance the membership and reach of transnational civil society networks, and enable the rapid deployment of solidarity and support when rights come under attack.



# RESPONDING TO CONFLICT AND CRISIS





**In a world marked by numerous conflicts and crises, civil society continues to mobilise. Civil society is working to protect people on the frontline, sustain lives, reach those abandoned by governments and serve the excluded groups worst affected by conflicts, including millions displaced within countries and across borders. Civil society is working to defend rights, hold to account the powerful forces committing violations and document rights abuses with a view to prosecution.**

**Civil society's essential value was proved time and again in its response to the global emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. And its vital role continues to be seen amid the many conflicts that rage around the world today – not only in Ukraine but also in Ethiopia, Syria and the Sahel, among many others – and humanitarian crises in numerous other countries, such as Afghanistan, Haiti and Myanmar.**

## RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE

It's now just over a year since Russia invaded Ukraine. The war's impacts have been global, pushing

up fuel and food costs, pricing essentials out of the reach of millions and driving a great wave of mass protests. The global political consequences have been major too, with renewed questioning about the international system, tensions within the European Union (EU), debate about NATO, impacts on European elections and, enabled by systematic Russian disinformation, the further spread of far-right conspiracy theories.

The war has brought huge losses of life. Almost every region of Ukraine has experienced Russian attacks. While estimates vary greatly, it's likely tens of thousands of civilians have been killed. Evidence has mounted of human rights crimes committed on a vast scale by Russian forces. Russia's withdrawal from Bucha last March made clear the reality of its invasion, with sickening evidence of atrocities including summary executions, rape and torture. Russia has gone as far as invoking the spectre of nuclear war to try to deter states from coming to Ukraine's aid.



**FIRM, UNIFIED RESPONSE NEEDED  
TO RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION**

Against this grim backdrop, Ukraine's civil society is doing things it never imagined it would. An immense voluntary effort has seen people step forward to provide essential humanitarian help. Volunteers are distributing food and medical supplies, treating the wounded and traumatised, searching for missing people, organising transport and accommodation for internally displaced people and helping the millions of Ukrainian refugees find support networks in neighbouring countries.

This is backed by international campaigning to mobilise solidarity and urge states and international institutions to take a strong line on Russia, including against its financial interests and the economic elite.

**»»** We engage with partner human rights organisations in European countries, such as France and Germany, so that they put pressure on their national governments. Some countries have continued doing business as usual with Russia, even though they have repudiated the war. We need their governments to make the kind of political decisions that will save Ukrainian lives."



**OLEKSANDRA MATVIICHUK**  
Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine

Alongside these come efforts to collect evidence of human rights violations, with a view to one day holding Vladimir Putin and his circle to account for their crimes. The evidence collected could be vital for the work of United Nations (UN) monitoring mechanisms and the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation launched in March.

When Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, I immediately joined a field team of investigators working day and night to document Russian war crimes in our country. Since then, our team members have collected evidence of indiscriminate shelling, targeted attacks against civilians, ecological crimes and other violations of customs of war."

 **YAROPOLK BRYNYKH**  
Truth Hounds, Ukraine

As is so often the case in times of crisis, women are playing a huge role: while some women are serving in the military, overwhelmingly it's men who've taken up arms, leaving women responsible for pretty much everything else. Existing civil society organisations (CSOs) have been vital too, quickly repurposing their resources towards the humanitarian and human rights response. Ukraine is showing that an investment in civil society, as part of the essential social fabric, is an investment in resilience. It can quite literally mean the difference between life and death.



Putin knows what a difference an enabled civil society can make, which is why he's moved to further shut down Russia's civic space. As soon as the war began, people mobilised in protest, knowing repression was certain. Vast numbers have been criminalised: **over 19,000 people** are estimated to have been detained. People have been arrested just for holding up blank signs in solo protests.

Censorship has seen independent media almost entirely eliminated. Last March a law was **passed** imposing long jail sentences for spreading what the state calls 'false information' about the war. Numerous media companies and CSOs have been branded as 'foreign agents' and shut down.

Systematic disinformation has also played a key role in the government's effort to keep the public onside, which along with the certainty of punishment has stopped anti-war protest numbers becoming overwhelming.

We are witnessing the establishment of military censorship. Even calling the events in Ukraine a war is prohibited. A new crime has been included in the Criminal Code: that of publicly disseminating knowingly false information about the Armed Forces."

 **MARIA KUZNETSOVA**  
OVD-Info, Russia

But as the war progressed, even normally pro-state voices dared **criticise** the war effort, particularly following a series of reversals and the introduction of partial conscription in September – something that sparked a **further wave** of protests. More pressure for change may come from the families of the slain as casualties mount up.

The international community can support Russian civil society by sharing accurate information about what is happening in the country. A majority of CSOs and activists from neighbouring countries as well as international CSOs are focused on trying to help Ukrainian people, both refugees and those left in Ukraine. This is completely understandable, but I think they shouldn't forget the people in Russia who continue to advocate for peace and human rights."

 **NELYA RAKHIMOVA**  
Coalition for Sustainable Development of Russia

One day Putin's time will come to an end and there'll be a need to rebuild Russia's democracy. The reconstruction will need to come from the ground up, with investment in an independent civil society. To prepare the ground, acts of protest and solidarity, internationally and to the extent possible within Russia, are needed to communicate that Russians who want change are not alone. Brave dissidents who take huge risks by speaking out, whether in Russia or in exile, need to be supported as the future builders of democracy.



## A WORLD OF DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused Europe's biggest displacement since the Second World War: by the

end of 2022, around **eight million** Ukrainians – 20 per cent of the country's pre-war population – had become refugees.

But away from the spotlight multiple other crises continued to unfold. Conflicts, disasters such as floods and droughts, food scarcity, violence, political persecution, economic strife and climate change all drove displacement, and not only from global south to global north countries but also between global south countries and, on a huge scale, within countries.

Twelve years into their country's conflict, Syrians remain the **largest displaced population** in the world, having fled violence, tyranny and widespread human rights abuses. Nearly 5.6 million Syrian refugees are currently registered as living in nearby countries, far more than have made their way to Europe.

▣▣ The world seems to be starting to forget Syrian refugees. No one is talking about Syrian refugees anymore. But the fact that new crises are happening doesn't mean the situation of Syrian refugees has improved and the issue disappeared."



**SERENE DARDARI AND  
MAHMOUD ABDULLAH**  
American Near East Refugee Aid, Lebanon

In Europe, the presence of migrants from Syria and other Asian and African countries has provoked a significant public backlash encouraged by far-right groups: this has played a key role in **growing support for far-right parties and politicians**, as exemplified by recent tilts to the right in **Italy** and **Sweden**. In Italy, civil society is once again being **criminalised** for rescuing migrants in danger at sea.



People gather around Little Amal, a 3.5-metre-tall puppet of a young Syrian refugee girl, during a 8,000 km tour across Europe, from Turkey to the UK, to raise awareness of the plight of young refugees. Stuttgart, Germany, 1 October 2021.

Photo by Lukas Barth/Reuters via Gallo Images

Traditionally Syrians have encountered a warmer reception in neighbouring countries, but that's changing, notably in Turkey. The country is home to the highest number of Syrian refugees, estimated at 3.5 million. Authoritarian president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long instrumentalised migrants to extract resources and concessions from the EU. But as a severe cost of living crisis struck, throwing the result of the May 2023 election into doubt, Erdoğan's response was to make refugees a target.

It is not surprising that migration and the future of refugees have become the main agenda item in Turkish politics. Refugees are the perfect scapegoat in times of crisis. Politicians are using the issue to redirect people's anger towards refugees instead of blaming the politicians who have not been able to address their concerns."

 **DILAN AKBAYIR**  
Civil society activist, Turkey

Xenophobia has surged and led to violence, and people have been threatened with deportation to Syria, including in retaliation for speaking out. At the same time the government has **pushed back** people escaping the Taliban's theocratic rule in Afghanistan. In a political race to the bottom, opposition politicians are competing over who has the toughest stance on migration. The situation worsened further with the devastating earthquakes in Syria and Turkey in February 2023, with displaced people in northern Syria among those most badly affected and struggling to get help.

 **TURKEY: REFUGEES TARGETED  
IN SURGE OF XENOPHOBIA**

There's also been little improvement in the lives of Rohingya refugees forced to flee Myanmar, where they've long been denied citizenship. In Bangladesh they're subjected to stifling restrictions on their ability to speak out, while in India they're exposed to anti-Muslim hatred. Their plight seems largely forgotten, and now the army that unleashed genocidal violence against them rules their country. While they wait for a chance to return, they continue to fight for less hostile treatment in host countries.

There hasn't been any change to our situation since 2017. It's true there have been meetings about the Rohingya and many organisations and groups have issued statements regarding our situation. However, all these meetings and statements have brought no positive outcome. The solutions offered to end the conflict still equal zero."

 **MAUNG SAWYEDDOLLAH**  
Rohingya Students Network, Bangladesh

 **ROHINGYA REFUGEES:  
STILL FAR FROM HOME**

Finding more solidarity are the masses of Venezuelans who've spread across Latin America fleeing economic meltdown and political oppression. Between 2015 and 2022, a staggering seven million Venezuelans left, with the greatest number making their way to Colombia. Venezuelan migrants face discrimination and multiple forms of exclusion, and there have been anti-migrant protests in Chile and Peru, but what makes a positive difference is the virtual absence of top-down xenophobia exercised for political gain.

The latest wave of migrants from Venezuela included a lot more people in a vulnerable situation, which created a demand for the community, but above all for the Colombian state, to respond to. And the country began to operate under a logic of solidarity and gratitude: Colombians remember that in the past it was Venezuela that received Colombian migrants."

 **CARMEN AIDA FARIA**  
Fundación Manitas Amarillas, Colombia

People continue to put themselves in immense physical danger to migrate. In Latin America they're crossing the **Darién Gap** between Colombia and Panama – 60 miles of dense rainforest and swamps, home to violent criminal gangs – and setting out to sea from the coasts of Cuba in the hope of reaching the USA. Across the world, the **Mediterranean** continues to be one of the most treacherous migration routes, with people putting themselves at the mercy of trafficking gangs and taking to sea in inadequate small boats because restrictions have made safer routes impossible. While numbers remain down on the 2015 peak, they're still high, with almost 600,000 arriving and nearly 2,000 dead or missing in 2022 alone.

In the UK, the ruling party and its media mouthpieces have stoked a moral panic about small boats crossing the English Channel. In April, the government announced a deal to deport asylum-seekers to Rwanda, apparently to try to deter people from crossing. The consequence is that people could be dumped in a country they have no connection to that's an authoritarian state with an appalling human rights record.



### ASYLUM IN THE UK: A ONE-WAY TRIP TO RWANDA?

Politicised migration anxiety has mobilised across Europe. Another flashpoint is provided by Spain's enclaves in Morocco, where people gather to try to enter EU territory. Several people died in a mass crossing attempt in June, highlighting the dangers of a security-driven approach to migration and the lack of accountability over rights violations.



### MIGRANTS PAY THE DEADLY COST OF SPAIN'S HARSH APPROACH

Migration remains a major political issue in the USA too. In 2022 border crossings by undocumented migrants reportedly **topped** 2.76 million, breaking the previous record by more than a million. This increase was driven largely by Venezuelans, followed by Cubans and Nicaraguans, showing how political repression can be a driver of migration. Venezuelans have arrived in such numbers that it's forced a change of policy: a limited humanitarian permit is now available to them, but not for other nationals.



### SYRIAN AND VENEZUELAN REFUGEES: TWO FACES OF THE SAME CRISIS



### CUBA: WHY FLEE PARADISE?

2022 showed that this is a world of migration. People will stay on the move because the multiple crises that uproot them will continue to occur. But policies that deny this reality continue to dominate. States seek to reinforce defences rather than address the root causes of migration.

The warm welcome that in the main has been extended to Ukrainians, even by right-wing leaders used to stoking xenophobia for political gain, contrasts sharply with the lack of hospitality afforded to others. But as they proved themselves able to respond efficiently and with compassion to a migration crisis, EU states made clear that hostility towards non-white, non-Christian migrants isn't an inevitability but rather a conscious political choice.



### UKRAINE'S REFUGEES: WILL COMPASSION PREVAIL OVER PREJUDICE?

“The political elite treats migration as a problem to be controlled, a phenomenon that endangers the welfare and values of our countries, and that must therefore be stopped at all costs. The reality is different: migration will not stop happening. Attempts to stop it will only cause more suffering for the migrants who pass through the checkpoints.”

**TEAM MEMBERS**  
Solidary Wheels, Spain

## CRISIS ACROSS THE SAHEL

Russia's war on Ukraine might seem mostly a global north concern: that's one interpretation of UN voting patterns on resolutions on Russia, which have seen much more consistent condemnation of Putin by global north states than global south states.

But the conflict far transcends Europe's boundaries. Mercenaries from the Wagner group – a shadowy organisation headed by Putin inner circle member Yevgeny Prigozhin – have played an **increasing role** not only in Ukraine but also in several African countries. Since the start of the **Ukraine war**, Russia has stepped up its diplomatic offensive in Africa, which may be a factor in the unwillingness of several African states to condemn the invasion.

An ongoing wave of jihadist insurgency across the Sahel is endangering people's lives, bringing numerous human rights violations and displacing many. Originally governments turned to France, the former colonial power, to provide armed forces. In Mali, where insurgency first rose in 2012, jihadist-occupied territory was reclaimed, but the conflict continues and has spread to neighbouring countries. Over time, dissatisfaction with the role of French troops, and to a lesser extent UN forces, has grown.

In Mali, a **military coup** in August 2020, followed by the **ousting** of the civilian-headed transitional regime in May 2021, precipitated a French departure. Relations between the two governments deteriorated, and the last French troops left in August. Wagner forces have stepped in. Because the group is so opaque it's hard to estimate how many are deployed, and Mali's junta has insisted Russian officers are merely playing an advisory role – but eyewitness accounts



A protester holds a sign reading 'Clear off criminal French army' at a protest against the French military presence in Niamey, Niger, 18 September 2022.

Photo by Boureima Hama/AFP via Getty Images

indicate they're involved in active conflict. It's also clear civilians are being **targeted**. Meanwhile the insurgency continues to **advance**: studies show that experience of rights violations by security forces is a key **driver** in extremist recruitment.

There's no accountability over these forces, which are accused of atrocities, notably in the Central African Republic (CAR), where the group has long operated. Further, Wagner forces **extract** mineral wealth – they're often paid in gold or oil – diverting resources from development and delivering them to the Kremlin.

In Mali and other countries of the region, many people oppose French troops. There have been numerous anti-France protests with people waving Russian flags. People are angry at France's colonial role, but they also see its forces as ineffective. Opinions have been influenced by a pro-Russian **disinformation campaign** unleashed in Mali and other Sahel countries.

For Mali's military government, the switch is a way of resisting pressure to step aside: France condemned the coup, while Russia obviously makes no calls for democracy. There's no semblance of democracy in the CAR, and Burkina Faso is on a similar trajectory following **two coups** in 2022. In January 2023 its junta also **ordered** French troops to leave.

Some civil society leaders have spoken out in support of distancing from France. But the connection between Mali's embrace of Wagner and the denial of democracy was made clear in November, when the junta **banned** the activities of CSOs receiving French support, in apparent retaliation for France suspending aid to the government. At a stroke

this affected civil society's ability to provide humanitarian help to those affected by the conflict and to scrutinise the government.

In February 2023, another ominous sign came with the **expulsion** of the head of the UN's peacekeeping mission's human rights division over his choice of civil society witnesses of rights violations.

Civil society needs to be able to play its proper roles, not least so there can be democratic debate about the role of Russian forces, scrutiny over rights abuses and discussion of sustainable security alternatives.



CIVIL SOCIETY CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE OF MALI'S ROW WITH FRANCE



BURKINA FASO: SECOND COUP FURTHER DENTS HOPE OF DEMOCRACY

## OFF THE RADAR: OVERLOOKED CRISES

Many other conflicts and crises risked being forgotten in the glare of the Ukraine war, although they were all life-changing events for those forced to endure them.

The Taliban's control of Afghanistan triggered not only a human rights catastrophe but also a humanitarian crisis. Over half of people in Afghanistan need humanitarian help, and

around 20 million face acute hunger. But a lack of pledges in response to a UN urgent aid appeal was a sign the crisis has slipped off the global radar. Economic sanctions have been imposed to pressure the regime to improve its human rights record, but the humanitarian impacts have been heaviest for the poorest and most excluded people, including the women and girls already subject to the worst repression.

One particular focus of advocacy is the US government's freezing of Afghan central bank assets, recently **transferred** to a Swiss fund. Civil society is calling for their full release, and for much more international aid. Global north states that occupied Afghanistan before their chaotic pull-out have a particular responsibility. They need to be guided by the voices of Afghan civil society, in the country and in the diaspora, to both alleviate human suffering and push for the Taliban to roll back their human rights abuses.

“The entire Afghan population is on the receiving end of collective punishment due to the sanctions imposed on the Afghan state. The international community should work hard to differentiate between targeted sanctions that focus on individuals within the Taliban and projects that ensure Afghans have a chance at survival.”



ARASH AZIZZADA  
Afghans for a Better Tomorrow



AFGHANISTAN'S FROZEN ASSETS AND A LOOMING WINTER CRISIS

Myanmar is also home to a forgotten conflict. February 2023 marked two years since the **military coup**. Military rule has been bloody, with democracy activists executed and **civilians killed** in airstrikes and ground warfare between the army and the armed rebellion that has joined forces with ethnic militias. Over a million people have been displaced. Many civil society personnel, along with journalists and opposition politicians, have been jailed, often following unfair trials in military tribunals: there are **almost 14,000** political prisoners. Detainees are subject to torture and ill-treatment. Many CSOs have been forced to suspend operations.

Myanmar's democracy movement sees the regional intergovernmental organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as having failed them. The UN human rights machinery continues to collect evidence of atrocities, and in December the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the military's rights violations. But while some states have imposed sanctions, these haven't been applied to the crucial state-owned oil and gas company, and many countries continue to do business with the regime.

International civil society pressure has increasingly targeted companies that collaborate with military-controlled corporations. Some have divested, but this has led to some key assets – notably a mobile phone network once majority-owned by the Norwegian government – being handed over to military allies. Responsible divestment is needed, particularly by the fossil fuel companies that continue to reap **vast profits** by associating with the blood-soaked regime.

“ I believe nothing lasts forever and this too will pass. The junta will have to leave at some point. We need to continue our struggle with a clear vision of the future that is centred on human rights and democracy. And we need support from the international community so those struggling on the ground will one day see their dreams come true.”

 **KYAW WIN**  
Burma Human Rights Network, Myanmar



### MYANMAR: JUNTA'S ECONOMIC POWER IN THE FIRING LINE

Also away from the spotlight, a seemingly intractable crisis continues to unfold in Haiti. Things have spun out of control since the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse. In the political vacuum, criminal gangs have taken control of large parts of the capital, terrorising the public by conducting a systematic campaign of abduction for profit. Journalists are being **attacked** both by gangs and security forces. On top of this, Haiti is experiencing a food crisis, with **almost half** the population suffering acute hunger. The effects of the global food price surge were exacerbated by a decision to withdraw fuel subsidies in September. This led to a wave of protests, **riots and looting**, and when gangs occupied a key fuel terminal it brought Haiti to a standstill. Many have fled the country, often by dangerous routes.

In October, Haiti's acting leader Ariel Henry called for UN foreign security assistance. But many Haitians are worried because any troops would likely come from the USA, which has a dismal

history of intervention in Haiti. Civil society has come together to suggest a consultative, transitional process to address the crisis and develop democracy. Any international response must be informed by local voices.

“ Henry has no legitimacy to call for any military intervention. The international community can help, but it is not up to them to decide whether to intervene or not. We first need to have a two-year political transition with a credible government. We have ideas, but at this point, we need to see a transition.”

 **MONIQUE CLESCA**  
Commission to Search for a Haitian Solution to the Crisis



### HAITI: WILL ANOTHER INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION HELP?

Conflict continues in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the M23 insurgent force controls large parts of the mineral-rich eastern region and many armed groups, some linked to neighbouring African states, are engaged in a struggle over resources. It's clear that Rwanda's authoritarian government supports M23, although it continues to deny it. Conflict resurged with an M23 push in March. An East African Community peace process led to a **ceasefire agreement** in November, but M23 rejected it and fighting **broke out** again the following month. In January 2023, Rwandan forces **shot down** a DRC fighter jet, further escalating tensions.

Civilians are paying the price. **Around 300 people** were reportedly killed in one of the worst M23 attacks in November. Around **five million people** are estimated to have been displaced. Fundamental civic freedoms

are also a casualty. A **state of siege** has been in place in two eastern provinces since May 2021. The state has used lethal force against protests and numerous civil society activists, journalists and opposition politicians have been arrested. The situation is likely to worsen ahead of elections scheduled for December 2023.

In anger and frustration at insecurity, people have joined anti-Rwanda and anti-UN protests. A UN peacekeeping force has been in the DRC for over two decades, but like French forces in the Sahel, many see it as ineffective, and peacekeepers have been accused of killing civilians. Protests against UN forces turned violent in July, leaving **at least 36 people** dead. Civil society movements are part of the protests but they're also calling out their government's rights abuses and failure to protect them. They demand locally accountable forces that, crucially, uphold human rights and don't use violence against civilians.

Ongoing neglect by democratic states can only further open the door to influence by autocratic regimes including China and Russia, with mineral resources an enticing prize. States that have built warm relations with Rwanda by ignoring its human rights abuses need to stop overlooking its evident role in stoking conflict in the region.

“ The international community has been hypocritical and has always prioritised their own needs. It is unfortunate that the recent events are happening in a mineral-rich area of our country. Many powerful people have interests there and are willing to do anything to ensure they are protected. That is why so few countries are speaking up against what is happening.”

 **ESPOIR NGALUKIYE AND SANKARA BIN KARTUMWA**  
LUCHA, DRC



## UNEASY PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

The war in Ethiopia's Tigray region was brought to what must be hoped is a permanent end after two years in November, with a ceasefire brokered by the African Union. Ethiopia's federal government has triumphed in its battle with Tigray separatist forces and their allies, but the costs have been huge all round. While casualty figures are disputed, it's clear hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions displaced. All parties in the combat are **accused** of war crimes and **acts of genocide**. Ethiopia's blockade of Tigray precipitated a humanitarian crisis. For months no aid was allowed in, leaving people desperately short of food, water and healthcare.

Civic space suffered. There was a campaign of **mass imprisonment** of Tigrayans, seemingly locked up purely on grounds of their ethnicity. Internet shutdowns were imposed and journalists consistently targeted as the government sought to control the flow of information. Many journalists have been harassed, numerous have been **detained** and several foreign reporters have been expelled. Some international CSOs providing humanitarian aid have experienced **bans**.

The government also **sought to limit** international scrutiny. UN monitoring found evidence of crimes under international law, but this was likely an



People demonstrate to raise awareness to violence against Amhara people in Ethiopia's Oromia Region. Washington DC, USA, 30 June 2022.

Photo by J. Countess/Getty Images

**underestimate** of the true scale of abuses. The government refused to cooperate with a UN Human Rights Council commission established in 2021 following civil society advocacy.

There's still considerable simmering resentment, not just in Tigray but across Ethiopia's complex patchwork of ethnic and regional identities and interests. The federal government mustn't seek to impose a victor's justice. It needs to invest in reconciliation. This must include openness and accountability over all crimes committed, including by the central government and its allied Eritrean forces. An absence of trust means the international community has a key role to play. But Ethiopia is yet another crisis that powerful states and international bodies have neglected – the UN commission's work, for example, is under-resourced. Now they need to take peace seriously.



ETHIOPIA: WILL THE CEASEFIRE  
BE FOLLOWED BY PEACE?

## CIVIL SOCIETY A PATHWAY TO PEACE

Apart from Ethiopia's ceasefire, none of these conflicts and crises were resolved as 2022 gave way to 2023. Even what Putin surely thought would be a lightning-quick strike on Ukraine has lasted more than a year. Conflicts and crises spanning multiple years require a committed response from the international community, motivated by humanitarian and human rights impulses and informed by local voices.

The vital role of civil society was again recognised in 2022 with the **award** of the Nobel Peace Prize to activists and organisations in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, working to uphold human rights at the heart of conflict. But their reward, in Belarus and Russia, was renewed persecution. There's no better summation of the gulf between the recognition of civil society needed and the reality of its repression.

There's no way of resolving a crisis, building peace and fostering reconciliation in the absence of a diverse, adequately resourced and enabled civil society, working in conditions where civic space is respected rather than restricted. It's about time that lesson was learned.

# 3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 Around the world, conflicts are causing avoidable devastation on an untold scale, with immense economic, environmental, social and human costs. Civil society should continue to advocate and campaign against militarisation and warmongering and intensify peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives.
- 2 The documentation of war crimes and collection of evidence of human rights violations is a cornerstone of efforts to bring accountability. Civil society should continue to engage with the international human rights machinery in collecting evidence, and international organisations should commit to working with civil society to document violations with a view to prosecution.
- 3 Civil society has long stood up for migrants, refugees and displaced people, including by providing essential services and advocating for their rights. It must urge states to respect the 1951 Refugee Convention and contribute to developing new international standards recognising the reality of migration and the rights of people on the move.



# MOBILISING FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE





Soaring costs of food and fuels are pushing people to the brink all over the world, compelling them to take to the streets. On top of the continuing impacts of the pandemic, Russia's war on Ukraine has played a major role, driving up the prices of oil, gas and staples like wheat and cooking oil, major exports of both Russia and Ukraine. As a consequence, over 12,500 protests were documented in 2022, across 148 countries at all levels of economic development.

Protesters typically blamed governments and called on them to protect them from the impacts of cost of living hikes. In numerous contexts, economic anger heightened longstanding grievances over unemployment, low pay and exploitative labour practices, economic inequality and ever-growing elite wealth, corruption, poor governance and the denial of civil and political rights. For many already struggling to get by, frustrated by the absence of economic opportunities and forced to live with minimal social safety nets and poor public services, rising prices were the tipping point. Alongside street protests, in many places people took collective action in the forms of strikes and unionisation campaigns to demand wage increases and labour rights. Time and again governments

proved largely unable to assuage the anger, in many cases opting instead for violent repression.

A year of economic strife leaves governments and big businesses facing renewed questioning. It's clear the current global economic system based on low business regulation and elite wealth creation isn't working for most people. The latest crisis should provoke renewed inquiry into whose interests economic arrangements serve and how economic power can be redistributed, globally and within nations.

## PROTESTS AROUND THE WORLD

Very often, amid generalised anger at rising prices, government actions that appeared tone-deaf or threatened to further worsen the situation were the spark that fanned protest flames. These events suggested that governments were out of touch or didn't care.

That was the case in Indonesia, where protests were sparked by a fuel subsidy cut in September. The decision came with no consultation,

inadequate provision for those worst off and no investment in alternatives. Thousands protested, with students to the fore, bringing heavy-handed security force responses.

Around the world fuel subsidies need to be phased out to reduce climate harm – but the transition must be just and not throw people into jeopardy. There was little indication of such thinking in Indonesia. The government has since passed a regressive new **criminal code** giving it even stronger powers to repress protests.



### INDONESIA: FUEL PRICE PROTESTS AT HIGH-HANDED GOVERNMENT

Often protests triggered by economic strife won concessions but these fell short of the bigger changes demanded. Protests in Panama in July triggered by rising prices tapped into years of anger at successive governments over corruption, economic inequality and poor public services, belying the country's reputation as an economic success. Weeks of protest led by teachers' groups

won price caps but the bigger issues – including systematic lack of investment in education – remained unaddressed. Increasing disaffection can be expected if political elites continue to neglect long-running problems.

“The immediate issues were the catalyst that caused social discontent with the structural problems to boil over. This led to protests on issues such as health, education, poverty and food insecurity.”

 **EILEEN NG FÁBREGA**  
Panamanian Chamber of Social Development

### PANAMA: AFTER PROTESTS, WILL THE GOVERNMENT KEEP ITS PROMISES?

High food and fuel prices sparked a national strike led by Indigenous movements that brought Ecuador to a halt in June. There was **violence** on both sides, and protests only ended when the government agreed to meet several demands, such as fuel price cuts and limits on mining. But the government has a history of renegeing on its promises, and further protests can be guaranteed if it doesn't do better this time.

“The protests originated in a situation of national crisis – an economic, insecurity and employment crisis – that has dragged on for several years. In previous mobilisation processes, the demands of social movements, particularly of Indigenous ones, have not been answered by the authorities. Exhaustion and attrition have led to new uprisings and demonstrations.”

 **MAURICIO ALARCÓN**  
Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo, Ecuador

### ECUADOR: PROTESTS OVER OR ONLY ON HOLD?

In Ghana worsening economic conditions gave rise to a new protest group, Arise Ghana. Like Indonesia and Panama, the country's international reputation is one of relative socio-political stability and success. But with inflation at **37 per cent** and a third of people under 30 unemployed, many lived on the edge even before the government introduced new taxes, including a levy on electronic money transfers. The levy caused protests in June and rising food costs sparked further protests in November. June's protests brought reports of **multiple injuries** in clashes between police and protesters, with police using rubber bullets, teargas and water cannon.

### SRI LANKA IN MELTDOWN

Economic crisis was on the cards in Sri Lanka anyway, and people knew where the blame lay. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had systematically restricted dissent and eliminated checks on his power, which allowed him to make increasingly high-handed economic decisions, including an array of debt-funded infrastructure projects. A ban on chemical fertilisers suddenly introduced in 2021 caused a food crisis in 2022. Normal life ground to a halt, with lengthy power cuts and people going without meals. Inflation hit record levels and the currency collapsed. Little wonder

so many took to the streets in months of protest that brought together a movement united across the country's normal lines of division.

“These protests, largely led by young people and students, represent a political awakening of various groups of our nation. Many women, older people, LGBTQI+ people, lawyers, religious clergy, artists and well-known people have been part of the protests. They have enriched the spirit of defiance, resistance, courage and creativity unleashed by youth, on an unprecedented scale.”

 **RUKI FERNANDO**  
Human rights activist, Sri Lanka

Protest pressure told when President Rajapaksa resigned in July. But instead of what people demanded – a new constitution with proper checks and balances to hold political leaders accountable – all they got was a new president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, drawn from the old regime and continuing its draconian ways. He imposed a **state of emergency** and gave security forces additional powers to suppress protest and **arrest dissenters**. The result was a violent **crackdown** characterised by numerous detentions and torture as people continued to demand a fresh start.

### SRI LANKA: CHANGE FALLS SHORT OF PROTEST DEMANDS



People protest against the government outside Prime Minister Edi Rama's office in Tirana, Albania, 12 November 2022.

Photo by Florion Goga/Reuters via Gallo Images

## IMPACTS OF WAR ACROSS EUROPE

The impacts of the war in Ukraine, close to home across Europe, gave rise to protests as winter approached. In November, tens of thousands **took to the streets in Albania** in protest at the high cost of living on top of deep government corruption.

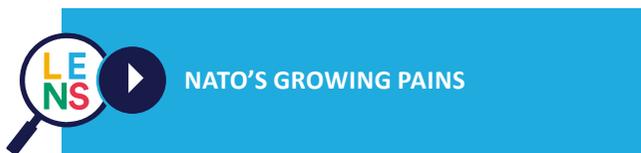
Challenges were particularly acute in Moldova, a country heavily reliant on cheap Russian gas and Soviet-era electricity infrastructure across the border in Ukraine. This left it **vulnerable** to Russia's decision to **slash** gas supplies and its air strikes on Ukraine's power grid.

In 2021 Moldovans angered Russia by electing a pro-European government, kicking out corrupt pro-Russian politicians. The new government has accused Russia of waging 'hybrid warfare'. When **thousands protested** in September, many called for friendlier relations with Russia to ease the economic pressure. Rallies were **organised** by the main opposition pro-Russian party, led by an exiled convicted fraudster seeking to capitalise on deep public worry about soaring inflation and interest rates. In February 2023 the government **quit**, blaming a crisis caused by Russia's aggression.

Similar issues were at play in the Czech Republic, where a protest of around 70,000 came in September as a result of the **convergence** of far-right and far-left parties. As in Moldova, protesters demanded the resignation of the pro-Europe prime minister and a shift in policy towards neutrality, ending sanctions against Russia and reaching a new agreement on gas supplies. Some protesters carried banners with **anti-European Union and anti-NATO** messages.

This was far from the only protest focusing on NATO, which became politically more prominent as Finland and Sweden moved towards joining the alliance. Ahead of the NATO summit held in Spain in June, over **2,000 people** mobilised against what they called 'NATO's war against Russia', with some waving Soviet flags.

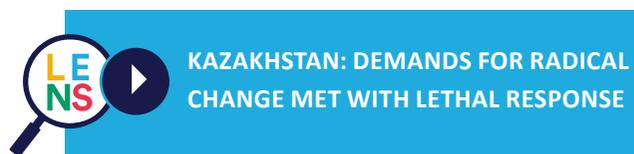
All these instances pointed to the potential for economic anger to be co-opted by regressive forces. There may be more of this to come, not least if people see vital social spending slashed while military budgets grow. But in the main, anti-NATO protests have been sparse, and the anti-NATO content of economic protests has been systematically inflated by **Russia's disinformation machinery**. Disinformation **tried**, for example, to make out that a Belgian **trade union march** on the cost of living was an anti-NATO protest.



## VIOLENT RESPONSES

As the rising cost of living drove protests even in heavily repressed countries where they rarely take place, state violence was often the default response. This was particularly the case when protests made demands for deeper political and social change. Many governments slurred protesters as foreign agents bent on unrest, choosing to deny the domestic reality of economic strife.

In Kazakhstan, rare protests erupted in January when the government suddenly withdrew transport fuel subsidies. Mobilisation continued, focused on corruption, poverty and inequality, even after the government reintroduced price caps. Refusing to countenance change, the government declared protests to be acts of foreign-instigated terrorism and used lethal force against them, aided by Russian troops. Over 200 people were reported **killed** and many more were **detained** and ill-treated. Nobody has been held accountable.



Deadly violence in Iran was deployed not only against the **movement for women's rights** but also in response to protests triggered by food subsidy cuts and the collapse of a building in May. As protesters pointed to the deeper issues of mismanagement and corruption, the government, as in Kazakhstan, vilified them as agents of foreign powers, enabling lethal repression.



Violence came on both sides during protests sparked by high inflation in Sierra Leone in August. Multiple civilians and police officers were killed in protest violence, with security forces reportedly using live

ammunition. Again, rather than acknowledge their legitimate concerns, the government repeatedly vilified protesters and characterised protests as acts of terrorism.

**The response raised concerns about how police are trained to handle protests. The police have not sat down with interest groups to see how future protests can be organised. There are legitimate fears that given Sierra Leone's recent history of violence, high youth unemployment and economic hardship, protests can easily get out of control and become very difficult to handle."**

**ANDREW LAVALI**  
Institute for Governance Reform, Sierra Leone



Lebanon, where people have **long mobilised** against dysfunctional governance, corruption and a failing economy that leaves many struggling to secure the basics, also saw instances of violence against protesters. In one case, army personnel and riot police **assaulted** university professors during a sit-in protest. Things have got so bad in Lebanon that many people stormed banks to steal their own deposits: they were driven to such desperate acts by strict capital controls, despite which political and economic elites have smuggled fortunes out of the country. Further mobilisation for systemic change, including the replacement of the political class, is guaranteed, even in the face of violent repression.

Lebanese depositors are desperate because their savings have been frozen, so they cannot withdraw them from banks. The way they are being mistreated is outrageous. If a depositor simply complains loudly, bank staff call the police on them.

 **ALAA KHORCHID**  
Depositors' Outcry Association, Lebanon



## LEBANON: PEOPLE TAKE ON THE BANKS

### WORKERS ORGANISING

In a dire economic context, workers in many countries took collective action to demand pay increases and better work conditions. Time and again, strikes were a key means by which unionised workers sought to improve their bargaining power. Among the many taking action were workers in crucial sectors such as education, healthcare and energy.

In October, striking French oil workers **blockaded** refineries, leading to widespread **fuel shortages**. They targeted oil giants Exxon and TotalEnergies, like all such corporations beneficiaries of gargantuan profits due to the Ukraine crisis, paying shareholders huge dividends while their workers struggled with high prices. Similar demands were made by **Norway's** striking offshore oil workers in July.

In September, a one-day national strike in Uruguay saw over a million people **mobilise** against wage cuts and neoliberal policies. Tens of thousands

took part in a similar **one-day strike** in Greece in November. In Italy, neoliberal deregulation was a focus: taxi drivers **went on strike** in July over plans to liberalise the sector to allow **aggressive** new companies such as Uber into the market.

Nigeria was home to an **eight-month strike** by university lecturers that ended with the government **making some concessions** but leaving key demands unresolved. Worried by the loss of almost a year of education, even when they saw lecturers' demands as legitimate, students started a movement calling on the two sides to come together and politicians to prioritise the right to education ahead of Nigeria's February 2023 election.

Both the federal government and the union at some point made us feel like our education doesn't matter. Every time teachers go on strike, we become passive spectators, just waiting on them to decide when to end it. We had to remind them that we matter too, and that it is our education and future that is at stake."

 **BENEDICTA CHISOM**  
Student and campaigner, Nigeria



## NIGERIA: STUDENTS HOPE TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL

### A REPRESSIVE RESPONSE

Because labour disputes challenged economic power, states often tried to suppress them. A lengthy

dispute in Zimbabwe centred on declining teacher's pay, something that has caused many to quit state education. When a national teachers' strike started in February, the government's response was to **suspend** over 135,000 teachers without pay.

It was the turn of Zimbabwe's nurses to **strike** in June over poor salaries and work conditions. But in January 2023, as a further strike was planned, the government passed a law **banning** essential health workers from striking for more than three days.

The UK made a similar move, reacting to widespread strikes by **announcing** a proposed law to force workers in several sectors to observe minimum service levels.

When Hungary's teachers went on strike in January, the far-right government **flexed** its sweeping pandemic laws to bring it to an end. In September five teachers were **sacked** for staging acts of civil disobedience.

It was a similar story in Togo when teachers went on strike in March. The government declared the strike illegal and **sacked** 137 teachers. Further sackings followed another strike in April. Three trade union leaders were arrested following a student protest to demand the return of dismissed teachers. The government also introduced further union restrictions in the labour code.

In Vanuatu the authorities **denied permission** for a teachers' strike in early 2022 and said anyone taking part would be disciplined.

In Cambodia, a once-strong trade union movement

has been **systematically suppressed** by the authoritarian government. During the pandemic, over 1,300 NagaWorld casino company workers were laid off. A strike that began in late 2021 to demand reinstatements was declared illegal in early 2022. Striking workers were **detained and charged**, with eight held for **two months** in pretrial detention. Workers were also assaulted and sexually harassed.

Standing up for labour rights brought significant risks in Bangladesh too. In February, when several garment workers were fired, people **protested** by blocking a road. Police responded with batons and sound grenades, injuring at least 20 people.

In other countries the weapon of choice was vilification: El Salvador's labour minister **accused** people taking part in International Labour Day marches in May of supporting criminal gangs.

## LABOUR RIGHTS: KEY VICTORIES

In 2022, a landmark moment came in Uzbekistan: its cotton industry was declared free from systemic child labour and forced labour. At one point an estimated two million children and half a million adults were forced to process the country's annual harvest.

This was a major achievement for civil society campaigning, which included advocacy to urge companies not to use Uzbek cotton until forced and child labour were eliminated. The next step will be to stop forced labour in neighbouring Turkmenistan.

**We have remained convinced of the importance of centring our campaigning around the demands of affected workers and civil society and the need to be guided by independent monitoring and reporting. And we have learned that advocacy for labour and human rights is a marathon, not a sprint."**



**ALLISON GILL**  
Global Labour Justice – International Labour Rights Forum



**CIVIL SOCIETY CAMPAIGNING  
ACHIEVES FORCED LABOUR VICTORY  
IN UZBEKISTAN**

Other victories came in India, where a two-year dispute ended in February with Shahi Exports, India's largest garment company, **agreeing** to pay around US\$4 million in unpaid wages. This major high-street supplier faced international campaigning over its refusal to pay annual cost of living increases.

In April, the **Dindigul Agreement** was struck: a major clothing company, Eastman Exports, agreed to eliminate workplace gender-based violence and harassment, following talks with unions, campaigning groups and the high street chain it supplies, H&M.

**This is a historic labour rights win for around 5,000 mostly female Dalit workers, who are placed at the bottom of India's caste system. This agreement is the first of its kind in India, the only one to cover spinning mills and the first to include explicit protections against caste-based discrimination, a problem that intensified during the pandemic."**



**JEEVA M**  
Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union

## TAKING ON THE BIG BRANDS

Stakes were raised at the biggest employers. Amazon workers, now a 1.6 million global workforce, continued to defy a barrage of the company's intensive **anti-unionisation tactics** to take collective action and seek union recognition. April saw a breakthrough in New York with the first-ever successful union recognition **vote** by Amazon warehouse workers. The year also saw several strikes over pay and workplace conditions. Workers **went on strike** in seven locations across Germany in May. A warehouse in the UK saw **walkout** protests in August over a derisory pay offer. On one of the company's biggest sale days in November, warehouse workers in **over 40 countries** protested and held strikes.

It's a similar story at Starbucks, with a burgeoning of union recognition at hundreds of US branches, in the teeth of the company's opposition. In November workers at over a hundred stores **went on strike** for better pay and work conditions.

At both Amazon and Starbucks, multiple people **claim** they've been fired on flimsy pretexts in retaliation for organising, and Starbucks is alleged to have singled out unionised outlets for **closure**. Starbucks was found to have **violated** labour laws by refusing to recognise a union following a vote at a Seattle store, while in November, a court **ordered** Amazon to read out a public notice at its unionised New York warehouse assuring workers it will 'cease and desist' from retaliation.

Workers in other companies, including in UK and US Apple stores, have also started to **unionise**. The experience of working under the pandemic made

many people question old assumptions about what employers can demand and what a healthy work-life balance is. Big companies shouldn't expect to have it all their own way anymore.

■ ■ We are hopeful that the grassroots efforts driven by workers who are tired of their exploitative and unjust working conditions have set in motion a push towards transformative change for improved conditions for hourly wage workers to include dignity and respect in the workplace."

➤ **THERESA HAAS**  
Workers United, USA

**LENS** ▶ **STARBUCKS WORKERS:  
PARTNERS IN SHARED SUCCESS?**

In the global north, progress continued towards balancing relationships with work through civil society advocacy for a four-day workweek. In 2022, the biggest-ever test of the concept, a six-month four-day workweek trial involving 70 companies, took place in the UK. Many companies that took part **decided** to make the switch permanent. Most found productivity had either increased or stayed the same.

■ ■ The disruption to societal and workplace norms by the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the potential for very different models of work, for both workers and employers, and reinforced the need to rethink old, established patterns."

➤ **HAZEL GAVIGAN**  
4 Day Week Global



Christian Smalls, head of the Amazon Labor Union, takes part in a pro-union protest. New York, USA, 5 September 2022.

Photo by Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

## ONLINE GIANTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT FOR DISINFORMATION

When it comes to questions of corporate responsibility, much attention focused on big tech brands.

None was in the spotlight more than Twitter following billionaire Elon Musk's takeover. His maverick approach proved bad financial news: in January 2023 it was reported that revenue had dropped by **40 per cent** as over 500 advertisers had paused their spend. Musk's self-professed **free speech absolutism** has seen **hate speech** and **disinformation** soar, with once-banned far-right figures allowed to **return**. Musk himself shared a far-right **conspiracy theory**.

Moderation systems have been dismantled, many staff laid off, including the entire **human rights team**, and Twitter's Trust and Safety Council, a key advisory group drawn from civil society, was **dissolved**. But Musk's free speech commitment evidently had limits: in December some journalists who'd reported on Musk and Twitter found their accounts temporarily **suspended**.

There's a tech crunch underway: major companies have laid off **over 70,000 staff** in the last year. That means less moderation and more opportunities for disinformation and hate speech to thrive. But it's about more than axing jobs: disinformation flourishes because controversy is good for business. Conflict keeps people engaged. Algorithms are designed to feed people endless streams of increasingly extreme content that reinforces pre-existing beliefs.

There's a dissonance between the important role played in public discourse and political debate by platforms like Twitter and the ability

of corporate owners like Musk to set and rewrite the rules. A more informed debate is needed about how online expression can be protected while hate speech and disinformation can be guarded against.



### TWITTER: TAKEOVER TALK SPARKS HATE SPEECH

Spotify, dominant player in audio streaming, was also the centre of controversy in 2022. One of its most lucrative podcasts, the Joe Rogan Experience, was accused of repeatedly sharing COVID-19 disinformation. When some artists threatened to pull their work from the platform, the company took steps to clarify what constitutes disinformation. But the issue raised the question of how responsible online platforms are or can be for the content they share when it has harmful impacts. Market-dominant companies like Spotify have a special responsibility to act with care.



### SPOTIFY: POWER BRINGS RESPONSIBILITIES



### THE FOUR-DAY WORKWEEK: THE FUTURE OF WORK?

## TOWARDS A TRANSNATIONAL TREATY

Once again the year has made clear that big businesses need to be held to account and can't be left to regulate themselves. Many of the rights violations civil society works to challenge result from unaccountable private sector actions and are enabled by the sway big business holds over political decision-makers. This is why civil society has long sought to develop an international treaty to hold large corporations to fundamental human rights standards.

The process to develop a treaty began in 2014 and its eighth negotiating session was held in October 2022. The process is open-ended, but since every day without a treaty is another day of impunity, civil society is pushing for states to meet a deadline of 2025.

The current draft shows civil society's influence, including by acknowledging the rights of excluded groups such as women, Indigenous people and children. But many in civil society are concerned about recent attempts to weaken the text and are pushing for clear rules, including on the mechanisms by which businesses will be held to account, offenders will be penalised and victims of violations will be heard.

The uneven pattern of state buy-in and participation poses a major challenge. Consistently, global south states have broadly backed a strong treaty and global north states – among them states that claim to make human rights central to their foreign policy – have voted against or pushed for a weaker agreement with low compliance standards. Latin

American states are participating heavily but African states are little involved.

Despite impressive civil society coalition-building and advocacy, limited scope for influence is also a challenge. But this treaty is too important to be left to states and businesses. Civil society's continued engagement – bringing forward the voices of those most affected by rights violations, such as women, Indigenous peoples and other excluded groups – will be key if an ambitious treaty is to result.

 I would expect a pretty good text, which in some ways reflects the character of the process, which has included a very strong civil society and social movements. From my perspective, the process has been sustained not only by the commitment of states to negotiate, but also by the impetus of civil society and dialogue among all involved."



**FERNANDA HOPENHAYM**  
UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights



AS DIFFICULT AS IT IS NECESSARY:  
THE PROCESS TOWARDS A BINDING  
BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY

## TAXATION IN THE SPOTLIGHT

There's another area where international rules could make a difference. In November, African states succeeded in pushing through a UN General Assembly resolution to begin intergovernmental talks towards a tax convention. The UN currently

has no role in setting global tax rules, with the space claimed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the network of 38 of the world's richest economies. The OECD sets rules to the advantage of wealthy states rather than in the interest of the world as a whole.

The resolution was, predictably, strongly opposed by many global north states; the US government tried and failed to water it down. But it had the **support** of many in civil society who have been urging change for years.

Campaigners are calling for much greater accountability in the usually opaque tax affairs of transnational companies, which result in an estimated **US\$483 billion** a year lost in potential tax revenues. They want an agreement on a global common minimum corporate tax threshold to stop the race to the bottom where states compete to attract businesses by offering the lowest rates of tax, starving public coffers of revenue that could be used to meet public needs. This is something the OECD has **failed** to make progress on. The resolution could open the door to the development of a UN tax body. Civil society will keep engaging to try to make it happen.

## A BROKEN SYSTEM

The cost of living crisis is just the latest manifestation of an economic system that doesn't work for most people. It's a system that benefits a few but impoverishes multitudes, that throws up periodic economic crises of its own making and seems incapable of helping humanity navigate crises such

as the pandemic and the impacts of conflicts such as Russia's war.

During the pandemic, states in the global north intervened on a massive scale to protect industries and save jobs. But large companies still do everything they can to avoid paying adequate wages and taxes, in both the global north and the global south. Some profited hugely from the pandemic – not just medical and pharmaceutical companies, but other such as home delivery services, many of which rely on a model of low wages and minimal labour rights.

Russia's war has been just yet another opportunity for the fossil fuel giants, any number of which have banked record profits. At a time when fossil fuel companies should be repurposing or closing down, they're booming, and much of their loot is being handed over to the already wealthy, accompanied by greenwashing but no serious transition away from fossil fuels. Even windfall taxes on excessive profits have been controversial and applied only patchily. Meanwhile millions have faced daily misery due to unaffordable prices, forced to make horrendous choices between eating and heating. Those that face the worst burden are the people already most denied power, such as women, young people and minorities.

It's a little wonder many are now making the connection between the great scourges of unfair economies and worsening climate change. It's increasingly clear that wealthy elites are **disproportionately** causing greenhouse gas emissions. An economic system that can't seem to work without emissions and extraction is broken. But at the same time, struggling people necessarily protest when programmes such



People protest during the World Economic Forum annual meeting, demanding a climate tax on the rich. Davos, Switzerland, 15 January 2023.

Photo by Fabrice Coffrini/AFP via Getty Images

as fuel subsidies are withdrawn. Alternatives are needed where the polluter rather than the poorest people pay, and where transitions meet the test of both economic and social justice.

Fossil fuel companies aren't the only ones booming. Oxfam **research** published in January 2023 showed that during these times of crisis upon crisis, the richest just kept getting richer. Every crisis is just another opportunity, because systems are structured to work for the wealthy. But as this becomes ever more blatant, economic inequality is undermining political legitimacy.

People see their politicians rubbing shoulders with super-wealthy elites at events like the World Economic Forum. They're sometimes drawn directly from that elite, with the same wealth and reluctance to pay tax, or at the very least, are anxious to placate the super-rich. It's little wonder people are turfing out incumbents at [election after election](#) and some are listening to the siren voices of populists who promise change.

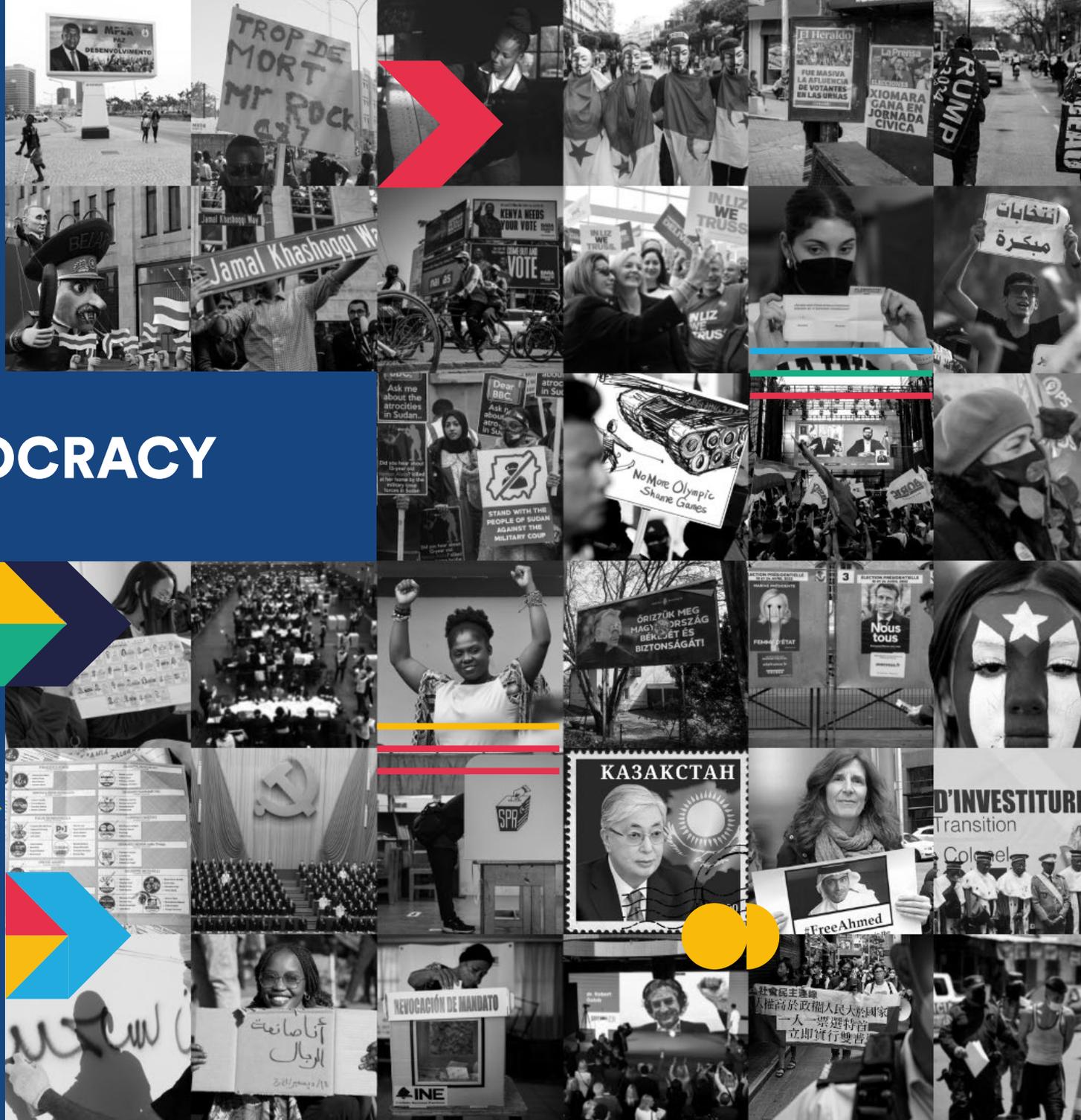
Even some very wealthy people have recognised the system is broken and in January 2023 **made a call** to pay more tax. More taxation for those who can afford it, including emergency taxes on wealth, would be a start. But many will keep questioning a system that enabled a tiny minority to get so rich in the first place while leaving many struggling to secure the basics. Civil society must urgently engage with these questions, and make sure that legitimate anger isn't harnessed by regressive forces.

## 3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 Civil society should critique the structural flaws in the current global economic model that benefits a few while leaving many vulnerable to crisis. Areas for advocacy could include progressive taxation, such as windfall and wealth taxes, social protection floors, universal basic incomes, union recognition and more effective business regulation.
- 2 With global military expenditures slated to rise, including in response to current conflicts and global power battles, new campaigns are needed to ensure that increased military spending doesn't divert public funds from the social policies needed to protect the most excluded and vulnerable groups.
- 3 Civil society engagement with decision makers on climate policies should focus on ensuring a just transition that meets the test of both economic and social justice. Civil society efforts should focus on ensuring that moves to cleaner modes of energy production and consumption enable the creation of high-quality jobs and are accompanied by efforts to safeguard people from economic shocks.



# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY





Democracy remains contested and subject to pushback around the world. In some countries in 2022 democratic forces regained ground in the face of authoritarian threats. But no long-running autocracy made significant steps towards democracy and there were no handovers from military forces to civilian rule. Some deeply flawed democracies regressed further. Authoritarian regimes with broad international reach, notably China and Russia, acted as powerful international supporters of the denial of democratic freedoms.

Wherever elections were free and fair, the strongest global pattern was one of rejection of incumbency as people sought political novelty, embracing alternatives that promised a break with establishment politics many view as a failure. In making these switches, people hoped for solutions to longstanding problems that their political systems have proved unable to solve, such as insecurity, corruption, poor public services and economic inequality.

Sometimes this rejection of incumbency led to victories for progressive candidates, while other times it meant a regressive turn. Either way, victories often represent less of an endorsement of a particular political position than a verdict on

ineffective and disappointing incumbents. As a result, newly elected governments may have weak mandates. This means that where progressive turns have opened up opportunities for civil society, there's no guarantee these will last. In the many countries where people are at the end of their tether, further failures could lead to a loss of legitimacy not only of those in power but of democracy itself.

### DEMOCRACY AND DISINFORMATION

Disinformation operations played a huge role in elections and in distorting public discourse across the board. Disinformation had an influence on Chile's referendum, which resulted in the rejection of a progressive constitution designed by the most inclusive process in the country's history. It fuelled attacks on women's rights in South Korea's election, as the winning candidate appealed to disaffected young men by conferring legitimacy in once-fringe myths that men are discriminated against. It also left its mark in Brazil's elections, on which former two-time leftist president Lula da Silva narrowly defeated the incumbent far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, following a polarised campaign in which he was forced to deny accusations he'd made a 'pact with the devil'.



CHILE'S CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS:  
BACK TO SQUARE ONE?



SOUTH KOREAN ELECTION: WOMEN'S  
RIGHTS THE BIGGEST LOSER



BRAZIL: WORLD AWAITS PIVOTAL  
PRESIDENTIAL RUNOFF VOTE

In the Philippines, disinformation enabled the resounding victory of Ferdinand Marcos, son and namesake of a brutal former dictator, backed as vice president by the daughter of the outgoing leader, an authoritarian president whose 'war on drugs' claimed tens of thousands of lives. While competition was far from fair and vote-buying played a role, the outcome owes much to an aggressive, long-term disinformation operation that rewrote history, convincing many that the dictatorship era was a time of prosperity and

security. Attacks on civil society have **continued** under the new administration.

“ I fear in a few months or years we will be living under a dictatorship. Marcos may even be able to stay in power for as long as he wants. It’s very scary because the human rights violations that happened during his father’s dictatorship are not even settled yet. More human rights violations are likely to happen.”

 **MARINEL UBALDO**  
Living Laudato Si’ Philippines

### PHILIPPINES: DEMOCRACY IN MOURNING

In country after country, disinformation shared and accelerated by social media normalised extremism and fuelled real-life violence. It can be expected to continue to pose a major threat to democracy in the years to come.

## EXTREMISM NORMALISED

Anti-rights forces consolidated their reign in Hungary, whose authoritarian leader, Viktor Orbán, triumphed in April 2022 despite facing a united opposition and a campaign focusing on his close links with Putin. But another effort to mobilise a broad-based opposition to vote out a populist leader was successful in neighbouring Slovenia, when Prime Minister Janez Janša was defeated by a new party promising to respect the rule of law, uphold civic freedoms and lead a transition to a greener society.

### HUNGARY’S ELECTION A GRIM DAY FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

### FRESH HOPE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: RIGHT-WING POPULIST DEFEATED IN SLOVENIA

Extremist political forces still however pressed ahead elsewhere. Sweden’s September election, following a campaign dominated by crime and immigration, saw the far-right Sweden Democrats, once on the political fringes, come second. The new coalition government that formed depends on their support. That same month, the Brothers of Italy, a far-right party that sprang from the neofascist movement, came first in Italy’s election to dominate the new government.

“ Hate speech and disinformation played a significant role during the campaign. Meloni’s entire propaganda is based on ultraconservative beliefs that she pushes by instrumentalising half-truths, a distortion of the facts and outright lies.”

 **OIZA Q OBASUYI**  
Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights

### ITALY: TRIUMPH OF THE FAR RIGHT

### SWEDEN’S FAR RIGHT RISES

In November, Israel’s fifth election in two-and-a-half years saw former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu regain power after a spell in opposition. He did so by cultivating links with far-right politicians, resulting in the most extreme ultranationalist government in Israel’s history. Now he’s pressing ahead with moves to dismantle judicial checks and balances on government power.

### ISRAEL: MOST EXTREME GOVERNMENT EVER ON THE CARDS

In many more places, extremist forces won in a less obvious but equally damaging way: by entering the mainstream and shifting the political centre. This often occurred as mainstream politicians adopted their rhetoric to win or shore up their support. This means extreme political forces can win even when their candidates lose, as established parties turn their proposals into policy.

Examples abound of the normalisation of extremist discourse, whether out of ideological or opportunistic motivations. Even in Portugal, a country long considered immune to such appeals, the January election saw far-right discourse embraced in electoral politics. In France’s presidential election, centrist candidates, President Emmanuel Macron included, competed to look the most anti-migrant in response to the threat of rising far-right challenger Marine Le Pen. While Le Pen lost the April runoff, she recorded the highest-ever far-right vote – and succeeded in entrenching racism and xenophobia in mainstream political discourse.



### PORTUGAL: CONTINUITY COMES AS A SURPRISE



### A CLOSE CALL FOR FRENCH DEMOCRACY

The problem transcends electoral politics: acts and threats of violence by people radicalised into extremism have become a growing problem in multiple countries, from Canada and the USA to Germany and New Zealand. Opposition to pandemic measures has often been the entry point for people to embrace conspiracy theories, but the phenomenon will outlive the pandemic: many other issues can fulfil similar functions, from abortion and trans rights to climate change.

In New Zealand, **protests** sparked by temporary vaccine mandates in February 2022 became a magnet for extremists expressing a wide variety of grievances and using increasingly violent rhetoric. Among those drawn in were people vehemently opposed to gun control policies introduced in 2019 in the aftermath of an unprecedented deadly white supremacist attack on two mosques.



### FAR-RIGHT THREATS SPARKED BY PANDEMIC DENIAL

New Zealand's protesters found inspiration in the truckers' blockade in Ottawa, Canada that began



A supporter awaits the arrival of Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa at an election rally in Lisbon, Portugal on 28 January 2022.

Photo by Horacio Villalobos/Corbis via Getty Images

the previous month. A protest against proposed mandatory vaccinations for truckers crossing the Canada-US border quickly grew to accommodate an array of conspiracy theories and far-right views, receiving ready ideological and financial support from US-based Trump supporters. Some were prepared to move from violent words to deeds: an armed group connected to the protests was found plotting to kill police officers.



### CANADA: TRUCKER PROTESTS SET OFF ALARMS

### BRAZIL: INSTITUTIONS UNDER ATTACK

In Brazil, a tight presidential run-off in October ended four years of a far-right government that wreaked havoc on the environment, labour and social rights, and the rights of women, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ people.

Bolsonaro, a Trump-like figure who'd long sought to undermine the credibility of the voting system, only belatedly accepted the results, but never really conceded. Protests by his core supporters calling for military intervention grew following the election as he remained silent.

Barely a week after taking office on 1 January 2023, President Lula faced an insurrection by disgruntled Bolsonaro followers, who marched unimpeded for hours to the sites of federal power in the capital, Brasília, tore down fences under

the passive gaze of the police and invaded and ransacked key government sites.

Although Bolsonaro didn't personally direct the insurrection, he set the scene by consistently sowing disinformation, stoking doubts over the integrity of the election and demonising his opponents, making their rule illegitimate in the eyes of many of his supporters.

The Brazilian riots drew obvious parallels with the attack on the US Capitol two years before, but there were differences: in Brazil they were more extensive – they targeted not one but all three branches of government – although mercifully this time nobody was killed. But as in the **USA**, they pointed to the lingering damaging effects of far-right extremism, likely to survive the political leader who unleashed it.



### BRAZIL: CAN THE FAR-RIGHT GENIE BE PUT BACK INTO THE BOTTLE?

### PERSISTENT MILITARY RULE

None of the countries that underwent military coups in recent years – among them **Chad, Guinea, Mali, Myanmar** and **Sudan** – made progress towards civilian rule in 2022. In country after country, long-announced democratic elections were repeatedly postponed and democracy movements were heavily repressed.

“The degradation of the rule of law puts people's everyday life and livelihood at risk. Repression and fundamental rights violations make everyone feel unsafe and spread fear. The junta uses fear as a domination tool.”



**ANONYMOUS CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST**  
Myanmar



### MYANMAR: JUNTA'S ECONOMIC POWER IN THE FIRING LINE

In Guinea, the military junta in power since September 2021 announced its plan to rule for another three years. It followed this unilateral decision with a blanket protest ban and an order **dissolving** a major pro-democracy coalition. When democracy protests went ahead regardless, they ended in deadly violence and the detention of protest leaders. The army made clear it doesn't intend to abide by its Transitional Charter and promises of consultation, and only reluctantly agreed under pressure from the international community to shave a year off its latest timeline.

“The military are savagely repressing citizens who are mobilising for democracy and demanding a frank dialogue to agree on a reasonable timeframe for the return to constitutional order.”



**ABDOULAYE OUMOU SOW**  
National Front for the Defence of the Constitution,  
Guinea



### GUINEA'S MILITARY IN NO HURRY TO RETURN TO THE BARRACKS

In Sudan, the military government in place since October 2021 has been met with fierce resistance and sustained protests. In December an **agreement** was signed between the military and social movements and political parties that is supposed to see a two-year transition towards elections. But Sudan's neighbourhood resistance committees have rejected it and there are concerns that even if the agreement leads to civilian rule – an outcome that can't be taken for granted – it could mean immunity for the military's killings of democracy protesters.

**»»** We are back to the situation that preceded the revolution. We feel that the old regime is back; in fact, the military has started appointing people from the former regime everywhere. Activists, journalists and lawyers are being silenced because power went back to the military.

**»** **NAZIK KABALO**  
Civil society activist, Sudan



### BURKINA FASO: COUP-DRIVEN REGRESSION

In 2022, Burkina Faso experienced deep democratic regression with a double coup.

In January, the military took over, capitalising on people's anger at insecurity in the face of ongoing jihadist insurgency and the failure of the government

to protect them. In September, one army leader replaced another on exactly the same grounds.

As in some countries that have experienced coups, these recent moves have been popular with many, including some segments of civil society. The failures of the ousted government caused some to reject the democratic system they invested such hopes in when they **overthrew autocracy** in 2014.

**»»** The view of the recent coup as a significant setback for the democratic transition agenda is not unanimously held among civil society. Additionally, for a major segment of civil society security appears to be a more urgent and priority concern than democracy."

**»** **KOP'EP DABUGAT**  
West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network

Addressing the security situation must be a top priority of any government, not least because of a hunger crisis it has contributed to, with over 630,000 people facing the prospect of starvation and jihadist blockades stopping aid getting where it's most needed.

But democratic accountability is the only way of preventing human rights abuses and holding perpetrators to account when they occur – and as a fresh **crackdown** on media freedoms and the right to protest has made clear, that isn't going to come with military rule.



### LONG-TERM AUTHORITARIANISM

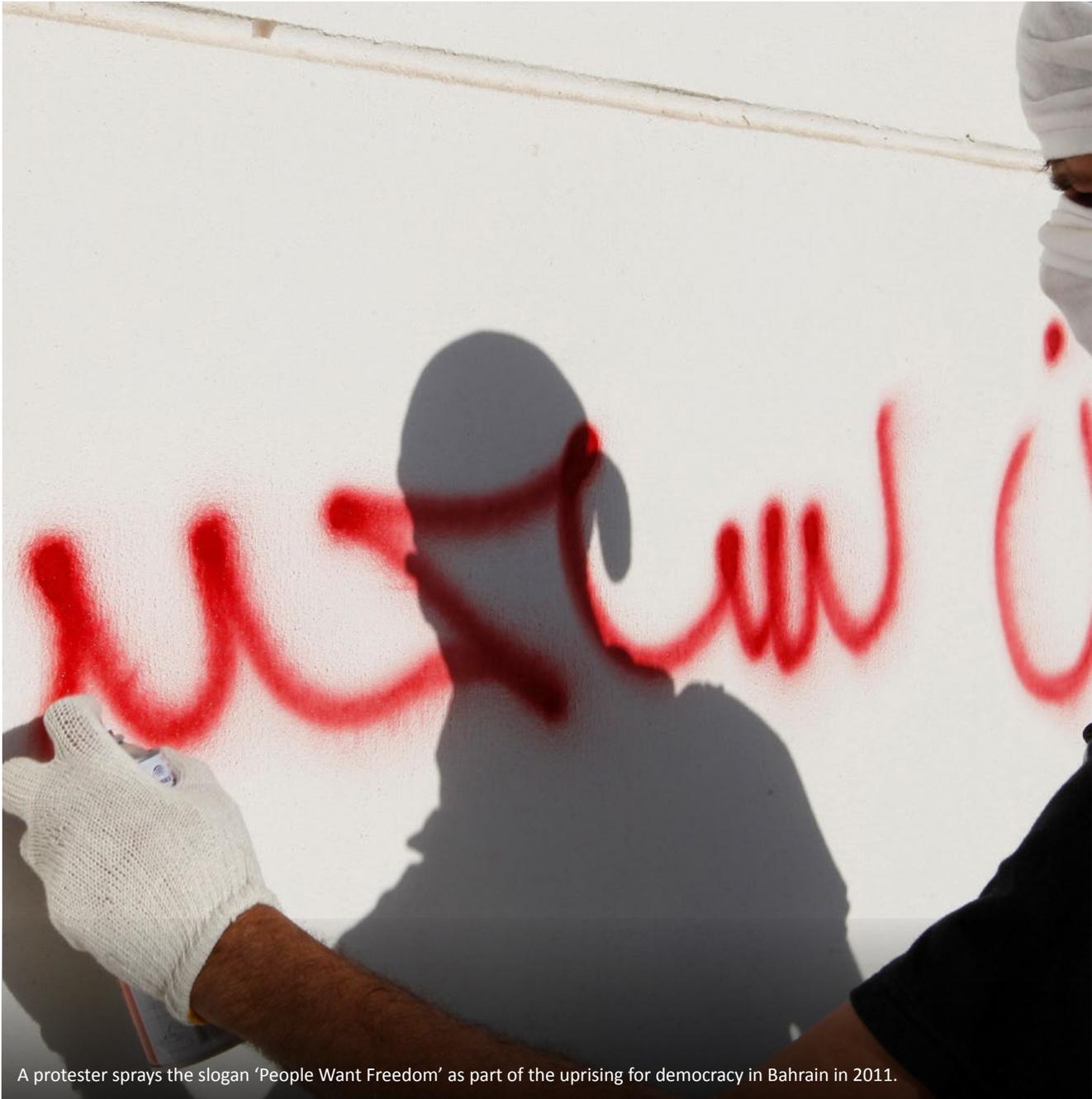
Longstanding autocracies saw no shift towards democracy in 2022 – although many held ceremonial votes in an attempt to acquire a varnish of legitimacy.

In Russia's satellite state of Belarus, a constitutional referendum held amid intense repression extended the powers of authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko. In Turkmenistan, a blatantly fraudulent election was used by the president to hand over power to his son while continuing to rule behind the scenes. In neighbouring Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev won a second term through a vote as flawed as all the country's past elections, running virtually unopposed after suppressing rare protests with **lethal violence**.

**»»** Kazakhstan needs political reform. I do not expect the government to hold democratic elections anytime soon, but I am concerned about the space for independent media and journalists, for the growth of a democratic opposition and for the development of civil society."

**»** **YEVGENIY ZHOVTIS**  
Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law





A protester sprays the slogan 'People Want Freedom' as part of the uprising for democracy in Bahrain in 2011.

Photo by Hamad I Mohammed/Reuters via Gallo Images

## TURKMENISTAN: TYRANNY MUTATES INTO DYNASTY

Similarly in Bahrain, a sham parliamentary election was held in which no members of the opposition were allowed to run, all expressions of dissent remained repressed and those daring to question this state of affairs were kept in prison.

“The only role of this election, like those of 2014 and 2018, is to provide a veneer of democracy. It’s make-believe. But let’s be clear: it is also an opportunity for us to work on our own renewal, to locate openings and fissures and pry them open.”

 **JAWAD FAIROOZ**  
Salam for Democracy and Human Rights

## BAHRAIN: ELECTION WITHOUT FREEDOMS FALLS FAR SHORT OF DEMOCRACY

While there was scant possibility of real change in these countries, it seemed possible in Angola. But limited hopes were dashed when President João Lourenço, head of the party that has ruled for almost half a century, was re-elected in August. On a playing field heavily tilted in his favour, amid unprecedented abstention and claims of fraud, Lourenço achieved only 51 per cent of the vote. While power remained in the ruling party’s hands, the narrow margin of victory kept hopes of change alive.

Chances for real democracy in Angola are quite low due to the level of electoral corruption practised by the party-state."

 **PASCOAL BAPTISTINY**  
MBAKITA, Angola

 **ANGOLA: THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION THAT NEVER WAS**

A glimmer of hope also came in crisis-ridden Lebanon, where several independent candidates managed to win parliamentary seats in the May election. The newly elected members of parliament, remarkably younger, more female and more diverse than established politicians, channelled the energy of the **2019 mass protest movement** to pose a new challenge to the traditional sectarian distribution of power.

This election has brought to the forefront new voices speaking about rights and pointing the way forward out of the current crisis."

 **LINA ABOU HABIB**  
Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, Lebanon

 **ELECTIONS BRING A BREATH OF FRESH AIR TO LEBANESE POLITICS**

**CHINA: REGRESSION BEYOND BORDERS**

When further restrictions on individual freedoms scarcely seemed possible in China, President Xi Jinping launched a further **crackdown** ahead of the Communist Party's National Congress in October, which confirmed him as head of the party-state for at least five more years. Censorship and **repression** of all forms of expression were ramped up to eliminate any competition for the unswerving loyalty the leader and party demand of their subjects.

 **CHINA'S XI JINPING AT THE PINNACLE OF POWER**

Unexpectedly, however, a rare wave of protests erupted in November against the government's stifling response to the pandemic, based on strict social control. While it unleashed its usual **repressive tactics** against protests, the government also did something unusual: it backed down and eased its pandemic rules. For once, Xi didn't look in charge of the situation, posing the question of whether Chinese people will keep testing the limits of freedom.

 **CHINA: PANDEMIC PROTESTS FORCE A RARE RETREAT**

But the risks of doing so were made clear by the **continuing repression** of Hong Kong's once flourishing democracy movement. Its leaders are

now in jail or exile, and the Chinese government is making Hong Kong indistinguishable from the mainland, unilaterally ripping up the guarantees made when British rule ended in 1997. Through a manoeuvre that qualified as an election in name only, in April 2022 a single candidate for chief executive was endorsed by a tiny, handpicked electorate sworn to fealty. The unsurprising winner, John Lee, is the security chief who oversaw the brutal suppression of democracy protests.

China also ramped up the rhetoric about Taiwan, making clear that force may be used to make it a part of China – a core goal of Xi's political project. Taiwan is a flourishing democracy and economic success story, and most of its people have no desire to lose their status as an independent nation.

In Hong Kong, China cracked down hard on civic movements and arrested people for even having a podcast. It shut down all forms of civic expression, including news agencies. China will do to Taiwan what it did to Hong Kong."

 **MIN-HSUAN WU**  
Doublethink Lab, Taiwan

 **TAIWAN IN THE FIRING LINE**

 **HONG KONG: ANOTHER STEP CLOSER TO CHINA**

In the Americas, three authoritarian governments stood out for their efforts to consolidate their rule and protect themselves against any potential challenge.

Following his victory in the farcical November 2021 elections, President Daniel Ortega continued turning Nicaragua into a totalitarian wasteland, targeting any form of independent organisation – social, business, religious and educational – and any voice that even slightly diverges from ideological orthodoxy and the cult of its leader. During the year, his government dissolved **more than 3,000** CSOs, almost half the number of registered organisations. Repression drove displacement: **almost 330,000** Nicaraguans are estimated to have left the country in 2022.

In February 2023, the government made an unexpected decision to release 222 political prisoners. It seemed an act as arbitrary as the decision to imprison them in the first place. While the move was welcomed by Nicaraguan civil society and their international allies, there was a sting in the tail: those released were banished and stripped of their nationality and civil and political rights.

 Faced with a lack of legitimacy, the Ortega-Murillo regime has deepened its strategy of annihilating any form of citizen organisation that is not subordinate to its interests."

 **MARÍA TERESA BLANDÓN**  
Feminist Programme La Corriente, Nicaragua

 **NICARAGUA'S CRACKDOWN: A BELEAGUERED REGIME CLUTCHING AT STRAWS?**

Another exodus, but on a much larger scale, has come out of Venezuela, where political repression, allied with corruption and mismanagement, have produced a **complex humanitarian emergency** that millions have fled.

 **VENEZUELA: THE END OF CIVIL SOCIETY AS WE KNOW IT?**

In Cuba, the authoritarian government put every effort into preventing a repeat of the unprecedented protests that rocked the country on **11 July 2021**. All year long, it relentlessly repressed and **criminalised** any expression of dissent, holding hundreds of protesters and activists behind bars, sentencing dozens to long prison terms and rewriting the Penal Code to criminalise every organisational and mobilisation tactic used to express dissent. Not surprisingly, Cubans are also fleeing their country in record numbers.

 Following the protests of 11 July 2021 and their repression, it became clearer than ever that the only three options available to Cubans are prison, exile, or submission."

 **CAROLINA BARRERO**  
Civil society activist, Cuba

 **CUBA: A YEAR ON FROM HISTORIC PRO-DEMOCRACY PROTESTS**

 **CUBA: WHY FLEE PARADISE?**

## DEMOCRACY ERODED FROM WITHIN

Elections are fundamental to democracy—but they're not enough. Democracy between elections relies on multiple means by which people can participate, seek to influence governments, scrutinise state actions and express dissent. But there's a current trend of leaders who could broadly be characterised as popular authoritarians coming to power through free and fair elections only to interpret their victories as a mandate to ride roughshod over constraints on their powers and rule as they please.

In El Salvador, currently under a long-running **repressive** 'state of exception' declared in response to a wave of gang violence, President Nayib Bukele's style of rule has been characterised as '**millennial authoritarian**' in nature, exploiting his social media reach and enduring populist appeal. In September he announced his intent to seek re-election in 2024. His move was enabled by a judicial decision that overran the constitution's explicit ban, taken by a Bukele-appointed Supreme Court following the dismissal of the old court by the Bukele-dominated Legislative Assembly.

Mexico offered another example of an elected leader gaming democratic mechanisms for his own ends: in April, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador bizarrely tried to boost his populist legitimacy by holding a recall referendum on himself. While the ruse backfired – he gathered a large vote from his core supporters but on an extremely low turnout, as most people stayed away to avoid legitimising the manoeuvre – government surveillance and other restrictions on civil society and the media continued. The military has moved into an increased public security role, putting further pressure on civic space.

The government has deepened militarisation not only de facto but also de jure, through the creation of a dense legal and institutional framework, making the trend difficult to reverse. The possible erosion of the military's subordination to civilian power opens up a question mark over the future of democracy."

 **SOFÍA DE ROBINA**  
Centro Prodh, Mexico

 **MEXICO: RECALL REFERENDUM  
RUSE LEAVES NO ONE SATISFIED**

Across the Atlantic in Tunisia, President Kais Saied, who in 2021 dismissed parliament and took control of the judiciary, unilaterally pushed forward a process to rewrite the country's constitution. In July 2022 he rubber-stamped his changes through a constitutional referendum that saw a very low turnout. The new constitution removed checks and balances and downgraded the role of parliament, allowing Saied to further concentrate power. A parliamentary election followed in December under new rules that weakened political parties and fragmented parliament, further consolidating Saied's power – but again a paltry turnout signalled widespread disaffection.

Civil society will continue its pressure and mobilise against any deviations from democracy, given that the new constitution will guarantee the president extensive powers and open the doors for further violations."

 **AMINE GHALI**  
Al Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center, Tunisia

 **TUNISIA: DISMANTLING  
DEMOCRACY, ONE STEP AT A TIME**

## INSTABILITY AND VIOLENCE

Other political systems where democracy was already under strain faced further challenges in 2022. In Papua New Guinea, Prime Minister James Marape retained power following an election in which up to a million voters – a huge portion of the country's nine million population – were unable to vote due to failure to update the electoral roll. The ensuing frustration contributed to violence that left at least 50 people dead.

 **PAPUA NEW GUINEA: ELECTION  
CHAOS POSES INTEGRITY QUESTIONS**

In Peru, Dina Boluarte became the sixth president in six years as she was sworn in to replace President Pedro Castillo after he attempted a 'self-coup' by dissolving Congress. A wave of protests greeted her inauguration and was met with lethal repression that claimed dozens of lives.

Many saw Castillo's dissolution of Congress as a blatant violation of the separation of powers and therefore a presidential coup attempt. But those who pinned their hopes for a better life on Castillo, a leftist from humble origins, saw his removal as a coup, blamed Congress and demanded fresh

elections. These are necessary but on their own won't fix Peru's highly dysfunctional politics, where those elected to govern fail to do so and systematically fail people's expectations.

 **PERU: DEMOCRACY AT  
A CROSSROADS**

Elections were rocky affairs in many countries across the world, characterised by elite disputes over results and outbursts of violence. In Iraq, election-related violence erupted almost a year after the election, as deadlock persisted over the formation of a government. Supporters of populist leader Muqtada al-Sadr, whose party came first in the October 2021 vote, protested following his announcement of his withdrawal from politics. Violent clashes with supporters of rival parties left at least 30 dead.

 **IRAQ: ENDLESS POLITICAL CRISIS  
BENEFITS NO ONE BUT ELITES**

In Kenya, disagreements around the outcome of the 9 August election were solved peacefully and through institutional channels. In contrast with other elections in the past, when disputes dragged on, it took less than a month for the Supreme Court to **confirm** the victory of William Ruto, outgoing deputy president, with just over half of the vote. His opponent, former Prime Minister Raila Odinga, had rejected the results with unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and fraud. While fears of electoral violence

didn't materialise, disaffection signalled by the low turnout is a problem that still needs to be addressed.

People are demotivated from voting because they do not see any change happening as a result of elections. Government corruption is pervasive no matter who is in the government, and economic performance is consistently poor. People are also discouraged from voting when they think their voices do not matter.

 **KEN OGEMBO**  
Siasa Place, Kenya

 **KENYA: A PRESIDENT ELECTED  
— OR PERHAPS NOT?**

Because often the problem is that election losers don't recognise the results, the **most important** development in Fiji was the peaceful transfer of power. Following the December election, Sitiveni Rabuka replaced long-time Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. It's a sign of the shaky foundations of Fijian democracy that both men had previously led coups to oust democratically elected governments. Concerns linger about the Fijian military's willingness to accept political change, not least given its deployment as government formation talks were underway.

 **FIJI'S NEW GOVERNMENT: A LESS  
REPRESSIVE TRAJECTORY?**



People pass by electoral adverts ahead of a campaign rally in Jomo Kenyatta International Stadium in Kisumu, Kenya, on 4 August 2022.

Photo by Ed Ram/Getty Images

At least in Fiji and many other countries people had a chance to vote – which is an opportunity they're having to wait for in Solomon Islands. An election scheduled for 2023 was pushed back to 2024, ostensibly because the government can't afford to host the Pacific Games and hold an election in the same year. The decision, taken by an administration that has built much stronger relations with China, was preceded by **attacks** on media freedoms. It called into question how much the government truly values democracy.



### SOLOMON ISLANDS: DEMOCRACY ON HOLD

## PROGRESSIVE CHANGE

Potentially progressive change was also on the cards from Oceania to the Americas.

In Australia's May parliamentary election, the Labor Party defeated the ruling conservative Liberal-National coalition. The centre-left **government** inaugurated in June included a record number of women and brought the welcome promise of a U-turn on its predecessor's policies of climate denial.



### CHANGE ON THE CARDS IN AUSTRALIA

In the November mid-term elections in the USA, **abortion rights** were high in many voters' minds, helping galvanise the progressive camp around the defence of rights under attack, expressed through a rejection of state-level anti-abortion measures and higher than expected support for the Democratic Party.



### US MIDTERM ELECTIONS: A TEMPORARY RESPITE?

In Malaysia, change resulted from an election that saw a major extension of the franchise, with the voting age lowered to 18 following civil society campaigning. While no party won an outright majority, the process ended with long-time challenger Anwar Ibrahim sworn in as Malaysia's new prime minister. He came in promising reform, including a commitment to roll back **heavy restrictions** on freedom of expression – promises civil society will be urging him to deliver.

“Malaysian politics are dominated by old people. Now for the first time, young voters could be Malaysia's kingmakers. Change started happening even before the polls opened, as many senior leaders were replaced with younger candidates and parties had more youth-centric manifestos.”



THARMA PILLAI  
Undi18, Malaysia



### MALAYSIA: WILL NEW GOVERNMENT BRING REAL CHANGE?

Hopes for change rose in Latin America, where the year started with the inauguration of Honduras's first female president, Xiomara Castro, followed by the start of the term of Chile's **youngest-ever president**, former student leader Gabriel Boric, and ended with the return of Lula in Brazil.

Castro, of the left-wing Libre party, came to power more than a decade after her husband, former president Manuel Zelaya, was overthrown in a military coup. Her victory, in an election with record voter turnout, ended a long period of conservative dominance. Honduras's often troubled democracy appears to have passed the key test of a democratic transfer of power.



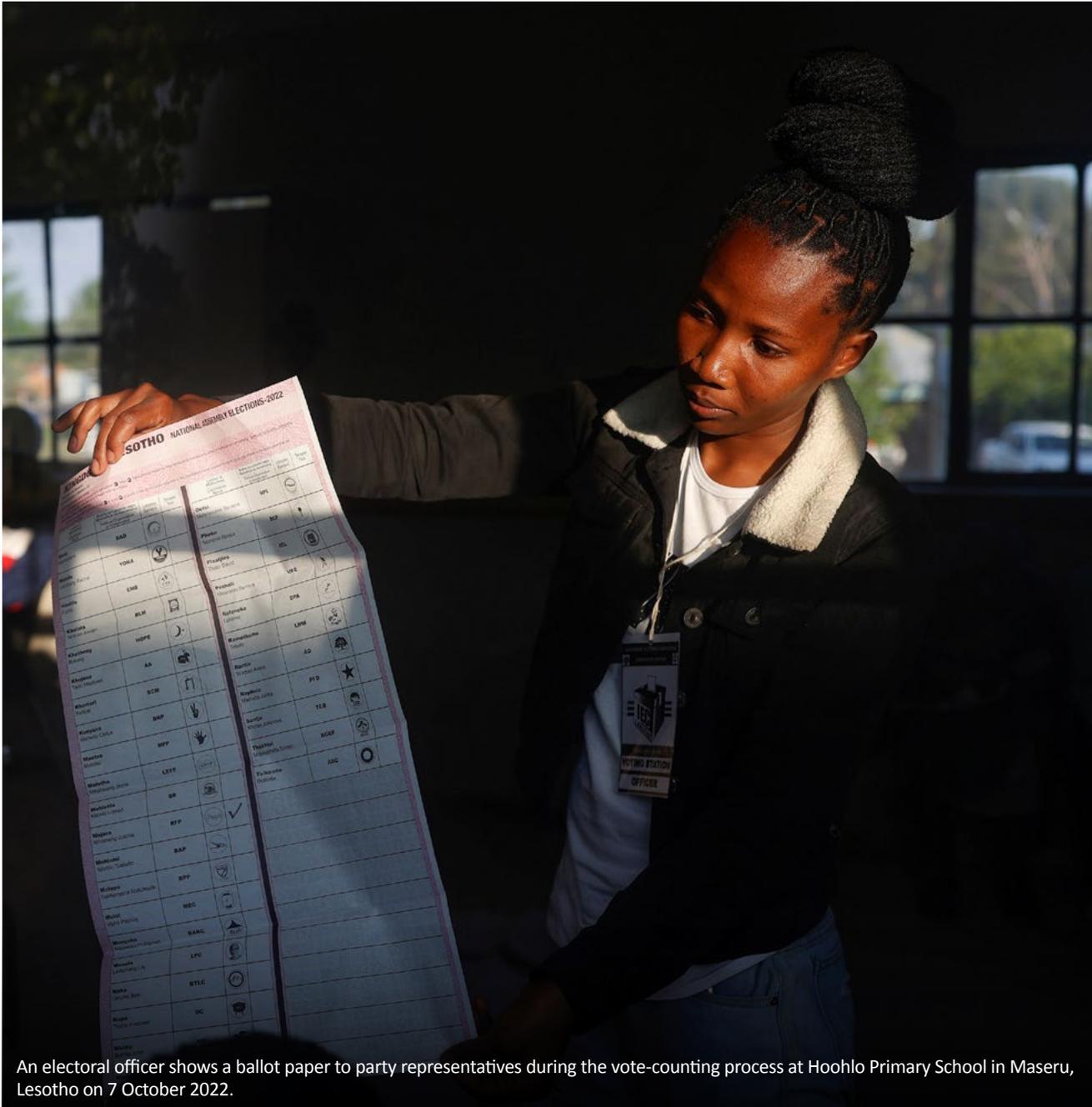
### HONDURAS: THE END OF A CYCLE?

Halfway through 2022, Gustavo Petro was inaugurated as Colombia's first-ever leftist president, and Afro-Colombian environmental activist Francia Márquez became the first Black female vice president. Their victory spoke to the demands of the **protest movement** that has mobilised for change since November 2019.

“For the great expectations it has created not to wane, Petro's government will need to score some early victories, showing progress in advancing the peace process and decreasing the number of assassinations of social leaders.”



GINA ROMERO  
RedLad



An electoral officer shows a ballot paper to party representatives during the vote-counting process at Hoohlo Primary School in Maseru, Lesotho on 7 October 2022.

Photo by Phill Magakoe/Gallo Images



## COLOMBIA'S HISTORIC LEFT TURN

### INCUMBENTS REJECTED

Countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Honduras, where governments promising to advance social justice came to power, weren't the only places where incumbents were rejected. Change also came in Costa Rica, where the April presidential election gave unexpected victory to an outsider, Rodrigo Chaves, who ran on an anti-corruption platform with a populist narrative attacking 'the corrupt political class'. The election was characterised by an apathy not even a close run-off contest could overcome.



## COSTA RICA AT THE POLLS: VOTING OR GAMBLING?

Costa Rica exemplified a broader trend. In multiple countries people are deeply disenchanted with the performance of successive governments of various political colours. Some are expressing their disaffection by staying away from the polls, while others are abandoning their traditional political identities, eager to try anything new that promises to overcome failure. As a result, votes become increasingly fragmented, small changes in preferences can result in big shifts, election results become unpredictable and new political forces can emerge seemingly overnight.

This was seen in Lesotho, where the October election was won by a new party, Revolution for Prosperity, led by an outsider, business tycoon Sam Matekane. Change was born out of frustration with a political system marked by internal strife, dysfunction and failure to tackle deep economic and social problems. But now the new prime minister will have to prove that his move into politics was motivated by something other than his business interests.

One of the expectations voters place on political parties is that they will work on improving service delivery. Lesotho also has high rates of unemployment and widespread problems of gender-based violence and crime that people hope will be addressed by the new government."

 **LIBAKISO MATLHO**  
Women and Law in Southern Africa, Lesotho



As elections increasingly resemble a game of chance, outcomes such as Chaves's victory are far from the worst possible: in Costa Rica, fundamentalist anti-rights forces are waiting in the wings. Public disaffection with the latest incumbents could catapult them to power. In Malaysia, a hard-line Islamist party gathered momentum at the last election and could stand to benefit from further disenchantment. The experience of several European countries has shown how easily disillusionment can be capitalised by deeply regressive forces.

Election winners should understand that their victories may have less to do with what they offer than with rejection of incumbents. As the new incumbents, they should be mindful that voters will judge them the same way. They must work to deliver on their promises while keeping in mind that no election gives a mandate to monopolise power: election winners have a duty both to those who voted for them and those who didn't, and must uphold and enable the democratic institutions and processes that brought them to power and could potentially result in their eviction.

## 3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 Free and fair elections are a vital component of democracy. To ensure elections accurately reflect voters' wishes, national and international civil society groups should work together to monitor elections and expose any wrongdoing.
- 2 A healthy civic space is the bedrock of a proper democracy. Civil society should work to defend civic space and checks and balances on political power. In doing so civil society will both prevent the erosion of democracy from within by democratically elected leaders and help preserve the conditions for civil society's existence.
- 3 Political shifts can bring both challenges and opportunities. When progressive political changes happen, civil society must help hold political leaders accountable for their promises, while guarding against the prospect of regressive backlash.

# ADVANCING WOMEN'S AND LGBTQI+ RIGHTS





Gender and sexuality remain at the centre of a culture war waged by a well-organised and well-funded international network of ultraconservative forces leveraging these issues for political advantage. Civil society continues to work to mobilise solidarity and defend rights, and despite the hostility, in 2022 achieved some significant gains in rights around the world.

The year offered a reminder that the trajectory of rights is non-linear and reversible: regression is possible and hard-earned rights can be lost. Where advances were made, people gained a recognition of rights that once seemed impossible. Where regression took place, as with women's rights in contexts as different as Afghanistan and the USA, people ended the year with fewer rights than those enjoyed by previous generations.

That regression can be reversed was proved in Tanzania, where following a civil society lawsuit, a ban on pregnant girls attending school was struck down. This was one of many civil society victories around the world in 2022.



TANZANIA: AN ENCOURAGING STEP FORWARD FOR GIRLS' RIGHTS

## WOMEN'S EQUALITY A MOVING TARGET

Recent crises have had devastating impacts on gender equality. Gender-based violence continued to thrive in conflict settings, such as the war in Ethiopia. The gendered impacts of war were highly visible in besieged Ukraine, with women and children the majority of a staggering eight million refugees scattered across Europe, and often subjected to perils such as sexual and labour exploitation.

Refugees are mostly women and their children carrying small bags, since men aged 18 to 60 are banned from leaving. As women make up a large proportion of refugees, there is also a lot of need for all kinds of feminine-care products. Since the early days our organisation, Menstrual Action, has been shipping sanitary products to refugees."



MAGDALENA DEMCZAK  
Akcja Menstruacja, Poland

The pandemic also impacted disproportionately on women and girls, increasing rates of domestic violence and job insecurity and diminishing access to sexual and reproductive health services, participation in the labour market and school enrolment.

According to World Bank data, around 2.4 billion women of working age are not afforded equal economic opportunity and 178 countries maintain legal barriers against full economic participation. In 86 countries women face some form of job restriction, and 95 countries don't guarantee equal pay for equal work. Globally, women still have only three quarters of the legal rights afforded to men.

Crucially, women also continued to be grossly underrepresented in the places where decisions are made on issues that deeply affect them. This includes the climate crisis: women made up less than 34 per cent of country negotiating teams at the COP27 climate conference, and only seven of the 110 world leaders present.

Some countries elected or inaugurated their first-ever female political leaders in 2022, starting with Honduras's Xiomara Castro in January. Slovenia elected its first female president, Nataša Pirc Musar, in November, while in Peru, Dina Boluarte was appointed president when the office holder was ousted after trying to shut down congress.

But the fact that female leadership isn't necessarily

a victory for women was made clear in **Hungary**, where Katalin Novak, a close ally of authoritarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and a staunch supporter of his anti-gender policies, became the country's first female president in May. Similarly, **Italy** got its first prime minister in October, but in the form of neofascist leader [Giorgia Meloni](#)➤.

No wonder the 2022 **Global Gender Gap Index** was pessimistic. This analysis of progress towards gender parity in 146 countries concluded that at the current pace, it will be 132 years before the global gender gap is closed.

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AN ONGOING STRUGGLE

Violence against women and girls, long the most pervasive human rights violation around the world, only worsened under the pandemic. Gender-based violence was also sure to flare with every one of 2022's many political, economic and environmental crises.

At the same time, activism to challenge violence and advance women's rights has been made increasingly harder by rising anti-feminist and anti-gender movements that deny the problem and refuse to acknowledge the wellspring of gender-based violence – a persisting patriarchal system that denies women their status as full subjects of rights.

“In our society, women's bodies are subject to all kinds of violence due to custom and tradition, and this is reinforced by the lack of legislation on gender-based violence that could act as a deterrent. Religious discourse degrades women instead of strengthening our role in society. Public discourse not only normalises violence against women but also justifies it by blaming the victim.”

 **AZZA SOLIMAN**  
Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance

Against this regressive backdrop, women's movements continued advocating for change while working to support survivors of gender-based violence and mobilising in outrage against acts of violence and failures to hold perpetrators accountable.



A clear example was seen in India when the Gujarat state government unjustifiably granted **early release** to 11 men convicted of a 2002 gang rape of several Muslim women and the murders of 14 people. Swift public condemnation followed, with people taking to the streets to demand the Supreme Court revoke the decision.



Years-long advocacy efforts led to a breakthrough in **Indonesia**, despite relentless anti-rights disinformation campaigns, when a Sexual Violence Bill was passed to criminalise forced marriage and sexual abuse and enhance protections for victims. In **Spain**, a new Law on the Guarantee of Sexual Freedom, based on the principle of consent, was passed in an attempt to challenge widespread impunity for sexual and gender-based violence.

“The ‘Only Yes is Yes Law’ is a clear example of the joint work done by the women's movement, and particularly the feminist movement, present in all spheres, including civil society and government.”

 **CARMEN MIQUEL ACOSTA**  
Amnesty International Spain



“It took us 10 years to get here. During the past decade, we have organised and made sure we built a unified front pushing for a law that empowers victims. A victory like this provides confirmation of the great influence our work has on society.”

 **NURIL QOMARIYAH**  
Perempuan Bergerak, Indonesia



At the European level, the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – emerged strengthened by two new accessions. A year after Turkey became its first defector, the treaty, which aims to prevent gender-based violence, protect victims and end impunity for perpetrators, was ratified by the **UK** and **Ukraine** in July.

“The regional strike that we held on 6 July was just the start of our cross-border fight against gender-based violence. Transnational feminist solidarity is vital in this struggle. The driving force of our call was sheer anger at the current situation: we will not accept more piecemeal, ineffective solutions for a problem that is systematic and systemic.”

 **BANAN ABU ZAIN EDDIN**  
Takatoat, Jordan

## BACK ON THE STREETS

Following a pandemic hiatus, women’s movements were again able to take to the streets in numbers on International Women’s Day (IWD) on 8 March, articulating demands for gender justice. Unsurprisingly, mobilisations often had a strong focus on various forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence. This was seen in a wide range of countries, including **Argentina**, **Iraq** and **Kenya**, to name a few, while protests focused on femicides were seen in countries such as **Honduras**, **Mexico** and **Turkey**.

Women mobilised on the key issues in their contexts: abortion rights in **Poland**, rural women’s rights in **Tunisia**, peace and solidarity with Ukrainian women and girl refugees in **Bulgaria** and military rule in **Sudan** were among the many issues raised.



IWD saw demands for economic rights, with people raising the issue of unpaid care work in **Chile** and **Zimbabwe**, a concern that was raised later in the year in the UK, where the **March of the Mummies** demanded childcare reforms. This is a key global issue of gender justice: according to **data** from the International Labor Organization, across 64 countries over 16.4 million hours are spent on unpaid care every single day – more than three-quarters by women. If paid the hourly minimum wage, this would amount to nine per cent of global GDP – more than twice the share represented by agriculture.



Multitudes also took to the streets in June and July, prime Pride season in much of the world, to demand LGBTQI+ rights. In Chile, marchers **protested** against the sexual consent age law, which discriminated against LGBTQI+ people. Ages of consent were equalised soon afterwards through a **reform** of the Criminal Code.

Pride events were marked by a return to the roots and renewed radicalism in places with a long tradition of mobilisation, as in New York, and by an expansion in more difficult contexts to offer much-needed safe spaces to LGBTQI+ people. This was the case in Tunisia, where the third edition of the Queer Film Festival held in September offered a welcome opportunity for LGBTQI+ people to assert visibility and confront homophobic social attitudes, in a context where a power-hungry president is actively spreading homophobic hate speech.



2023 Pride events were also marked by a sense of urgency in the many contexts where anti-rights groups are mounting a concerted attack on LGBTQI+ rights – and specifically on trans rights.



In Serbia, anti-rights groups drawing inspiration from both the US fundamentalist Christian movement and Russian nationalists at war with so-called ‘gender ideology’ tried to force the cancellation of the EuroPride event held in Belgrade in September. When the parade proceeded regardless, they **gathered** to try to stop it. Violent protesters attacked police and journalists and attempted to break through the security cordon

protecting marchers. Some participants were **attacked** following the event.



**SERBIA: LGBTQI+ PEOPLE THE LATEST TARGET OF REPRESSION**

### DIVERGENT TRAJECTORIES ON ABORTION RIGHTS

Perhaps no issue was as contested as abortion rights. But while the global headlines were dominated by regression, several countries saw progress in 2022.

In June, the US Supreme Court positioned itself at the forefront of global backlash as it **overturned** *Roe v. Wade*, the ruling that for almost 50 years enshrined women's right to choose. The decision left abortion regulations in the hands of the USA's 50 states and had instant effects in several that had introduced 'trigger bans' that took effect as soon as the ruling was overturned. Within a few months, half of US states had banned or severely restricted access to abortion, and Republican lawmakers were pushing further, trying to restrict the freedom of movement and the circulation of abortion medication.

But Republican lawmakers looked out of step when abortion rights were on the ballot, sometimes literally, as in some states during **midterm elections** held in November. In California, Michigan and Vermont, voters approved amendments to state constitutions to guarantee abortion rights and other reproductive health services. Voters in Kentucky and Montana



Women's rights activists gather outside the Justice Palace in Bogotá, Colombia, as the Constitutional Court debates the decriminalisation of abortion on 21 February 2022.

Photo by Guillermo Legaria Schweizer/Getty Images

rejected proposals to change state constitutions to deny abortion rights – just as they had done in unmistakably conservative Kansas in August. This suggested that the ultraconservative backlash was out of sync with public opinion. It offered further evidence that, in the USA at least, this is something of a top-down strategy mobilised by extremist political and religious leaders and enabled by hefty financing.



### ABORTION RIGHTS IN THE USA: REGRESSION AGAINST THE TIDE

The dynamics were completely different south of the Río Bravo. In the year that followed the Mexican Supreme Court's historic 2021 ruling deeming it unconstitutional to criminalise women for voluntarily terminating a pregnancy in the first 12 weeks, **11 Mexican states** changed their criminal codes to enshrine this right. Such opposite trajectories gave rise to feminist solidarity: Mexican feminists ramped up cross-border support, drawing from experience gained during decades of underground operations.

The **green wave** also continued to unfold in South America. In February, a Colombian Constitutional Court decriminalised abortion on demand up to 24 weeks. This long-awaited decision was the result of a decades-long struggle by the feminist movement – but it unleashed an instant anti-rights backlash, including initiatives to reinstate restrictive laws.



### COLOMBIA RIDES THE GREEN WAVE

Signs that regression could be reversed came in Brazil, where **President Lula** announced the country's exit from the Geneva Consensus Declaration, an anti-abortion text co-sponsored by several regressive leaders, including former president Bolsonaro, and signed by 34 countries in October 2020.

Further south, what could have been a huge step forward became a **missed opportunity** as Chile's draft constitution enshrining sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to abortion, was **rejected** in a referendum in September. As a result, a 2017 law that only allows abortion in three narrow circumstances – rape, foetal unviability and risk to the pregnant person's life – remains in force.

## LGBTQI+ STRUGGLES FOR EQUALITY

LGBTQI+ activism is the target of the same backlash mobilised by well-resourced alliances of far-right politicians and fundamentalist religious leaders of various faiths, in countries as diverse as Indonesia and the USA.

In Indonesia, despite its progress in criminalising forced marriage and sexual abuse, later in the year a regressive new criminal code was introduced, criminalising extramarital sex with prison sentences of up to a year. Since same-sex marriage isn't legal, this provision effectively criminalises same-sex activity. The new code also recognises local-level Sharia laws that restrict women's rights, as well as imposing restrictions on fundamental freedoms of belief, expression and peaceful assembly.

“The current government is trying to bring Islamic fundamentalist groups into the fold. They are trying to ensure their loyalty by showing they are willing to safeguard conservative religious values. LGBTQI+ rights have been at the forefront of the battles waged by fundamentalist political and religious groups, so they have been the first to go.”



FATIA MAULIDIYANTI  
KontraS, Indonesia



### INDONESIA'S NEW CRIMINAL CODE: A TURN FOR THE WORSE

But despite the setbacks, around the world LGBTQI+ groups pushed forward on two key issues: the decriminalisation of same-sex relations and marriage equality.

Following years of civil society advocacy efforts, in 2022 four countries – all members of the **Commonwealth** – scrapped colonial laws that criminalised same-sex relations. While decriminalisation by no means signifies the end of discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+ people, it's a vital first step, as criminalisation – even when not fully enforced – enables rights violations such as arbitrary arrests and emboldens anti-rights forces to take the law into their own hands.

In response to civil society lawsuits, the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court decriminalised homosexuality in **Antigua and Barbuda** in July, and in **Saint Kitts and Nevis** in August. The Caribbean trend continued in December, when the High Court of **Barbados** ruled the criminalisation of same-sex relations unconstitutional.



LGBTQI+ rights activists protest outside Commonwealth House during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting on 19 April 2018 in London, UK.

Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images



ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: A STEP FORWARD FOR LGBTQI+ RIGHTS



ANOTHER BREAKTHROUGH FOR LGBTQI+ RIGHTS IN THE CARIBBEAN



BARBADOS: THIRD TIME'S A TREND



SINGAPORE: BELATED RECOGNITION OF LGBTQI+ RIGHTS

In **Singapore**, parliament decriminalised sex between men in November, but the government tried to impose a red line on any further progress, announcing its intention to change the constitution to define marriage as being strictly between a man and a woman.

Over the past decade, a decriminalisation wave has swept a dozen countries, but a majority of Commonwealth countries still criminalise same-sex acts. More progressive change can be expected soon – particularly in the Caribbean, where a multi-country litigation initiative is bearing fruit. But activists will need to counter the anti-rights influence of the church: the recent global summit of Anglican bishops regressively reaffirmed notions of homosexuality as sinful and same-sex marriage as an aberration.



Same sex marriage became legal in **Chile** and came into effect in **Switzerland** – having being overwhelmingly approved in a referendum – in early 2022. In July, same-sex marriage was legalised by **Andorra**’s parliament and as a result of a Constitutional Court ruling in **Slovenia**. It also became legal in **Cuba** after a new Family Code was ratified by a referendum in September.

A measure of progress was achieved even in Latvia, once rated as the **worst place** in the EU to be gay: a court issued the country’s **first ruling** on same-sex couples, recognising the relationship fits the concept of marriage even though the constitution continues to define marriage as a union between a woman and a man.

At the European level, progress came in January 2023 in the form of a **ruling** by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights, which established that the Russian authorities’ refusal to

give legal recognition and protection to same-sex couples constituted a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In late October, same-sex marriage became legal in all of **Mexico** as the two laggard states of Guerrero and Tamaulipas finally brought their laws into line with a 2015 Supreme Court ruling declaring bans on same-sex marriage unconstitutional. Meanwhile, in December the US Congress **passed** the Respect for Marriage Act, meant to protect both same-sex marriage and interracial marriages in case the Supreme Court overturns the ruling protecting these as it did with *Roe v Wade*.

Several Mexican states have passed and implemented equal marriage laws years ago, despite which many obstacles still remain. Legal change does not bring instant social change. Hence the importance of continuing to focus on cultural change. Laws can change very quickly, and they do change overnight, but culture does not."



But a missed opportunity came in Japan in June, when a court in Osaka declared the country’s ban on same-sex marriage constitutional. Alongside their peers over the world, Japan’s LGBTQI+ activists will keep pushing to shift public opinion – and with it the views of legislators and judges – until equal rights are secured.

Japan has not made much progress on gender inequality, let alone LGBTQI+ rights and SOGI-related issues. This is because the Japanese government is closely connected with religious right-wing groups based on the values of male chauvinism and a patriarchal view of the family."



Further vital legal change included bans on so-called ‘conversion therapies’ – introduced in **Canada, India, Israel** and **New Zealand** – and the reduction or elimination of restrictions on blood donations by men who have sex with men in **Austria, France, Greece, Ireland** and **Lithuania**.

Some important steps forward were taken in recognising the right to identity of trans and gender-diverse people, the focal point of a toxic backlash and confected moral panic mobilised by a bizarre alliance of ultraconservatives and self-styled ‘gender-critical’ feminists.

A law providing a simplified registry process to change gender in legal documents went into effect in **Switzerland** in January. A court ruling in **Colombia** in March allowed non-binary people to have their gender legally recognised. In April the USA started issuing passports with a **non-binary gender option**.

In **Spain**, a self-identification system was approved in February 2023 for people who want to change their

legal gender without having to meeting any medical requirements. A similar system was introduced in **Scotland** in late December but **blocked** in January 2023 by a UK central government increasingly preoccupied with culture war politics.

## ANTI-RIGHTS REGRESSION

In 2022 backlash came in all forms and sizes. In the USA culture wars continued to be waged in every sphere including education, with teachers in numerous states banned from mentioning sexuality or gender in class and books removed from libraries in response to attacks from organisations of conservative parents mobilised by **disinformation**.

**Hundreds** of anti-LGBTQI+ bills were introduced in state after state during the year. Many were specifically **targeted** at trans people, focusing on sport, education, healthcare, ID restrictions and religious exemptions. While these have had limited success so far – only about 10 per cent have become laws – they have had far-reaching effects on the lives of trans people, starting with the damaging consequences of demonising discourse.

Heavily funded by conservative US foundations, the anti-gender movement made strides in Latin America. In Guatemala it made a bold move: on 8 March, while IWD commemorations were underway, Congress passed a law raising prison sentences for abortion, banning same-sex marriage and limiting the teaching of sexual diversity. The prospect of a presidential veto following a rapid civil society backlash forced Congress to backtrack,



Activists march for the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people on International Women's Day 2022 in Guatemala City, Guatemala.

Photo by Visibles/Facebook

but this was a powerful reminder that anti-rights groups are becoming stronger, testing the waters and working towards long-term goals.

Anti-rights groups in Guatemala are part of a highly organised and well-funded transnational movement that aims to undermine the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people, as well as the broader participation of civil society in public debate and decision-making."



### GUATEMALA: ANTI-RIGHTS MOVEMENT SHOWS ITS TEETH

In Sudan, hopes of further progress in women's rights that began with the 2019 transition to democracy were short-lived: after the military regained power, the morality police associated with the old dictatorship have been reinstated to keep a close eye on women's appearance and behaviour.



### SUDAN: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MILITARY'S FIRING LINE

In Russia, the other country that provides the other main current of inspiration for global attacks on LGBTQI+ rights the year brought further regression. In November a **new law** was passed widening the state's restriction of what it calls 'LGBT propaganda' to outlaw pretty much

any public expression of LGBTQI+ identity. The state outrageously characterises LGBTQI+ rights as a component of 'hybrid warfare' being waged by the west.

As the year drew to a close, women's and LGBTQI+ rights also threatened to regress alongside democracy in Israel after an extremist and ultraconservative **new government** took office in December.

## A GLOBAL BATTLEGROUND

Battles around sexual and reproductive rights continued to play out at Commission on the Status of Women's (CSW), the most important global forum on women's rights, which held its 66th session in March at the UN's headquarters in New York.

Feminist and LGBTQI+ groups used this global space to reaffirm women's right to make decisions over their bodies and lives. They sought to shield abortion rights against backlash and framed access to abortion as a matter of both public health and fundamental social justice. And they demanded the recognition and inclusion of all women, rejecting the narrow understanding of the concept of women pushed by anti-rights forces that excludes trans women, promoting instead an intersectional, multifaceted definition of women in all their diversity.



CSW 66  
INTERVIEW SERIES



### VICTORY AGAINST ANTI-RIGHTS BACKLASH AT THE UN



### CSW66: A MIXED MOMENT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The same battle lines were drawn when time came to renew the mandate of the UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity in June. Since it was established in 2016, the office has played a key role in collecting evidence, raising awareness and reporting on states' compliance with human rights standards. Deniers of LGBTQI+ people's rights never stopped trying to hinder its work, and it took sustained civil society efforts to get the mandate renewed, thereby making sure LGBTQI+ rights stay on the UN agenda and sustaining a key international ally and critical advocacy space.

In the vote to renew the mandate we saw two groups of states putting up resistance: countries that have never made progress in recognising rights and where there is a lot of resistance to change, and countries that are moving backwards, such as the USA."



TAMARA ADRIÁN  
Diverlex, Venezuela

## WOMEN AGAINST THE THEOCRACY

The most extreme example of regression came in the form of steps taken by the Taliban throughout the year to erase women completely. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan declared in September 2021 became real on 14 November 2022 when its supreme leader ordered the full implementation of Sharia law. This had immediate and far-reaching implications for **LGBTQI+ people** who were forced to hide to survive and women who were pushed into the private sphere, isolated and bullied into compliance. For women, the last spaces to go were universities and civil society jobs, both of which they were banned from in December. Before then, in Kabul they'd been banned from public spaces such as funfairs, gyms and public parks.



### AFGHANISTAN: THEOCRACY PUSHES WOMEN TO THE MARGINS

Afghan women refused to go quietly, staying instead at the forefront of civil resistance. Violent repression saw them adapt, with protest numbers typically small, protests moving indoors or online as needed and protesters wearing masks to protect their identities.

“Afghan women have been the main force behind civil or non-violent resistance to the Taliban. The first recorded women-led protest took place just days after the Taliban seized Kabul. It started with four or five major groups protesting for girls’ right to education, women’s right to work and freedom of movement.”



**HUMAIRA RAHBIN, ANOUK THEUNISSEN AND MEETRA QUTB**  
Afghan Witness, UK

While the Taliban consolidated their power in Afghanistan, Iran’s longstanding theocratic regime faced its biggest-ever threat. In mid-September the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the morality police for allegedly breaching strict hijab rules sparked an unprecedented wave of mobilisation.

“Iranian women are routinely harassed in public by regime officials and pro-regime sympathisers for ‘bad hijab’ and are even banned from singing and dancing, hugging or touching men who are not their relatives, among too many other things. Many Iranian women are tired of the constant policing of their appearance and behaviour. They want to be free to get on with their lives as they see fit.”



**KYLIE MOORE-GILBERT**  
Human rights advocate and academic

Protests – initiated by young women, soon joined by their male classmates, colleagues and friends – quickly made broader demands for political and social change. The authorities responded accordingly, escalating repression, manipulating the criminal justice system and using the death penalty to punish protesters and try to deter others.



### IRAN: FEARLESS PROTESTS, FIERCE REPRESSION

## TO WEAR OR NOT TO WEAR

When it comes to clothes, liberation isn’t about wearing or not wearing a particular item; it’s about the freedom to choose what to wear.

While in Iran an allegedly ‘improperly’ worn hijab triggered the most widespread and sustained challenge the country’s theocratic regime has ever faced, in India the hijab became a symbol of dignity, pride and resistance against a spreading wave of Islamophobia.

In early 2022, in a move led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist party to stoke religious divisions for political gain, Muslim students in parts of the country were banned from wearing hijab to class. At a single stroke, they experienced violations of their rights to free expression, free manifestation of religious beliefs and education.

“The hijab ban is a complete violation of women’s rights to express their own identities. It should be my choice alone whether to wear the hijab or not.”



**SYEDA HAMEED**  
Muslim Women’s Forum, India

But this time around, right-wing populists may have picked the wrong target. Indian Muslim women resisted, refusing to be the pawns in someone else’s political game.



### INDIA: HIJAB ROW THE LATEST SHOW OF HINDU NATIONALISM



Members of the Iranian diaspora protest against the execution of Iranian protesters on 17 December 2022 in Lisbon, Portugal.

Credit: Photo by Matiullah Wesa/Instagram

Iran's theocracy withstood past protest waves, but the leaderless, fearless movement currently standing up to it is a bigger challenge. Convinced they have more to lose if they stay home and accept the status quo, young protesters have kept up the fight. But success is far from guaranteed: the regime they face remains a formidable force.

What happens next will depend on the capacity of protesters – the resources they can gather, the groups they can bring together, the leadership they build and the collective narrative they produce out of compelling personal stories – and international influences and pressures."



**SOHRAB RAZAGHI**  
Volunteer Activists, The Netherlands



**IRAN: COULD WOMEN PROTESTERS BRING DOWN THE THEOCRACY?**

In Iran as elsewhere, the future is uncertain, but one thing seems clear: in the struggle for rights defeats happen but even then the desire for change can't be extinguished. Where there is oppression, resistance will sooner or later resurface.

## 3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 With intense attacks taking place on gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights, transnational civil society solidarity is more necessary than ever to raise awareness, share tactics, pool resources and push back.
- 2 In the light of the critical role of street mobilisation in the fightback against attacks on gender identity and sexual and reproductive rights, civil society must focus on safeguarding the freedom of peaceful assembly, including by ensuring perpetrators of violence against protesters are held accountable.
- 3 Strategic litigation at the national and international levels has proven to be an effective strategy to expand rights. Civil society should engage with courts and human rights institutions to achieve further progress.





It's been another year of civil society action to help avert the worst impacts of what's increasingly being recognised as a triple planetary crisis, with the combined threat of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. But it's also been another year of insufficient action by states, the private sector and the international system.

Civil society is engaging on every front possible: responses to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change and practical projects to improve adaptation, street protest and direct action, and advocacy, legal action and international-level engagement. All the urgency to prevent the worst impacts of the crisis continues to come from civil society.

## A WORLD RAVAGED BY EXTREME WEATHER

Extreme weather events – made far **more likely and severe** by climate change – have continued to scar countries and bring tragic consequences.

Extreme heat struck India, bringing normal life to a halt. Floods left hundreds dead and thousands homeless in South Africa. At least **15,000 deaths**

were attributed to Europe's **record-breaking** summer heatwave. And then record rainfall left one-third of Pakistan under water, causing **over 1,700 deaths**. These were just a few of many such events in 2022.



### PAKISTAN: THE LETHAL IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Many of these emergencies exposed inadequate planning and coordination, a lack of consultation with communities and civil society, and insufficient resources for disaster preparedness and response. Nonetheless, civil society did what it could to fill vital gaps and meet pressing needs. A huge voluntary effort mobilised in Pakistan, with young people to the fore, rescuing people, distributing aid and crowdsourcing funds. Local-level action was similarly important in India, South Africa and the many other places struck by climate-related catastrophe in 2022.



### SOUTH AFRICA: THE DEADLY IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



### INDIA: HORROR HEATWAVES BRING CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

## COP27: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

The plight of Pakistan, alongside many other countries, points to a great injustice: emissions have disproportionately been caused by global north countries, but impact disproportionately on the global south – on countries that have done the least to cause the crisis and have the fewest resources to respond. Pakistan, for example, produces less than one per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions but is among the **10 countries worst affected** by climate change.

Local response is vital to alleviate human suffering, but global change is needed to tackle a problem that affects people and planet across borders. The annual COP climate summits represent the peak global opportunity, but the latest, COP27 held in November, yet again failed to deliver.

COP27 was unpromising even before it began. It was hosted by Egypt, an authoritarian state that ruthlessly represses civil society. This made it much harder for domestic and international civil society to exert pressure for ambitious agreements, as they typically do at COP summits. The UN's decision to award the summit to Egypt reflected a lack of recognition of the vital role of civil society in driving climate action.

**Holding a COP in a country with closed civic space such as Egypt is unacceptable and should not have happened. I have no idea how anybody could think a conference like this could be held in such a restricted environment."**

 **AYISHA SIDDIQA**  
Polluters Out

Ahead of the summit, numerous activists who called for protests were **arrested**. Civil society participants **complained** of harassment and intimidation. But civil society also used the global spotlight to focus attention on the Egyptian government's catalogue of human rights abuses and its thousands of political prisoners.

 **THE COP27 CHALLENGE:  
DEMANDING CLIMATE ACTION IN A  
REPRESSIVE STATE**

At the summit's end, decades of civil society advocacy finally paid off when states agreed to create a fund to address loss and damage caused by climate change. This step forward came when global south states, bolstered by civil society's support, refused to countenance any further delay from wealthy states. Global north states long resisted,

not least out of a determination to prevent debate about reparations for colonial crimes. But Pakistan, as chair of the G77 group that brings together 134 global south countries, made a strong moral case by pointing to the devastating impacts of its floods.

This was only a first step. A 'transitional committee' will make recommendations on a loss and damage fund at COP28 in December 2023. Advocacy will continue to try to ensure the fund materialises and is adequate and effective. Campaigners will keep working to unlock greater progress on climate financing – pushing for adequate funding for emissions cuts, adaptation and loss and damage, and an end to the perverse financial incentives for continued extraction. Increasingly this includes proposals to reform institutions such as the World Bank.

But while COP27 took tentative steps to respond to the damage already caused by climate change, it did little to prevent further harm. Most states failed to act on the promise made at COP26 to submit more ambitious plans to cut emissions consistent with capping temperature rises at 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

Progressive plans like those developed by Vanuatu, a Pacific Island state facing existential threats from climate change, were a rare exception. Developed through consultation with civil society, Vanuatu's plan sets out both its intent to cut emissions and the need for international support to adapt. It sets a challenge for donors: will they back the ambition?

 **VANUATU'S CLIMATE PLAN SHOWS  
WAY FORWARD**

But in COP27's rooms and corridors, the fossil fuel industry continued to exert its baleful influence. Some **636 fossil fuel lobbyists** took part – and they got what they came for. The meeting's final statement once again made no commitment to reduce fossil fuel use. It went no further than before on the most urgent need of all: to rapidly eliminate coal, the dirtiest fuel.

There remains a gap between what powerful states say and what they do. The fuel price hikes caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has seen states react partly by acknowledging the need to accelerate the development of renewable energies – but also by pushing for greater fossil fuel extraction. US President Joe Biden unsuccessfully **tried to persuade** Saudi Arabia and its allies to pump more oil to lower prices. Germany's new government – **elected** in 2021 after a campaign where climate change was a major issue, and which includes the Greens party – **reopened** coal power stations to make it through the winter. The UK government, one year on from pushing for the phase-out of coal as COP26 host, **approved** a new coalmine development. It's little wonder many global south states accuse the global north of climate hypocrisy.

Greater progress at COP28 seems unlikely. It will be held in another state that, like Egypt, stops people organising, mobilising and making demands: the oil-rich United Arab Emirates (UAE), which in November publicly **committed** to extracting fossil fuels for as long as possible. The head of the state oil company has been **put in charge** of the summit. Plenty more expensive PR can be expected, as can little space for civil society to raise inconvenient truths.

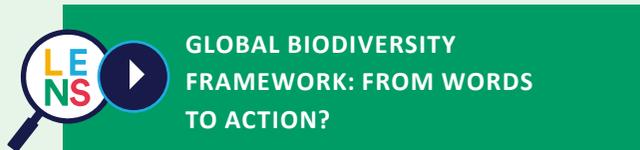


## A STEP FORWARD FOR BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION

COP27 wasn't 2022's only global summit of major environmental importance. COP15, the latest meeting under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, was finally held in Montreal, Canada in December following pandemic delays. It led to the agreement of the Global Biodiversity Framework, which sets a target to conserve 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030. The agreement commits to reduce subsidies that cause environmental harm and, crucially, recognises the role of Indigenous groups in conservation: conservation projects often trample on their rights. But it's weak on the crucial matter of the private sector's responsibilities.

As with COP27, a key sticking point was funding. While the agreement is to mobilise US\$30 billion in a year from 'developed' to 'developing' countries by 2030, several African states, notably the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – home to the world's second-largest rainforest after the Amazon – urged the creation of a new biodiversity fund. When this didn't arise it accused the summit's leaders of forcing through an agreement against its wishes. Global south states will keep demanding adequate funding to enable all states to play their role in conservation.

The need is great, with research increasingly suggesting a **mass extinction** is underway, bringing the destruction of fragile systems that sustain human life and play a vital role in absorbing greenhouse gases. But the biggest challenge following COP15 is that no biodiversity targets arising from this process have ever been met. International agreements mean nothing if they go unimplemented. Civil society will keep up the pressure to do better this time.



## PUSHING FORWARD AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

While high-level summits continue to frustrate, civil society keeps engaging at the global level because international bodies remain important sources of standards and norms. These provide yardsticks to measure the performance of states and rallying points for advocacy.

A small step forward came in March when the UN **appointed** its first ever Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. Ian Fry, who takes up the role, is charged with making recommendations on the adverse human rights impacts of climate change and promoting the integration of human rights in climate change responses. This offers an important new focal point for civil society engagement.

A milestone was reached in July when UN member states passed a **resolution** recognising access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a universal human right. This came after years of civil society campaigning. While the resolution is non-binding, it offers a norm that can be referenced in the push for stronger environmental regulation, in climate and environmental litigation, and in the ongoing campaign for a global convention on the right to a healthy environment.

“The recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a universal human right makes environmental protection a core aspect of human rights protection. It is a major step towards a human rights-based approach in environmental litigation, as it integrates human rights norms into environmental matters.”



If there is to be a new convention, developing it will take many years. The challenges in securing this kind of agreement could be seen at UN headquarters in August, when talks to develop an Oceans Treaty stalled. The treaty – to protect the two-thirds of seas that fall beyond national jurisdiction – has been under negotiation since 2017. These talks were supposed to be the final round, ending in the treaty's adoption. But they broke up with no consensus. Key points of contention were fishing and marine genetic resources, dominated by a few powerful states.



An Indigenous activist from Brazil participates in a protest for climate justice at the COP27 climate conference in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, on 12 November 2022.

Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images

A treaty was **finally agreed** following a fresh round of talks in March 2023. Now the challenge will be to encourage rapid ratification so it can enter into force. Civil society will work to urge adoption and implementation, which must be backed with adequate resources.

Cooperation has been lacking regarding many aspects of the treaty. However, the treaty process has seen a lot of success in convening discussions and negotiations. As of now, more than 100 states are highly committed to backing the treaty as it stands."

 **JOHN PAUL JOSE**  
High Seas Alliance

 **OCEAN TREATY:  
UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

Another important process **started** in March at the UN environment summit in Kenya, when states agreed to develop a legally binding treaty on plastics. There's a great need for stronger regulation given the ubiquity of plastic pollution. The treaty will cover the whole lifecycle of plastics and, significantly, acknowledges the role of Indigenous people and **waste pickers**. The treaty is due to be negotiated over two years and civil society will be urging states to meet the deadline.

That persistence pays was demonstrated when the Escazú Agreement held its first conference of parties in April. This is the environmental rights treaty for Latin America and the Caribbean, adopted in 2018 following extensive civil society

engagement. Globally it's the first treaty to make specific provisions on the rights of environmental human rights defenders, a crucial need in a region that has the world's **highest number** of killings of such activists.

Reflecting civil society's positive role in the process, the summit was much more open than a typical intergovernmental meeting. Civil society advocacy focused on the development of strong compliance procedures. It is also urging stronger Indigenous representation in treaty processes and pushing for the numerous states that have not yet ratified to do so.

Politically the first COP was very important because it renewed political commitment to the Escazú Agreement. There was a lot of commitment, and the rules adopted are very positive for civil society's active participation. Civil society had a direct voice in the negotiations."

 NATALIA GÓMEZ  
EarthRights International



In all these processes, civil society encourages, promotes and monitors the implementation of international agreements. But in 2022, awareness grew about a pact that presents a powerful barrier against climate action: the Energy Charter Treaty.

The Energy Charter Treaty was agreed in 1994 to protect fossil fuel companies from political

instability and policy changes. It allows them to sue states through a dispute settlement mechanism when their policies impact on fossil fuel projects. Multiple states have been sued for climate policies that seek to limit extraction.

European states – including France, the Netherlands and Spain – have said they're pulling out of the treaty, but that doesn't solve the problem: the treaty contains a sunset clause, which means companies can sue states for 20 years after withdrawal. The EU proposed amending the treaty to limit the sunset clause to 10 years while expanding its scope to other energy sources. But several states refused to agree.

Civil society has instead urged a coordinated, EU-wide exit, along with the passing of an EU law to end the dispute settlement mechanism. That may be getting closer: in February 2023 the European Commission backtracked on reform plans and instead **proposed** a collective withdrawal, offering hope for stronger climate policies.

This is an old treaty which main purpose is to protect fossil fuel companies, and it's completely at odds with the Paris Agreement and the EU's climate and sustainability agenda. The treaty's sunset clause gives an almost unlimited right to companies and investors and is one of the reasons why we are urging EU states to leave the treaty all together, in a coordinated way."

 PAUL DE CLERCK  
Friends of the Earth Europe



## ACTION ON THE STREETS

Civil society continues to combine international-level action with all the other available tools to seek climate justice. These include street protests and direct action, encompassing non-violent disobedience and disruptive public stunts. Movements like Fridays for Future have never stopped mobilising. September's **Global Climate Strike** saw people around the world make the case for loss and damage financing, applying pressure ahead of COP27. Scientists are also **speaking out** and taking part in direct action, compelled into activism by their understanding of the unfolding climate catastrophe.

Street protest and direct action keep climate change high on the political agenda, heighten public awareness and communicate, through disruption, the chaos to come if climate change goes unchecked. 2022 saw the emergence of new, deliberately controversial tactics, including stunts involving priceless works of art.

In October, two young activists from the Just Stop Oil group caused a stir by **throwing soup** at a Van Gogh Sunflowers painting in the UK National Gallery. They'd taken pains to ensure the painting, covered in glass, wouldn't be damaged. Their controversial act made headlines – and that was the point. It was one of **several** such actions in global north countries during the year. These stunts made the point that works of art receive far more protection and are apparently more valued than the essentials of a liveable planet. They cut through the news cycle in a way other protests and calls for action didn't.

There's **no evidence** these stunts backfired by causing people to see action on climate change as less important because they disagreed with



protest tactics. There are indications such tactics can rekindle debate and bring the issue back to prominence, and may encourage people to take part in other forms of climate action.

All the same, in January 2023, one influential group, Extinction Rebellion in the UK, **announced** it was abandoning disruptive tactics and shifting towards large-scale protests that could bring more people into the movement. But other groups will likely maintain more disruptive tactics. Given the enormity of the issue, the protest response will remain multifaceted, gaining strength from diversity and the complementary forms of activism.

Meanwhile, in the locales at the sharp end of the lethal fossil fuel industry – where oil and gas are extracted and transported – communities continue to resist, particularly when disaster strikes.

That’s what happened in Peru in January 2022, when a coastal oil spill brought severe hardship for small-scale fishers. Spanish oil giant Repsol was accused of being slow to take responsibility, making the impacts worse. The disaster exposed a history, under successive governments, of environmental regulations being minimised in the interests of big business. It brought protests to demand the company take responsibility and the government step up its environmental regulation, including by ratifying the Escazú Agreement.

■ This situation has encouraged civil society to prioritise the search for solutions. For almost a decade, environmental requirements have been reduced in Peru; it is necessary to walk back that path.

 **JUAN CARLOS SUEIRO**  
Oceana

Local residents protest against Spanish energy firm Repsol and demand accountability for an oil spill at its facility off the coast in Ancon, Peru, on 25 January 2022.

Photo by Pilar Olivares/Reuters via Gallo Images



## PERU'S OIL SPILL RAISES CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS

Civil society also **spoke out** over an **oil spill** in Gabon in April by French-British company Perenco, accusing the company of failing to maintain its facilities and demanding it be held to account.

And yet the thirst for further extraction is seemingly unending, however much it flies in the face of the commitments made under the Paris Agreement. The size of the challenge is indicated by the enormous profits fossil fuel companies have reaped.

Among many others, a huge new development is planned in East Africa to carry crude oil from Uganda to the Tanzanian coast. Both states are backing the project and talking up the economic opportunities, but for many locals the plan threatens displacement, pollution and health hazards.

Civil society is campaigning to stop the harm, but because it's standing up to powerful interests, it's being met with severe backlash. Several activists have been arrested, detained and threatened. A broad civil society coalition, #StopEACOP, is mobilising to provide support to embattled activists and pressure investors to pull out. Several potential financiers, including in France and South Africa, have responded by committing to not fund the project.

**I have organised strikes to challenge the project, but since my last protest, I have received threats from unknown people who say they are police officers and tell me they are going to come and arrest me. We are in danger and nobody is helping us with security and support. Our government cares only about profit, not people."**



**NYOMBI MORRIS**  
Earth Volunteers, Uganda



## GAME NOT OVER: RESISTANCE AGAINST EAST AFRICAN CRUDE OIL PIPELINE

### CLIMATE ACTIVISTS TARGETS OF REPRESSION

It isn't just in East Africa. Around the world environmental and climate campaigners are under attack because they challenge powerful political and economic forces. In the decade since campaigning organisation **Global Witness** started tracking killings of environmental and land rights activists, 1,733 have been killed – one every two days.

In December the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, **spoke out** about the importance of protest in driving climate action and the need to protect civic space for climate protesters. It was a timely warning. As part of a **widespread crackdown** on protest freedoms around the world, many states – including some that claim to be climate champions – are targeting climate protests with heightened restrictions.

Shortly after hosting COP26, the UK **passed a law** giving police wider powers to restrict and break up protests, including on grounds of disruption and noise, something politicians have justified with reference to disruptive climate protests. In January the government **announced** its intention to give police further powers to pre-emptively stop protests.

In Finland in March 2022, 12 activists from Elokapiina, the Finnish Extinction Rebellion movement, were convicted of insubordination for staging roadblock protests. In Denmark, **over 110 activists** were arrested in two days of Extinction Rebellion protests in May. In Germany, when people protested against a coalmine expansion in January 2023, police violently **dragged people away, reportedly used** batons, pepper spray and water cannon and briefly **detained** several campaigners, among them Greta Thunberg. Numerous US states have also **introduced laws** making it harder to protest near pipelines and mines.

As in Germany, Australia's **May election** was dominated by climate change, following several years of extreme weather in a country that is one of the world's highest per capita greenhouse gas emitters. A government characterised by climate denial lost, and in September the new government **passed** Australia's first climate change legislation in a decade, committing to cut emissions by at least 43 per cent by 2030.

But at the same time, Australian activists are being criminalised. In 2022, three Australian states passed anti-protest laws **targeting** climate activists. In December, climate activist Deanna 'Violet' Coco fell foul of the new laws, receiving a **15-month jail sentence** for blocking a lane of traffic on Sydney Harbour Bridge. Following widespread outrage, she was **released on bail** pending an appeal. Climate

activists are looking for the Australian government to not just say the right thing, but also enable civil society to play its proper role, which includes protesting.

“Sweeping new laws were rushed through recently in a chilling and knee-jerk response to ongoing peaceful protests. These laws threaten to silence not only climate activists like Coco, or environmental and humanitarian organisations like ours, but every single one of us.”

 **NELLI STEVENSON**  
Greenpeace Australia Pacific



### AUSTRALIA: STILL SILENCING THE CLIMATE ALARM

The restriction of civil society campaigning pays a backhanded compliment to its effectiveness. Despite often constrained civil space, civil society is achieving breakthroughs in stopping projects that cause climate harm. In just one example, in June the Japanese government **pulled out** of financing coal-fired power projects in Bangladesh and Indonesia, which it was funding from development aid. This was a direct result of civil society pressure that had already seen a Japanese contractor withdraw from building the plant. Now civil society is pushing for renewable energies as a replacement.

“Civil society made a lot of efforts to stop Japan financing the Matarbari coal project, and hard advocacy work finally paid off. Environmental CSOs were able to put pressure on key stakeholders with the help of research institutions that studied and tracked global finance and investments.”

 **SHARIF JAMIL**  
Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon

## CHALLENGES IN TRANSITION

Even climate transition brings extractive dangers: there's a global rush to mine the metals used in electric vehicle batteries, such as lithium.

The biggest lithium deposits are in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. There, communities living close to current and potential sites of extraction, many of them Indigenous groups, are calling for much more consultation over decisions that will affect their lives.

In Serbia, home to important lithium deposits, campaigners won a reprieve in January when the government gave into pressure, withdrawing licences for a vast mining project that would have devastated a major agricultural region. Civil society remains on guard however, fearing the unpopular plan could be revived now the country's **election** has passed.

“In the face of many displeased people mobilised in an election year, the government reacted. It revoked the decree greenlighting Rio Tinto's project and backtracked on the spatial plan for the special-purpose area designed for the project's implementation, which had been illegally introduced.”

 **MIROSLAV MIJATOVIĆ**  
Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team, Serbia



### ENERGY TRANSITION: DILEMMAS AND TRADE-OFFS

## CLIMATE LITIGATION: A GROWING TOOL

As well as action on the streets and international-level advocacy, climate activists are engaging with governments to strengthen climate and environmental regulations. In February, efforts paid off in Italy when the constitution was **amended** to make environmental protection one of its fundamental principles, with the aim of protecting the interest of future generations. Civil society is now pushing for environmental regulations to be strengthened to reflect the revised constitution.

“It has been a long road to reach today's great consensus on environmental issues. And consultations with environmental CSOs in the amendment process were a key factor in that they helped put pressure on political parties to make the right decision.”

 **EDOARDO ZANCHINI**  
Legambiente Onlus, Italy

Civil society is also **increasingly** taking to the courts to hold states and fossil fuel companies and financiers to account for failures to respect international human rights standards and commitments like the Paris Agreement. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has **recognised** the role climate litigation is playing in increasing climate ambition and improving outcomes.

2022 saw multiple success stories. Ahead of Brazil's pivotal election, civil society won a landmark Supreme Court victory that **recognised** the Paris Agreement as a human rights treaty, a ruling that places it above ordinary legislation.

Approval for a gas drilling project in the Timor Sea off Australia was **suspended** when a court ruled the company behind the project, Santos, hadn't consulted Indigenous communities adequately. The judgment came in response to a legal challenge brought by islanders. Oil giant Shell was **held to account** in South African courts, when a ban was upheld on its use of seismic waves to explore for Indian Ocean oil and gas. But the need for ongoing vigilance was made clear in January 2023 when a second application for exploration was **approved**, requiring fresh civil society action.

South Africa has good environmental legislation, but much of it is lacking in implementation, so that is what the environmental movement focuses on. The law is very clear; our constitution says we have the right to a safe and healthy environment."



New lawsuits are being brought in response to the **revelation** that Exxon knew about and accurately predicted climate change in the 1970s. And more court victories are coming. In July, a lawsuit filed by six young Portuguese activists against 33 European states was **fast-tracked** at the European Court of Human Rights. The activists, who are crowdfunding their case, are seeking recognition that their human rights are being impacted on by the failure of governments to cut emissions sufficiently. The court **will also hear** climate cases brought by a French farmer and a Swiss group, Senior Women for Climate Protection Switzerland.



Protesters demand a halt to the planned demolition of the hamlet of Luetzerath, on the edge of the expanding Garzweiler II open-cast coalmine near Erkelenz, Germany on 23 April 2022.

Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Many other cases are working their way through the courts, showing how civil society is using every means available to insist on action sufficient to avert catastrophe.



## COURT ACTION FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE: A GROWING MOVEMENT

### A CHANGE AGENDA

Awareness of the climate emergency and environmental crises is growing, thanks to civil society's efforts. Around the world, people are **starting to see** climate change as the defining issue of our time.

Civil society's struggles are making clear that responding to climate change has to go beyond replacing one form of energy with another. There are many challenges, such as how to phase out subsidies while protecting people from economic shocks, how to make energy prices affordable and

how to replace extractive jobs with other forms of good-quality employment.

There's a need to take on the myths spread by fossil fuel companies and those beholden to them that fossil fuel phase-out entails economic downturn. There's also a need to foster peace where there are conflicts, since conflicts and militarisation are by their nature destructive: Russia's war on Ukraine has seen a significant **emissions spike**. Policy-makers need to respect rights and engage positively with civil society in the search for solutions.

That change can happen was shown by the January 2023 news that the once-vanishing ozone layer, a potential environmental catastrophe, is **healing**. The problem with the ozone layer was identified in the 1980s. States listened to scientists, forged an international treaty, the Montreal Protocol – which imposed limitations on businesses – and stuck to it. Effective international cooperation solved a looming environmental problem. This proves that destructive habits can be reversed. It also shows that change takes much political will, resources and ongoing pressure. The latter, at least, can be counted on: civil society will continue to do its job.

## 3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 Street mobilisation and direct action are key tactics in sounding the alarm on climate change but are coming under attack, including in democratic states that claim to be climate champions. Civil society must make a concerted effort to raise awareness of the importance of protest rights, including the right to take part in disruptive non-violent protests.
- 2 Civil society efforts to raise awareness about the reality of climate change and the need to address it are having some success in influencing public opinion to call on decision makers to act. Civil society should embed climate justice in all of its work and make clear the multiple ways in which climate change impacts on human rights.
- 3 Disinformation is a key barrier to climate action. Civil society should work with the media and scientists to counter inaccuracies and help win support for action. As part of its influencing strategy, civil society should develop stronger media and science literacy.



# URGING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE REFORM





The structures and processes of global governance are facing a tremendous test. Although it's one of several conflicts – such as those in Syria, across the Sahel and until recently in Ethiopia, among others – Russia's war on Ukraine placed a particular strain on the UN. Ukraine's government and civil society alike looked to the international system for peace and justice. But the UN's response was hamstrung by Russia's power to obstruct.

The experience should provoke renewed reflection about how the international system works and who it serves. Civil society's critiques of global governance and calls for reform have never been more relevant.

Since 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and invaded Ukraine for the first time this century, Ukrainians have seen thousands of international organisations' representatives spending their time here, mostly in expensive hotels and restaurants. But now that Ukrainian lives are in fact under immediate threat, international organisations are not here anymore. For us, they are now invisible and silent."

 **YAROPOLK BRYNYKH**  
Truth Hounds, Ukraine

## SECURITY COUNCIL FAILURE

Russia is one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the global body charged with upholding peace. Enduring divisions between the permanent five – broadly, Russia and China on one side and France, the UK and the USA on the other – mean the UNSC often fails to act on conflicts when one of the permanent five has an interest, as seen repeatedly in relation to Syria's civil war. But the deadlock and dysfunction of the UNSC is now plain for all to see.

Russia's war is in clear violation of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the 'territorial integrity or political independence' of another state. In March, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) – the UN's court that settles inter-state disputes and issues opinions on international law – made a **provisional order** that Russia must halt its invasion. The ruling is binding but Russia ignored it.

Despite its clear conflict of interest, Russia simply applauds to **spread disinformation** about its intervention in Ukraine.

The architecture of the international governance system is not working properly because it has a fundamental design defect. Russia is a permanent member of the UNSC. The mandate for this body is to maintain international peace and security, but we have seen the total opposite of that take place in Ukraine.

 **OLEKSANDRA MATVIICHUK**  
Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine

In the absence of UNSC action, it fell to the UN General Assembly (UNGA), encompassing all UN member states, to condemn Russia's invasion. In a rare special session in March, the UNGA passed two resolutions calling for an end to the fighting, humanitarian access and immediate withdrawal. But patchy patterns of support were a cause for concern.

Several authoritarian states voted with Russia. This isn't surprising: states with poor human rights records often side with fellow violators in opposition to international scrutiny. But many more, global south states, particularly those in Africa, abstained rather than vote against Russia. This partly reflects Cold War habits of solidarity and a current of public opinion that sees Russia

as standing up to the west. But it's also a measure of Russia's increased diplomatic and economic engagement in African countries, backed by growing deployment of its mercenary forces▶.



### UKRAINE WAR EXPOSES WEAKNESSES OF INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

## MIXED MESSAGES FROM THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

A similar scenario was seen at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which in March voted to establish a commission to investigate war crimes and other human rights violations committed by Russia, but with 13 states abstaining. It begged the question of why states serve on the UN's peak human rights body if they're so unprepared to examine abuses.

Russia was one of the 47 UNHRC members, an absurdity finally dealt with in August, when the UNGA took the rare step of voting to **suspend** Russia from the Council. But with 24 states voting against and a staggering 58 abstaining, this resolution also fell far short of unanimity, enabling Putin to downplay criticism of his sustained assault on universal human rights as patchy and biased.

In October, the Council voted to establish a special rapporteur on human rights in Russia. The office-holder is to report back in a year's time, offering an opportunity for civil society

to share evidence of violations. It marks the first time a permanent UNSC member has been subjected to this kind of scrutiny, offering hope that impunity can be challenged, however powerful the offender.

But again the vote was far from unanimous. Only 17 Council members voted for the resolution, with 24 abstaining – 12 of them African states.

An enduring problem was seen in the annual vote for the UNHRC's new members in October. States serve three-year terms, renewable for a second term, with around a third rotating off each year. But the elections of new members are rarely competitive. The five regional blocs of states often put forward as many candidates as seats are available for each region. This leaves little opportunity to use the election process to scrutinise states' human rights records.

In 2022, there was competition in only two blocs, and civil society worked to make this count. In Asia and the Pacific, one positive was that authoritarian Bahrain pulled out of its campaign for a seat, following backlash over its extensive human rights violations. Similarly in the group of Latin American and Caribbean states, civil society successfully campaigned for Venezuela to lose its bid. But still many states with grim human rights records took a place on the Council, including Algeria, Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Currently, 34 UNHRC member states – over 70 per cent – have serious civic space restrictions. For such states, it's fair to ask whether they genuinely seek to uphold the UNHRC's mission – or whether they intend to undermine it.



### UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL TAKES ACTION ON RUSSIA

## THE CHINA TEST

Another permanent member of the UNSC, China, presented another massive test of the international system – and one only partly passed.

In August, the UN's report on the Chinese government's systematic human rights abuses in its Muslim-majority Xinjiang region was finally published, in the face of a concerted effort by China to block it. The report found credible evidence of torture, sexual and gender-based violence and arbitrary and discriminatory detention, among other violations, and concluded these may constitute crimes under international law. China enlisted its allies to mount a furious backlash.



### CHINA: UN REPORT LEAVES NO ROOM TO HIDE

Controversy over the delayed report dogged the final year of Michelle Bachelet as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. She was accused of downplaying human rights criticism and trying to negotiate with rights-violating states, an approach that risked making rights look like something amenable to negotiation and trade-off. The report was released just before her term ended.

The UNHRC then missed the moment in October when it narrowly voted not to hold a debate on China's Xinjiang abuses. The report had provided ample evidence – but the Council simply decided not to discuss it. China pulled every string to ensure this moderate proposal fell. While 17 states voted for, 19 were against and 11 abstained. Few states outside the European bloc backed the proposal, and even several Muslim-majority states abstained, underlining China's deep influence.

States that resist calling out China's abuses tend to fall back on the platitude that the UNHRC should promote dialogue rather than name and shame – but given the chance, they prevented dialogue. Still, the report's damning evidence remains, and civil society will keep pressing for follow-up.



### CHINA: UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL FAILS CRUCIAL TEST

### CONTINUING DIVISION ON ISRAEL

There's another major test some states failed. In December, the UNGA passed a resolution calling for an ICJ opinion on Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. Numerous UNGA resolutions have described the occupation as illegal, and in October the UN's fact-finding mission **issued a report** finding reasonable grounds to conclude it is indeed in violation of international law.



Protesters, including members of US-based Kazakh and Uyghur communities, denounce the Chinese government's human rights violations. New York, USA, 26 July 2022.

Photo by Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

The call for an ICJ opinion was **carried**, with significant numbers of votes against and abstentions, but here the split was very different. Most of the western states that backed action on China and Russia took a different stance on Israel's abuses, abstaining or voting against the resolution. Overwhelmingly states voting for the resolution were from the global south. China and Russia both supported it, leaving Russia bizarrely condemning an occupation while conducting an invasion.

Once again this pointed to the biggest challenge of global governance: political leaders make largely self-interested calculations rather than taking principled stands. States that rightly condemned the crimes being committed by China and Russia chose to ignore those being perpetrated by Israel. In doing so, they enabled the rejection of criticism as selective and politically motivated. Consistency, not hypocrisy, is needed in the face of human rights abuses.

## A NEW HUMAN RIGHTS HEAD FOR THE UN

Bachelet was by no means unusual in serving a single term as the UN's human rights head, and China wasn't the only controversy she faced. Her time in office pointed to an enduring tension in the role, between diplomacy and advocacy. Civil society wants the office to be led by a human rights champion but it often ends up in the hands of a career politician or diplomat. The appointment process is opaque, giving little scope for civil society input.



That was the case again this time. In September UN insider Volker Türk was appointed as the new High Commissioner. It isn't clear how the selection was made and what criteria were applied.

The appointment came at a time of a widespread backlash against human rights, including the fundamental civic freedoms civil society relies on. Civil society urged the new High Commissioner to stand up for human rights publicly and within the UN system. They want the High Commissioner to call out human rights violators however powerful they may be and act on the early warning signs of violations. To do so, the office must engage with and defend civil society.



## CIVIL SOCIETY LOCKED OUT

Civil society provides an important counterbalance to the state-centric nature of UN processes. It needs access so that it can seek to influence decisions and hold states to account. But the gap between aspiration and reality was laid lamentably bare at the annual high-level UNGA session held in New York in September.

President after president lined up to make their speeches. Many condemned Russia's war on Ukraine, and in the light of the war, some raised the hope of progress in UNSC reform to limit veto power of the kind flexed by Russia. President Biden went further than before, **supporting** the idea of expanding the Council's membership, something **backed** by many African states.

Some abused the platform. Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi disingenuously used his **speech** to paint his country as a champion in the struggle against injustice, even as **Iranian protesters** were being **gunned down**. Mali's Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maiga lauded his country's warm relationship with Russia. Many speeches were a waste of global attention, aimed squarely at domestic audiences.

The real value of the high-level session is the chance to have less formal interactions. But civil society remained locked out of any such opportunities. The CSOs that the rest of the year can access UN headquarters, having cleared the hurdles of accrediting to the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), remained denied entry on security grounds. Civil society still organised a plethora of parallel initiatives, but its exclusion from UN headquarters deprived it of a priceless opportunity to engage.

This pointed to a bigger problem: civil society consistently struggles for access. The UN has offered some encouraging signals in this regard. In 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres issued a **Call to Action on Human Rights**, which promised to put human rights at the centre of the UN's work – something that can only happen if civil society is enabled to play a full role. This was

accompanied by UN-wide **guidance** on civic space. But there have been few signs of follow-up. A lack of resources is part of the problem: human rights is supposedly one of the UN's three pillars alongside development and peace and security, but very much the poor relation, receiving only around **four per cent** of regular funding.

Civil society will keep pushing for more ambition. Little progress has been shown so far on implementing the 2021 **Our Common Agenda** report on UN reform. This was already a disappointment for civil society since it paid little heed even to the modest idea of appointing a UN-wide civil society envoy or champion, something that remains urgently needed to help enable civil society's engagement.



UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY:  
NO ROOM FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?

### SOME PROGRESS ON ACCREDITATION

At least a small step forward came in December when nine CSOs received ECOSOC status after years of trying. Accreditation is in the hands of the Committee on NGOs, an ECOSOC subsidiary body of 19 states, and this has a habit of deferring applications from CSOs working on human rights issues that some states object to. Several have faced repeated years of questioning and demands for further documentation, in what has seemed a deliberately attritional process. The longest wait – **15 years** – was experienced by the International

Dalit Solidarity Network, whose accreditation was long held up by India.

When the committee again blocked accreditation for nine CSOs, the **US delegation** pushed instead for the decision to be taken by the larger, 54-member ECOSOC, which voted to accredit them with 24 votes for, 17 against and 11 abstentions. States with serious civic space restrictions almost all voted against accreditation.

Despite the steps taken to clear the way this time, the habit of blocking accreditation remains. In January 2023 the committee recommended one CSO for accreditation but **deferred** another 103. The questions states put to the CSOs denied accreditation made clear their suspicions of CSOs that stand for human rights. The Committee on NGOs is an obstacle to civil society's engagement with the UN and needs urgent reform.

### A TEST OF VALUES FOR INSTITUTIONS

Away from the UN, it was a year of returning for normal for several international organisations, able to hold key summits in person for the first time since the start of the pandemic. The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, the international network of French-speaking countries, held its meeting in Tunisia in November. There was little sign of any attempt to discuss the **increasingly dictatorial** rule of President Kais Saied; rather the meeting offered him valuable prestige.

It was a similar story with the Commonwealth. Just like Tunisia, and like **Egypt with COP27** >

the much-delayed Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, held in June, showed that a dire human rights record is no barrier to hosting an international summit: it was held in Rwanda, where critics of tyrannical President Paul Kagame tend to end up **dead or in jail**.

Another development further suggested the Commonwealth's commitments to democracy and human rights mean little in practice: at the summit, two new countries were welcomed as members – Gabon and Togo. Like other Francophone African countries, they're keen to distance themselves from France, and joining a network of mostly former UK colonies is one way of signalling this.

But neither country remotely meets the supposed entry requirements on democracy and human rights. Neither government allows free and fair elections, and both severely restrict people's rights to organise, protest and speak out. They both have long-standing autocratic presidents who took over from their presidential fathers. Commonwealth membership looks like a way of laundering their reputations.



GABON AND TOGO  
OFFER RENEWED TEST OF  
COMMONWEALTH VALUES

Meanwhile, the Pacific Islands Forum, Oceania's regional cooperation body, met in July. The summit ended harmoniously, helped by the fact that Australia's new government is taking climate change **more seriously**. Regional cooperation however received a setback when Kiribati left the organisation,



citing bias against countries from the Micronesia region. In January 2023 the rift appeared healed when it was **announced** Kiribati was re-joining.

The backdrop to the meeting was China's growing regional role. Just ahead of the summit, China attempted to secure a region-wide economic and security deal. Several states said they needed more time, and collectively they've made clear they expect any partners to commit to strong action on climate change. China continues to pursue bilateral relations with several Pacific Island states, notably Kiribati – a relationship that may have prompted the disagreement – and Solomon Islands. Australia and the USA have been prompted to step up their engagement in response.

It seems clear that to manage both the opportunities and risks enhanced relations may bring, states should work collectively in the Pacific Islands Forum – and they need to ensure they're guided by human rights principles and hear civil society's voices.



**CHANGING TIMES IN OCEANIA?**

## HOPES OF INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

One of the reasons people look to the international system is in the hope of ensuring accountability and justice over human rights violations. 2022 marked 20 years of the Rome Statute, which established the ICC, in charge of investigating

Judge Miatta Maria Samba enters the courtroom for the trial of Mahamat Said Abdel Kani at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, 26 September 2022.

Photo by Peter Dejong/Reuters via Gallo Images

and prosecuting gross human rights crimes. In September an ICC trial **began** of Mahamat Said Abdel Kani, accused of committing crimes against humanity and war crimes as part of an insurgent uprising in the Central African Republic in 2013.

In its two decades, the ICC has prosecuted and convicted several perpetrators of gross human rights abuses. Each prosecution offers some redress to victims and sends a message against impunity. But a key challenge remains: several powerful states – including China, Russia and the USA, three of the five permanent UNSC members – haven't ratified the Rome Statute, limiting the Court's ability to hold them to account.

In the absence of jurisdiction due to non-ratification, the ICC can still act with an UNSC referral – with all the challenges that entails – and its lead official can launch investigations independently. But without state cooperation, little progress can be expected. An international institution set up to compensate for state failures – to prosecute gross crimes when national-level courts are unable or unwilling to – remains vulnerable to state manoeuvrings. This has forced the ICC to take a patchwork approach, investigating and prosecuting when it can.

Ukraine isn't an ICC member either, but following the start of the war, its government granted jurisdiction. In May the ICC sent its **largest-ever** team of investigators to Ukraine to begin collecting evidence. The hope is that one day those behind Russia's crimes can be held to account.

The existence of the ICC keeps hope alive among victims of human rights violations. But the ICC could deliver accountability more effectively if states backing ICC action towards Russia – notably

the USA – took the logical next step and also put themselves under its jurisdiction. They should make it clear they support the institution unconditionally, not only when it suits their agendas.

**"The UN should establish an international tribunal to establish the facts of the Russian Federation's military aggression, while the ICC should consider and promptly rule on war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine."**

 **SASHA ROMANTSOVA**  
Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine



The ICC isn't the sole pathway for international justice. In November Kunti Kamara, a former rebel leader in Liberia's 1989-1996 civil war, received a **life sentence** for crimes against humanity. The trial took place in a French court acting on the principle of universal jurisdiction, which holds that any state may take action in cases involving crimes against international law.

This principle has increasingly been used by European states, including Finland, Germany and Switzerland. In January, Anwar Raslan, a former senior official in Syria's intelligence services, received a life sentence after being **convicted** in Germany of crimes against humanity.

These prosecutions offer hope that, alongside the ICC, there can be multiple and complementary routes to international justice. Civil society has a strong role to play in pushing for more states to exercise the

principle of universal jurisdiction and collecting the evidence that helps hold perpetrators to account.

**"CSOs on the ground have had the opportunity to speak in trials involving Liberians abroad and victims and survivors have had their say. The international community is helping us seek justice by bringing the accused to trial. That makes it unique and important to the quest for justice in Liberia."**

 **ADAMA DEMPSTER**  
Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia



## NEW FRONTIERS IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

International institutions and agreements need to keep evolving to meet and anticipate the challenges of an ever-changing world. The COVID-19 pandemic showed how ill-equipped institutions at all levels are for a global emergency. Lack of preparedness cost millions of lives. State-centric approaches dominated, narrowly defined national interests prevailed and there was little international cooperation. The lessons from the pandemic need to be learned for response to future global crises.

In 2022, drafting began to develop a treaty on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO). This came following extensive civil society

advocacy, which even before COVID-19 struck was calling for stronger international cooperation.

“The principles of equity, transparency and accountability must be built into this treaty. We need to think what needs sorting out or making right, because these are the things we will be held accountable for. Civil society is clearly asking for more say in health issues and in the development of the pandemic treaty, and I think this is truly necessary.”



**BARBARA STOCKING**  
Panel for a Global Public Health Convention

The pandemic **showed** the crucial difference civil society makes in helping communities and upholding rights. Civil society has a role as an official observer at the WHO, but for an inclusive and effective treaty to result, it should be afforded much more scope for influence. Voices from the global south particularly need to be heard, given the vast global inequalities the pandemic exposed.



**PANDEMIC TREATY: WILL THE WORLD BE READY FOR THE NEXT CRISIS?**

Civil society will keep trying to influence other important treaties currently in negotiation, including those on **ocean conservation**, **plastics use** and **business and human rights**. Civil society's positive influence was shown with the agreement of a relatively progressive **Global Biodiversity Framework** in December. The value civil society can bring is further demonstrated by its continuing role in UNAIDS, where civil society representatives serve on the governing body, helping ensure it stays

focused on the people most in need.

“Our purpose is to bring the perspectives and experience of people living with HIV/AIDS and those populations particularly affected by the pandemic, as well as civil society, to ensure that UNAIDS is guided by an equitable, rights-based, gender-sensitive approach to ensuring access to comprehensive HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment, care and support for all people.”



**GASTÓN DEVISICH**  
Fundación Huésped, Argentina

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine aren't the only crises to have exposed the inadequacy of current global governance arrangements. Climate change, a global **hunger crisis**, the soaring cost of living and massive economic inequality all point to abject failures of global governance. The problems of the world are too big to be tackled by states alone. They need global solutions, but for these to be the answers people need, international processes must be open to and enabling of civil society.

Upcoming opportunities should be embraced to push the case for reform. These include the Summit for the Future, due to be held in 2024 to develop a 'Pact for the Future', and before then, a session as part of 2023's high-level UNGA to take stock of progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – an ambitious development agenda that is impossible to achieve without full civil society participation. In these and in all such events civil society needs to be a full partner and its calls to make the institutions of global governance more democratic, responsive and fit to face contemporary challenges must be heard.

## 3 IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1 By starkly exposing the dysfunction of the UNSC, Russia's invasion of Ukraine opened up a unique opportunity for reform. Civil society must work with like-minded states to expand the Council and limit the use of veto power, making it both more inclusive and more effective.
- 2 Greater scrutiny is needed over appointments to senior UN positions, including of the Secretary-General and High Commissioner roles. Civil society must continue to push for transparent selection processes, including dialogue with civil society, and a commitment to select on merit.
- 3 Limited civil society access to intergovernmental forums results in poor outcomes: in the absence of the pressure and influence that civil society exerts, the commitments and standards are often weaker than needed. As a first step towards improving civil society access across the board, the UN should establish a civil society envoy or champion to coordinate engagement.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS





## INTERVIEWS

The analysis contained in this report would not have been possible without the input and insights received from civil society activists, leaders and experts around the world. We're grateful to the following interviewees for helping to inform this report:

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► **Lina Abou Habib**, 'Lebanon: This election has brought to the forefront new voices speaking about rights', 23.May.2022 ► **Bilkis Abouosba**, 'Yemen: Women are completely absent from decision-making bodies; politically we don't exist', 9.Mar.2022 ► **Eucharía Abua**, 'CSW66: UN member states should make efforts to honour their commitments at home', 4.Apr.2022 ► **Banan Abu Zain Eddin**, 'Jordan: Transnational feminist solidarity is vital in the struggle against gender-based violence', 23.Aug.2022 ► **Tamara Adrián**, 'United Nations: The power of anti-rights groups is growing; difficult times lie ahead', 9.Aug.2022 ► **Hadiya Afzal**, 'Afghanistan: Lack of dialogue and punishing sanctions are undermining the promotion of human rights', 30.Sep.2022 ► **Safaath Ahmed Zahir**, 'Maldives: We have come a long way, but more needs to be done to further open up civic space', 17.Oct.2022 ► **Dilan Akbayır**, 'Turkey: Refugees are the perfect scapegoat in times of crisis', 10.Jun.2022 ► **Maria Al Abdeh**, 'Syria: The pandemic added another layer to women's diminished access to healthcare', 4.Mar.2022 ► **Bassam Alahmad**, 'Turkey: Civilian refugees should not be used as political bargaining chips', 13.Jul.2022 ► **Alyaa Al Ansari**, 'Iraq: We've submitted many bills, but parliament refuses to adopt a law against GBV', 7.Mar.2022 ► **Ruth Alipaz Cuqui**, 'Bolivia: To exercise our rights, Indigenous peoples don't need anyone's permission', 10.Feb.2022 ► **Tariq Al-Olaimy**, 'COP27: Climate justice requires debt cancellation, reparations and non-debt climate finance for small island developing states', 1.Nov.2022 ► **Ana Lucía Álvarez**, 'Nicaragua: María Esperanza's case is part of a growing process of criminalisation of social protest', 19.Feb.2022 ► **Alicia Amarilla**, 'Paraguay: As long as land remains in private hands, conflict will continue', 5.Jan.2022 ► **Ghida Anani**, 'Lebanon: Abuses against women are the direct product of the gender imbalances of a patriarchal society', 10.Mar.2022 ► **Cecilia Ananías Soto**, 'Chile: Domestic and care work still falls overwhelmingly on women', 8.Mar.2022 ► **Anonymous Mongolian activist**, 'Mongolia: The government makes decisions without proper consultation', 21.Jul.2022 ► **Anonymous Palestinian activist**, 'Palestine: Colonial powers of the global north have normalised murder and devastation in the global south', 1.Sep.2022 ► **Anonymous Burmese activist**, 'Myanmar: The ruling military junta uses fear as a domination tool', 20.Sep.2022 ► **Catarina Antunes Gomes and Cesaltina Abreu**, 'Angola: Much effort was put into excluding people from the electoral process', 12.Sep.2022 ► **Rachid Aouine**, 'Algeria: The authorities are arresting human rights defenders to suffocate civil society', 16.Mar.2022 ► **Darcy Ataman**, 'Civil society: Music can be an entry point because it's the last thing someone could take away from you', 23.Nov.2022 ► **Arash Azizzada**, 'Afghanistan: The seizure of sovereign assets will worsen the world's worst humanitarian disaster', 3.Oct.2022 ► **Iliana Balabanova**, 'Bulgaria: Women's rights organisations are working together towards the goal of a feminist Europe', 2.Mar.2022 ► **Pascoal Baptistiny**, 'Angola: Chances for real democracy in Angola are quite low', 8.Sep.2022 ► **Carolina Barrero**, 'Cuba: The only options available are prison, exile, or submission', 22.Nov.2022 ► **Marco Antonio Becerra**, 'Chile: There is social consensus that the arbitrary exclusion of diverse families is unacceptable', 18.Feb.2022 ► **Sudha Bharadwaj**, 'India: The government is dealing with dissent in very concerning ways', 16.Feb.2022 ► **Anna Birley**, 'UK: For women to be respected, police reform is necessary but not sufficient', 23.Feb.2022 ► **María Teresa Blandón**, 'Nicaragua: The regime seeks to annihilate all forms of autonomous citizen organisation', 29.Aug.2022 ► **Bold**

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