



## **CIVIC SPACE AND ARBITRARY DETENTION**

**Insights, actions and success stories following the Pledge delivered by CIVICUS at the  
“Human Rights 75” High-level event on 11-12 December 2023,  
Palais des Nations and UNOG Webex**

Human rights defenders, journalists and activists continue to be arbitrarily detained across the globe. Following the Pledge delivered in the Context of the Human Rights 75 high-level event on 11-12 December 2023 (*see Pledge in Annex II*), the CIVICUS’s UN Geneva has prioritised arbitrary detention as a cross-cutting theme for the years 2024-2025 and has incorporated a specific focus on arbitrary detention in many of its UN Human Rights Council interventions centered on civic space issues. More generally, CIVICUS has continued to engage to support the release of wrongfully detained human rights defenders and activists through various actions, campaigns, and broader advocacy efforts.

CIVICUS's position is that those deemed arbitrarily detained by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention for exercising their core civic freedoms must be immediately and unconditionally released. CIVICUS's Stand As My Witness Campaign (SAMW) highlights particular cases of arbitrary detention, amplifying the voices of unjustly imprisoned human rights defenders and underscoring the urgent need for a concrete action plan to prevent and put an end to arbitrary arrest and detention on the international level. Since the end of 2023 we have featured new cases, whilst we have proudly removed others following their recent release.

Throughout 2024, CIVICUS has drawn attention to specific cases of unlawful detention in its thematic and country-focused statements at the UN Human Rights Council. In the context of the Human Rights 75 high-level event CIVICUS co-organised a side event, in collaboration with OMCT, FIDH and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights, on '*Censorship by Detention: real life impact and how to address it*', which included interventions from CIVICUS's members who were held arbitrarily detained under fabricated charges.

During the 55th session of the UN Human Rights Council, CIVICUS highlighted specific cases of arbitrary detention in the Democratic Republic of Congo and *incommunicado* detention cases in Venezuela, and highlighted the widespread use of arbitrary detention in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Over time, we have repeatedly highlighted cases of arbitrary detentions of human rights defenders such as Rocio San Miguel, Javier Tarazona and journalist Carlos Julio Rojas as a pattern of persecution to silence critical voices and prevent mobilization in a country, Venezuela, that has been high on the list of our advocacy priorities throughout 2024. We also highlighted the arbitrary detention of youth human rights defenders in Venezuela, before and after the Presidential elections of 28 July 2024.



At the 55<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council CIVICUS co-organised with FORUM-ASIA an event '*Shaping Asia's human rights future with youth human rights defenders*', which drew attention to considerable risks and attacks by both state and non-state actors ranging from arbitrary arrest to unlawful detention and judicial harassment facing human rights defenders in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the context of the Interactive Dialogue on Eritrea, for instance, CIVICUS highlighted how the gravity of violations of the right to a fair trial targeting peaceful protesters who continue to be subject to the threat of prolonged or indefinite periods of detention *de facto* results in arbitrary detention.

CIVICUS has continued to work on the release of all members of the Viasna Human Rights Centre, including those held in pre-trial detention, and in addition brought to the attention of the Council the cases of Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, Andrey Gnyot, and activists from the Nobel prize-nominated NGO, Our House.

In our thematic statement we presented our concerns across diverse geographical contexts around the widespread use of arbitrary arrest and detention as prominent tactics used to disperse and punish peaceful protesters in 2023, including in combination with the unlawful or excessive use of force by law enforcement, as documented by the CIVICUS's Monitor research findings.

In the context of the 57<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council, CIVICUS advocated for the release of thousands of protesters in Bangladesh, calling for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to undertake investigations into allegations of serious human rights violations in the context of youth-led protests. We also called for the release 65 individuals that had been arrested in Zimbabwe and remained unlawfully detained on charges related to unlawful gatherings.

Women human rights defenders remain among the most targeted groups, as our CIVICUS Monitor findings have documented. CIVICUS took a strong stance on the release of journalist Sandra Muhoza who should not have been imprisoned in the first place just like other human rights defenders in Burundi, while welcoming the release of a journalist and human rights defender, Floriane Irangabiye, convicted from a flawed trial in 2022, who was previously part our Stand as my Witness Campaign. CIVICUS also engaged a previously detained journalist and women human rights defender in Burundi to support these efforts. Nasrin Sotoudeh, a well renowned Iranian women's rights defender and lawyer, known for her courage in standing against Iran's discriminatory laws, has faced multiple imprisonments. She was released on medical parole in late November last year. Further, CIVICUS undertook



advocacy actions to enable the release of Virginia Laparra a Guatemalan prosecutor who fought corruption faced detention under politically motivated charges. She is now in exile.

In addition, we called for the release of unlawfully arrested and arbitrarily detained award-winning Cambodian journalist Mech Dara who was released on bail in October and youth activist Koet Saray who was sentenced to 4 years jail in November. We also took a strong stance to enable the release of the five young activists from the award-winning Mother Nature Movement who have been sentenced to between six and eight years in prison for their efforts to protect Cambodia's environment.

José Rubén Zamora, a journalist, outspoken critic of corruption, and founder of *El Periódico* newspaper, was conditionally released in October 2024 to be placed under house arrest after spending 2 years behind bars. However, on 15 November 2024, the Guatemalan Appeals Court overturned the lower court's decision, consequently ordering his return to jail for his money laundering case to be reheard. We recently added Thai human rights defenders and lawyer Arnon Nampa to our SAMW Campaign and called for his immediate release, including outside the UN context. Arnon Nampa was wrongly imprisoned and recently sentenced to 16 years' jail. In celebration of the International Women Human Rights Defenders Day and 16 Days of Activism, we honored the work of Women Human Rights Defenders and sustained our call for their freedom. We also called for due process and release of Kamira Nait Sid from Algeria, the co-president of the World Amazigh Congress who was released in October 2024 but was set for another trial in November.

Meanwhile, we expressed concerns about 300 political prisoners and 23 journalists unlawfully detained in Azerbaijan as the host of this year's Conference of Parties on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and called for the release of Anar Mammadli, Head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center and co-founder of the Climate and Justice Initiative, and prominent researcher and peace activist Bahruz Samadov.

We also called on the release of hundreds of human rights defenders and activists, including young protesters, who were arbitrarily imprisoned for their participation in the protests that took place in Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, whilst we have been seeking to respond to the arrest and detention of more than a hundred youthful protestors in Uganda and more recently to arbitrary recently who took to social media in July to plan an anti-corruption protest, and more recently in Mozambique where hundreds of children have also been detained following nation-wide post-election protests. Additionally, through CIVICUS's Freedom of Peaceful Assembly (FoPA) workstream particularly, the WeRise Campaign, support was provided to Hope Behind Bars, a Nigerian non-profit organization, to advance



their legal aid and representation efforts. A significant achievement during Cycle 2 of their project activities was securing the release of at least 30 minors who were arbitrarily detained during the #EndBadGovernance protest in August 2024. These minors, alongside 76 others, had been charged with treason a capital offense punishable by death. Following sustained legal advocacy, on November 4, 2024, President Bola Tinubu directed their release.

In the margins of the 57<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council CIVICUS hosted in collaboration with RIDHE a side event focused on '*Transnational repression in the Americas Region*', which also highlighted - among other things - interlinkages between patterns of arbitrary detention and transnational repression in the focus region. In Venezuela and Nicaragua transnational repression has intensified with the persecution and detention of prominent human rights defenders.

Throughout 2024 CIVICUS has advocated for the mainstreaming of arbitrary detention issues into key UN Human Rights Council Resolutions and analyzed a number of Resolutions from the perspective of possible implication on unlawful detention. For instance, the latest Resolution on Independence and Impartiality of Judges and Independence of Lawyers focused on the use of digital technologies and the inclusion of language addressing serious concerns relating to the potential negative impact on international fair trial standards could also have a positive impact in terms of addressing the increase in the systematic use of arbitrary detention as a top violation of core civic freedoms at the global level.

CIVICUS has also noted during a meeting with the OHCHR's Reprisals Team and the Assistant Secretary-General the need to further explore interlinkages between patterns of reprisals for cooperation with the UN and patterns of arbitrary detention on a global level, and to reflect those into the annual report on Reprisals for Cooperation with the UN. CIVICUS will also provide data on the possible interlinkages, where available.

CIVICUS's People Power Under Attack 2024 report highlights the detention of protesters as the most prevalent violation of civic freedoms, recorded in at least 76 countries. Our 2024 People Power Under Attack Report features among the top 10 violations of core civic freedoms the arbitrary detention of human rights defenders, which ranks third for the year 2024. This calls for sustained action to enable the prompt release of thousands of peaceful protestors and human rights defenders. We will seek to address this worrying trend through a number of actions, including upgrade of our SAMW Campaign and engagement on the upcoming UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Human Rights Defenders, proposing concrete asks for the High Commissioner to be included in the Resolution, and other advocacy actions around specific cases on wrongfully detained human rights defenders and



activists. CIVICUS has been part of the steering group of SOS-Defenders, the newly formed platform by the OMCT and Network on the arbitrary detention of human rights defenders around the world which aims to give visibility, empower and protect those who tirelessly stand up for human rights and suffer arbitrary detention for their action.

CIVICUS is also in the process of exploring participation in other collective advocacy efforts, including the RIGHT Coalition (Resisting Illegal Government detentions and Hostage Taking), recently founded and led by the Human Rights Foundation, particularly in Workstream 2 focused on arbitrary detentions of citizens to suppress dissent in order to: explore policy options that may be existing in order to strengthen the work of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; develop of a possible list of Arbitrarily Detained Individuals or Countries of Concern based on CIVICUS's resources, among others; undertake Individual Case Advocacy and Government Advocacy.



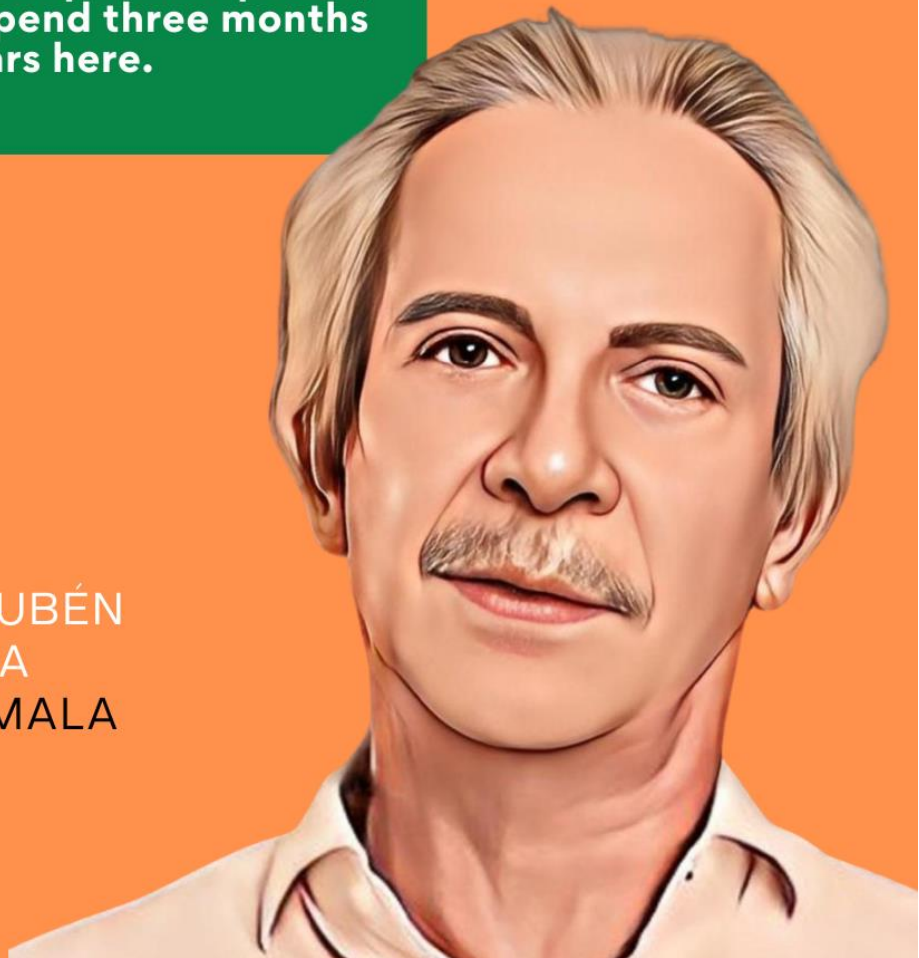
**Annex I**

#StandAsMyWitness



**I won't give up. I'm at peace,  
ready to spend three months  
or 100 years here.**

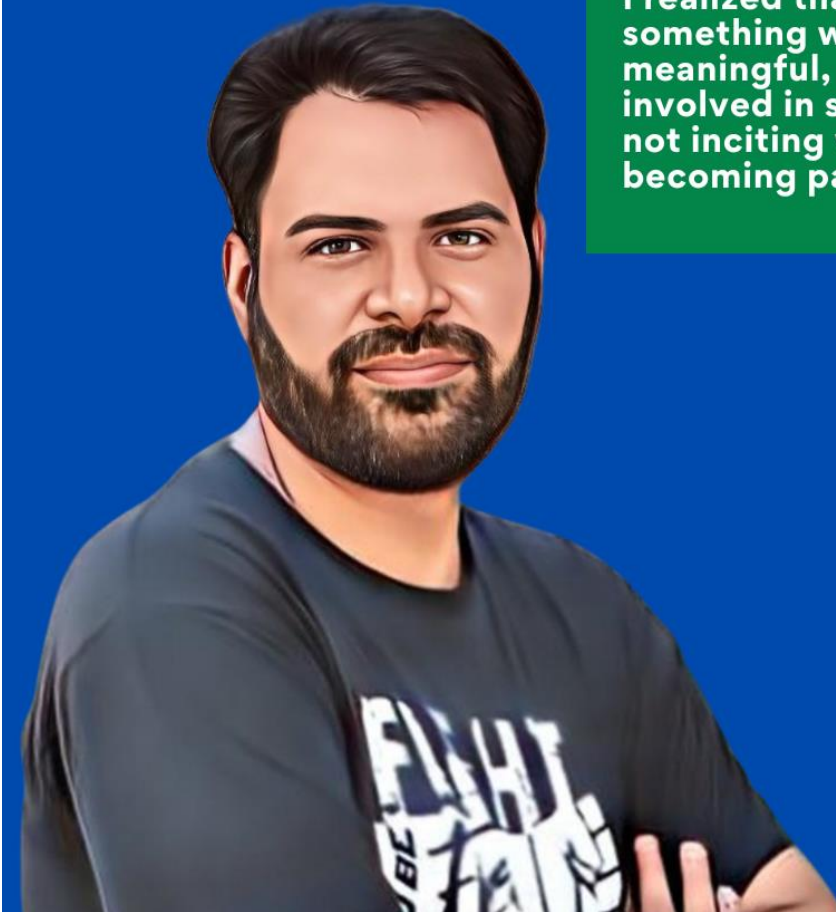
**JOSÉ RUBÉN  
ZAMORA  
GUATEMALA**





**#StandAsMyWitness**

**KHURRAM  
PARVEZ  
INDIA**



**I realized that I can do something which is more meaningful, where I would be involved in saving lives and not inciting violence, and not becoming part of revenge.**



**#StandAsMyWitness**

**NARGES  
MOHAMMADI  
IRAN**



**“Killing, imprisoning or denying the rights of a human being is not injustice against one person; it enchains and kills a whole society.”**





**#StandAsMyWitness**

**CHOW  
HANG-TUNG  
HONG KONG**



**It is actually a great fortune to be able to fight for one's own ideas. How many people in the world have such an opportunity? Against the biggest Communist dictatorship in the world, no less. What a challenge. So don't feel sad for me. We think that way because we regard ourselves as passive victims...**

**I will not help you spread fear.**



**#StandAsMyWitness**

**ABDUL-HADI  
AL-KHAWAJA  
BAHRAIN**



**If I die, I ask the people to  
continue on the path of  
peaceful resistance. I don't  
want anybody to be hurt  
in my name.**





## Annex II

### Pledge

#### **“Human Rights 75” High-level event**

11-12 December 2023, Palais des Nations and UNOG Webex

CIVICUS’s Pledge

*Delivered by Jessica Corredor Villamil, Chief Officer, Advocacy and Solidarity Action*

**Theme: Civic space and arbitrary detention**

Thank you for giving me the floor.

We, CIVICUS, have committed and will commit to **securing human rights** with our **solemn belief**. We believe that a well-established civil society contributes to the **protection, promotion, and ultimately to the advancement of human rights**. In other words, forming a dynamic, diverse, and independent civil society, where the **rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly are guaranteed**, is a key element in achieving sustainable human rights protection.

Achieving the goal of strengthening civil society for expanded civic and democratic space takes numerous efforts and even sacrifices. Human rights defenders, journalists, and protestors on the ground have strived to emphasize the **voices of excluded groups, strengthen civil society, and pursue duly enjoyment of human rights** even at the expense of their lives. CIVICUS has prioritized putting every possible effort for those who were arbitrarily **detained for the exercise of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and expression**, to be released without any conditions and to prevent this measure from happening in violation of **international human rights law and human rights standards**.

The victims of arbitrary detentions are **deprived of means to defend themselves from extrajudicial execution, enforced disappearances, torture and other** cruel treatments, without being informed of when those pains would end. Particularly, many of these **victims** are themselves **members of historically excluded groups**. In this regard, we have publicly operated the **#StandAsMyWitness Campaign**, which allows anybody who desires to speak up to **add voice, take actions, and call for the immediate release** of unduly imprisoned human rights defenders.

Geneva, 12 of December 2024



Arbitrary detention is directly **conducive to discontinuance of various forms of civil society movements**. In this context, we, CIVICUS, strongly emphasize **four pledges**. First, we pledge to continue putting every possible effort to urge the States in which arrest and detention of human rights defenders have been found to be arbitrary to **release them immediately and without any conditions, and we pledge to stand behind them with resilience and solidarity**.

Second, we pledge to **keep denouncing the systematic violations of the right to freedom from arbitrary detention by States**, calling for attention on those situations of arbitrary detention that result from **previous cooperation with the United Nations or other international mechanisms** in the area of human rights.

Third, we pledge to **build the capacities** of civil society actors, including human rights defenders, to advocate for relevant laws, policies, and mechanisms aimed at creating and maintaining a safe and enabling environment to **prevent threats and attacks that may lead to arbitrary arrests** and unlawful detention.

Fourth, we pledge to continue calling for **investigations of any alleged cases of arbitrary detention**, to ensure access to **justice and accountability**, and to end **impunity** where such violations and abuses have occurred. Lastly, we pledge **not to be frightened of fully exercising** the rights to **freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and expression** by confidently **denouncing acts of intimidation, threats, and reprisals** targeting individuals belonging to **excluded groups** who are particularly exposed to unlawful practices such as **arbitrary detention**.

We are confident that our joint efforts will contribute to preventing arbitrary detention, as a violation of **international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and civil society space**, from happening anymore.

We thank you.