



Input: Reflections on the super election year and its global impact on the protection of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (FoPAA) and for ensuring effective and inclusive public participation

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Introduction

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation provides the following information to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association (FoAA) in their preparation of a thematic report that seeks to identify the main challenges related to the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the "super election year" (2024) and global repercussions on the protection of these fundamental rights.

In this document, CIVICUS highlights emblematic case studies from different contexts and outlines its primary recommendations to Governments and to the United Nations and International Bodies, drawing from existing practices employed by the organization in mapping civic space restrictions globally, on an annual basis, which involve extensively utilizing civil society generated data.

The input also examines critical challenges and concerns regarding restrictions to the rights of freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the current global context and related attacks and threats against civil society across different electoral contexts documented through the CIVICUS Monitor and the organization's ongoing research and analysis initiative, CIVICUS LENS. The report draws mainly on these sources as well as on input shared by CIVICUS' country members and partners in Georgia, Guatemala, Mexico, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia. Finally, the submission highlights the enabling role played by the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association towards ensuring inclusive, participatory and more credible elections.

Documented information and data on main trends related to the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the year 2024

Freedoms of peaceful assembly and association (FoPAA) are the cornerstone of a vibrant civil society and key enablers of other civic freedoms, including meaningful participation and the right to vote. FoPAA are essential to the collective civic action that underpins the protection of democracy and exercise of all human rights at all levels.

As the global alliance of civil society, CIVICUS is committed to providing a comprehensive assessment of civic space conditions across local, national, regional, and international levels. The CIVICUS Monitor, a participatory research initiative, focuses on evaluating the respect for freedoms of association and peaceful assembly in law, policy, and practice within countries and over time.

In 2024, 64 countries held their national elections, with a big part of the global population casting ballots. Consequently, this “super election year” is set to leave a lasting impact on the civic and political landscape. However, not all electoral processes ensured fair, free, and credible elections. In some cases, notable electoral and human rights violations and abuses, including grave violations related to the exercise of fundamental freedoms were recorded throughout the electoral cycle.

What emerged from the polls was the realization that democracy is at a critical juncture worldwide, especially with the trend of rigged or stolen elections becoming increasingly common. Across different geographical and electoral contexts, from Russia to Venezuela, from India to Bangladesh, from Georgia to Rwanda, elections in various nations ruled by authoritarian regimes have been marred by electoral fraud and voter intimidation or suppression. In many cases, these rulers have used state-controlled media, election law manipulation, and surveillance tactics to suppress opposition and limit fundamental rights. These abuses represent not just a threat to the basic rights and fundamental freedoms of citizens all over the world, but to the ideals of democratic governance that have long been a hallmark of the current global order.

The “super election year” has shown both victories and significant setbacks for democracy globally: “autocratic elections”, alongside new and emerging trends related to the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, as well as freedom of opinion and expression, are a real and unprecedented threat to core civic freedoms underpinning democracy.

In pre-electoral contexts, opposition parties have faced significant restrictions, including being denied the right to hold campaign rallies or being outright excluded from participating in the elections. On a global level, these violations have clearly undermined and weakened the right of association. Additionally, during multiple electoral cycles, draconian laws have been crafted to limit the right of peaceful assembly of civil society organisations (CSOs) as a mechanism of controlling their activities and advocacy efforts. Several “foreign agents’ laws”, such as the one adopted in Georgia, or specific laws like the Kenyan “Assembly and Demonstration Bill 2024” posed as clear and concerning examples of this trend.¹ As a result, protests voicing dissent against the government and restrictive electoral processes have erupted worldwide. In response, state authorities have used excessive force to stop these protests or directly prohibited them, blatantly violating the rights to peaceful assembly and association.

¹ While Kenya had general elections in 2022, the recent developments are rooted in the contentious 2022 general elections.

In addition, in post-election environments, such as in the case of Mozambique, protests have erupted against the election process and electoral results, with consequent government crackdown including the firing of live ammunition against protesters, and riots that have left dozens dead, over a hundred injured, and thousand arrested.

As highlighted in the “People Power Under Attack 2024” report by the CIVICUS Monitor, the detention of protesters and human rights defenders has emerged as one of the most prevalent violations in 2024, with more than 1,350 violations of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association recorded. Pro-democracy activists and political opposition figures have borne the brunt of repression in this “super election year”, especially in the regions of Africa, Asia, and Middle East and North Africa. In several countries, authorities have employed violent repression, including killings, disappearances, and torture to create a climate of fear aimed at silencing dissent throughout the electoral cycle.

In 2024, among the three freedoms monitored by the CIVICUS Monitor - namely, freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression - violations of freedoms of peaceful assembly made up 29 percent of total violations, and freedom of association violations constituted 26 percent. Overall, the CIVICUS Monitor documented over 700 violations of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and over 650 violations of the right to freedom of association during the reporting period, many of which occurred in electoral contexts

In addition, in 2024 almost a third of the world’s population was living in countries with closed civic space. This is one of the highest percentages since 2018, when CIVICUS began systematically tracking civic space conditions around the world. This startling decline – from 26 per cent living in closed countries in 2018 to 30 per cent today – points to a major civic space crisis that requires immediate, global efforts to reverse. The "super election year" has exacerbated many of the trends previously documented by CIVICUS.

CIVICUS recorded a slight decrease in completely closed civic spaces globally in 2024, compared with 2023. However, compared with 2023, an additional 1.5 percentage points of the global population now lives in a repressed or closed country. In 2024 CIVICUS also recorded a slightly higher percentage of humanity living in open countries, where civic space is both free and protected, with 3.6 per cent of the world’s population enjoying the freedom to associate, demonstrate and express dissent without significant constraints, down from almost four per cent just five years ago but up from over one per cent compared with 2023. Since the previous edition of this report, civic space ratings have changed for 18 countries, with a remarkable deterioration in civil society conditions in nine countries.

According to our analysis, governments use a range of tactics to stifle the right to protest. Even where some election-related protests were peaceful and passed without incident, others were disrupted, prevented or dispersed by security forces, which in many cases used excessive force. Opposition protests were subjected to violations, including detention of protesters, both ahead of and after elections.

Case studies: main violations related to the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association in an electoral context

Elections in many jurisdictions have been jeopardised by unlawful use of force, excessive violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions and other human rights violations and abuses targeting primarily political leaders and opposition candidates, human rights defenders and activists, journalists and election observers. Select regional examples are presented below. The examples are only an illustrative selection and not an exhaustive list.

Africa

In Rwanda, opposition voices faced abuse, prosecution, enforced disappearances and unexplained deaths ahead of the July 2024 election. In Madagascar, politician Marie Jeanne d'Arc Masy Goulamaly was forcibly removed from her home in May 2024 after exposing election irregularities. During the boycott elections protests in Antananarivo, protestors and by-standers were tear-gassed and assaulted by the law enforcement agents. In Senegal there has been a serious erosion in civic space and civic freedoms, with hundreds of opposition members and activists arrested in the lead up to elections that were slated for February.

Americas

In Guatemala there were growing concerns about civic restrictions, particularly those affecting Indigenous Peoples during post-election protests, as well as threats and harassment against activists and the closure of media outlets. The particular case of Guatemala gained notoriety mainly when it comes to excluded groups, by the indigenous community in Guatemala, who led a 106-day resistance to hold elections in the country. Dialogue has been established with certain sectors of the population, mainly departmental governors of the indigenous population, trying to rescue their historical value taking into account the most recent events of the 106-day resistance. Although it is only a year since the new government took office, there is reportedly openness to dialogue with different sectors of social organizations. In the year of management of the new government, while there have not been initiatives to defend excluded groups, there has been a promotion of dialogue and joint work with the indigenous population and other excluded groups such as the LGBTIQ community, feminist movements, etc. These positive developments during the electoral period laid the groundwork for strengthening peaceful meetings, despite a notable police presence that aimed to terrorize the population.

In Mexico, there was a surge in political violence, making it the most violent electoral process since 2018, with attacks against local officials nationwide, reflecting the growing influence of criminal groups seeking to control political spheres. During Mexico's recent

general elections, several actions and proposals have raised concerns about potential restrictions on democratic rights, particularly affecting those expressing dissent or advocating for human rights.

- Proposed electoral reforms aimed at restructuring the National Electoral Institute. These proposals included reducing the number of councilors and electing electoral judges by popular vote, as well as eliminating proportional representation seats in the legislature. In response, nationwide protests, dubbed the "march for democracy" were organized in February 2024.
- Proposed constitutional amendments in August 2024 sought to undermine judicial independence, potentially affecting the judiciary's ability to act as a check on executive power.

The period leading up to the elections was generally marked by violence targeting political figures and election-related disorders. Mexico has implemented several legislative and policy measures aimed at enhancing the political participation of historically excluded groups, including women, indigenous communities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. While these initiatives have led to notable progress, gender-based political violence continues to be a concern, with female candidates and politicians facing threats and aggression. Other proposed electoral reforms, such as those targeting Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE) and the congressional structure, have raised concerns about potential impacts on minority representation. During Mexico's recent election cycles, authorities have implemented measures to uphold the right to peaceful assembly, aiming to address challenges faced by excluded groups. However, the effectiveness of these measures has been mixed, with ongoing concerns about violence and discrimination impacting excluded groups. The INE and the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary (TEPJF) have developed protocols to facilitate peaceful assemblies and ensure inclusive participation. For instance, the TEPJF has engaged in international jurisdictional electoral accompaniment to strengthen electoral integrity and address issues related to excluded groups. Despite these frameworks, excluded groups continue to face significant obstacles. Reports indicate that violence perpetrated by organized criminals, corruption among government officials, and human rights abuses by both state and nonstate actors contribute to a climate of fear and impunity, deterring these groups from participating fully in peaceful assemblies.

In Venezuela, the government intensified violence to suppress peaceful protests after the July 2024 election. At least 25 people were killed and over 1,600 detained on terrorism-related charges, including 114 teenagers as well as individual representing excluded groups such as people with disability and Indigenous peoples, whilst more than 2,000 prisoners have been held in arbitrary detention in Tocarón and Tocuyito because of post-electoral demonstrations. Amid persecution, reprisals, enforced disappearances and impunity for grave human rights violations, the use of lethal

weapons by alleged security forces and armed civilians linked to those forces in the context of protests has been identified as a recurring trend in the country, which complemented post-electoral violence and the approval of the Law for the Control, Regularisation, Performance and Financing of Non-Profit Social Organisations giving the government new powers to arbitrarily restrict and close NGOs.

Asia

Bangladesh kicked off the year with a general election tainted with a repressive crackdown on opposition parties, media, and voting irregularities. Nearly 10,000 opposition figures and activists were arrested on fabricated charges following protests against the ruling party, and more than 5,500 were injured. There were also raids on the homes of opposition leaders, attacks as well as allegations of torture and ill-treatment in detention.

In Cambodia, the opposition was targeted ahead of the provincial and district council elections. Opposition supporter San Bunchhay was severely beaten by six masked assailants in April 2024, while Sun Chanthy, the president of the Nation Power Party (NPP) was charged for "incitement" and eventually convicted for meeting supporters in Japan.

In India, in the months prior to the elections, opposition lawmakers faced suspensions, surveillance, and arrests. Among them were several Aam Aadmi Party leaders who were held in pre-trial detention on fabricated charges. For instance, Arvind Kejriwal, leader of the Aam Aadmi Party was arrested the day before the elections by federal investigators on money laundering accusations.

In Indonesia, there were numerous attacks and restrictions on election events. In February 2024, university students holding an event related to the elections at Trilogi university in Jakarta were attacked by a group of unknown persons. In the same month, a gathering and discussion on elections that was planned by the students of Yogyakarta State University and other academics was arbitrarily blocked. Two human rights organisations - KontraS and YLBHI - faced intimidation for their human rights work leading up to the February 2024 elections. There was a brutal crackdown by police and the military on protests in August 2024 across cities over plans to pass an amendment to a regional election law. Over 200 protesters, including minors, young people and students, were arbitrarily arrested and some were denied access to legal aid. During the election period, many groups have been victimized in civil liberties issues such as indigenous peoples, human rights defenders, journalists and environmental activists. In addition, we have witnessed several incidents in the situation of freedom of assembly, such as violence in August #EmergencyWarning, when the police and military officers became the perpetrators of violence against the participants of the action. The mobilisation of the State Civil Apparatus and the appointment of Acting Regional Heads:

vacant public positions have provided a platform for Presidential intervention to influence the outcomes of the 2024 elections. The mobilisation of the State Apparatus remains one of the most prominent violations in the 2024 elections. Several village and sub-district heads have reportedly urged their citizens to support specific candidates, coordinating activities and even producing videos. While the rights of LGBTQ groups and other excluded groups were formally protected in the elections, in terms of the right to be elected for them to advance in the constellation as candidates, this has proved to be very unlikely considering that there are many efforts by both State institutions that reject their existence. Likewise, civil society that gathers to support candidates who are not supported by power are likely to become public enemies, and even experience dissolution. This has happened to activists such as Rocky Gerung, Riki Harun and several activists who have supported Anies in the 2024 elections.

In Pakistan on 3 March 2024, police arrested over 100 supporters of detained opposition leader Imran Khan in rallies against alleged vote rigging in the February 2024 general election. In this year's elections in Pakistan and India, authoritarianism trickled into electoral exercises where an illegal crackdown on the opposition and targeted detentions of critical voices was pervasive.

The elections of Sri Lanka, similarly to the aftermath of the elections in Bangladesh saw young people expressing discontent with the authoritarian *status quo* and demanding democratic reform. In Sri Lanka the most recent general election was a historic one, providing a wider space for women candidates. In the current parliament, 21 women have been elected out of 225 seats (9.8%). This figure has typically not exceeded 2.5% since independence. Women have been involved in election campaigns mostly without significant dissent. However, following the election, there have been some negative developments. Two peaceful student protests were disrupted by police intervention, despite their non-violent nature. Recently, Additionally, in the post-election context, the government has recently recommended re-registration for CSOs that are not aligned with the government's agenda. Reportedly, police and armed forces have begun collecting information on CSO leaders, adding significant pressure.

Europe

In Georgia, in response to the mass protests against the 'foreign agents' law, police responded with rubber bullets, teargas and water cannon. Numerous videos have shown police using excessive force against protesters and there are credible allegations of severe ill-treatment of protesters in detention. Georgians are still mobilising nationwide and demonstrating against the Georgian Dream party, whose policies put the nation's hopes of joining Europe at greater risk. The current wave of protests erupted on 30 November, after Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia would suspend EU accession talks until 2028. Over the past year, Georgia has seen the right to protest not just constrained but effectively rebranded as a privilege—sparingly granted

and heavily regulated. Unprecedented mass protests only seemed to inspire even harsher legislative crackdowns, leaving the right to protest today more elusive than ever. In late 2023, ahead of the elections, Georgia's parliament expedited amendments to the "Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations," restricting the use of temporary structures, such as tents, at protests. Passed within three days, the law significantly interferes with the freedom of expression and assembly by banning such forms of protest. Violations allow police to impose fines ranging from 500 to 5,000 GEL, detain individuals for up to 15 days, and confiscate the prohibited structures. Following this, the legislative body focused its efforts on shaping the pre-election environment to accommodate manipulated outcomes. A series of laws were enacted, which, if effectively implemented, would not only facilitate election rigging but also suppress protest movements with greater ease. Two major laws and measures were adopted prior to the polls of 26 October:

- Adoption of the "Russian Law": In April 2024, the government re-initiated the previously failed legislative initiative - the so-called law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" ("Russian Law"). Despite mass protests within the country and extremely harsh reactions from Georgia's Western partners, the government still passed the law. The events surrounding the adoption of the law have negatively impacted the electoral processes.
- Assigning Zviad Kharebashvili, a US Sanctioned Police Official, known for violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, to creating "Territorial Groups" Supposedly Responsible for Ensuring Election Day Security: On September 30, 2024, the Minister of Internal Affairs issued an order to create "groups responsible for the prevention of violations of law and response to these violations" - the so-called "territorial groups" in Georgia's regions and Tbilisi. These groups can lawfully come into play even when there is a "flow of crowd" near the polling station.

In addition, the homophobic and transphobic law "On the Protection of Family Values and Minors," adopted in September ahead of the elections, came into force on 2 December. The new law sets legal grounds to restrict protests for LGBTQIA+ rights, preventing people from exercising their right to freedom of assembly to call for better conditions. The freedom of assembly for LGBTQ+ individuals was severely restricted during the pre-election period, effectively preventing them from gathering as a group and voicing their needs. However, members of the community have managed to participate in protests individually. Nevertheless, it is evident to every member of the community that they risk becoming targets of individual attacks.

In the wake of the adoption of the Russian law, aimed at demonizing civil society in Georgia, relations between the government and CSOs critically deteriorated during the pre-election period, exhausting all possibilities for cooperation. Prominent figures from non-governmental organizations frequently became victims of violence during the election period, with the aim not only of punishing them but also of instilling fear

throughout this sector. In the lead-up to the elections, protests were met with severe and brutal suppression, while the government occasionally resorted to police brutality and deployed "titushky" — government-aligned thugs — to intimidate and assault demonstrators, it largely allowed the protests to continue until they naturally subsided. By the time elections arrived, the energy of the spring protests had waned and many young protesters, disheartened by the lack of tangible results, abandoned their efforts. Instances of targeted arrests and assaults on prominent activists by regime-affiliated actors were framed as isolated occurrences, further enabling the government to sidestep broader accountability. Although protest activity diminished during the election period, the recent mass demonstrations that began on 28 November are systemic. Protesters have employed various methods to express their dissent, including the use of pyrotechnics and laser devices, both of which were recently banned by the government through expedited legislative initiatives.

Middle East and Northern Africa

In 2024, several countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region held elections, notably Algeria and Tunisia. These electoral processes were marred by significant human rights concerns, particularly regarding the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the inclusivity of public participation.

In [Algeria](#), the September 7 election was characterized by low voter turnout and allegations of irregularities. Incumbent H.E. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune was declared the winner with 94.65% of the votes, despite turnout figures indicating less than 25% participation. The National Independent Authority for Elections (ANIE) reported an average participation rate of 48.03%, which was contested by all candidates. Defeated candidates accused the ANIE of fraud and aimed to appeal to the Constitutional Court. The significant abstention rate and the regime's disconnection from society have led experts to foresee a turbulent second term for Tebboune, characterized by potential repression and social discord.

In [Iran](#), the majority of voters boycotted the 2024 parliamentary election, whilst all viable opposition was banned from running. Prior to the elections, civil society came under intensified attack by the authorities, with violent repression and arbitrary arrests and detainments. In June alone, least 300 activists and users of social media networks were summoned, arrested or charged for publicly criticizing former President Ebrahim Raisi while others were targeted by state security agencies for criticizing the presidential election.

In [Tunisia](#), during the 2024 electoral period, several measures and actions were observed that directly or indirectly restricted the exercise of fundamental rights, particularly freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Civil society faced increasing restrictions, including heightened surveillance of the activities of SCOs. Administrative obstacles were imposed, such as frequent and oppressive audits targeting associations. Abusive controls were applied to international grants, with banks refusing to accept

transfers for associations originating from international sources. The authorities or affiliated actors encouraged or tolerated defamation campaigns against human rights activists, journalists, and CSOs. These individuals and groups were often labeled as "enemies of the state" or "foreign agents." Such campaigns also stigmatized human rights defenders and undermined their ability to operate freely and exercise their rights. The combination of arrests, restrictions on civil society, misuse of laws, and defamation campaigns has created an environment of fear and repression in Tunisia during the electoral period, limiting the ability of individuals and organizations to advocate for human rights and participate in the democratic process. Several specific legislative and policy measures have had a significant negative impact on the ability of citizens, particularly excluded groups to freely and without discrimination participate in the electoral process. November 2024 was marked by a massive campaign of arrests targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, whilst propaganda and hate-incitement campaigns were conducted against excluded groups, including women, LGBTQ+ community, and migrants with a view to discouraging them from actively participating in the electoral process. The Tunisian authorities have adopted a closed approach, systematically ignoring initiatives by CSOs aiming to contribute to improving the electoral process. The authorities also filed complaints against organizations working on electoral monitoring and integrity, such as I WATCH and Mourakiboun, who were targeted by accusations and smear campaigns orchestrated by the authorities. During the electoral cycle in Tunisia, the state significantly reduced its interactions with civil CSOs and citizens regarding decision-making and policy development. This breakdown in communication had profound consequences on democratic dialogue and citizen participation, creating an atmosphere of distrust and exclusion. The Tunisian authorities employed indirect methods to prevent peaceful demonstrations, notably by systematically blocking access to designated gathering locations. This strategy involved closing roads, setting up security checkpoints, and deploying law enforcement to deter citizens from assembling. While these measures did not officially ban protests, they effectively made organizing them nearly impossible, undermining the right to peaceful assembly. Simultaneously, targeted arrests of presidential election candidates severely compromised the conduct of a fair and democratic electoral campaign. In addition to administrative restrictions, defamation and intimidation campaigns were launched against CSOs, accusing them of being manipulated by foreign agendas or destabilizing the state. Massive and arbitrary arrests of activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and members of excluded groups have severely weakened their ability to organize and protest. These arrests, often justified by vague charges such as "disturbance of public order" or "spreading false information," have created a climate of widespread fear, discouraging citizens, particularly those from excluded groups from claiming their rights. In Tunisia, the electoral process was undermined by last-minute amendments to the electoral law, exclusion and arrest of opposition candidates, and arbitrary measures against political opponents, independent media, and civil society backed by President Kais Saied's

campaign of repression and non-competitive election. On 27 September Tunisia's Assembly of the Representatives of the People passed a new law that stripped the Administrative Court of its jurisdiction in electoral matters, preventing it from acting as a check on abuses. Following mass arrests, over 170 people were detained on political grounds or for exercising their fundamental rights, including more than 110 connected to the Ennahda opposition party. The electoral commission arbitrarily denied accreditation to election observers and targeted the media.

Attacks on journalists in the 2024 electoral context, rising misinformation, and digital repression

In this "super election year", the attack on journalists has also been identified as the second most common violation by the "People Power Under Attack 2024" report, with violations documented in at least 49 countries. Authorities have targeted free speech to silence critical and dissenting information of public significance during elections, using various tactics such as arbitrary detentions, threats, and intimidation. These violations have come from both state and non-state actors, who have sought to persecute journalists and prevent information about corruption and human rights abuses from reaching the public, information that could have contributed to freer and fairer elections.

In this regard, the proliferation of disinformation also posed threats to the integrity of electoral processes, undermining effective public participation through the disproportionate impact on excluded groups. In certain contexts, the rise of disinformation has eroded trust in democratic institutions, thereby weakening the social legitimacy of both electoral processes and their outcomes. In other cases, disinformation campaigns specifically designed to mislead the public have radicalized individuals, destabilizing electoral processes, exacerbating racism and violence, and undermining democracies.

In several instances, such as during the electoral periods in many Eastern European countries, disinformation campaigns took the form of pro-Russian propaganda. These campaigns aimed to undermine anti-EU candidates while promoting pro-Russian ones. In other cases, such as the July far-right riots in the UK, disinformation fuelled hate speech which violent groups amplified through acts of racism and Islamophobia, including attacks on mosques and migrant-owned businesses.

Furthermore, the use of AI-enabled surveillance, such as facial recognition, against activists is likely to increase and become more normalised. This issue poses escalating risks to HRDs and journalists, as these technologies will be exploited and improved to monitor, harass, or suppress critical voices and dissent. At the same time, the challenge of disinformation is likely to intensify, particularly around elections, to mislead the public, influence voter behaviour, improve the electoral performance of certain candidates, and erode the overall confidence in democratic institutions. Select regional

examples are presented below. The examples are only an illustrative selection and not an exhaustive list.

Africa

Ahead of the general election in December 2023 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), around 10 members of the Union for the Congolese Nation party attacked Jerry Lombo Alauwa, a reporter for the Canal Congo Télévision TV channel and radio Liberté Kisangani, while he was covering a rally by opposition presidential candidate Moïse Katumbi. In Mali, activist and university professor Etienne Fakaba Sissoko was arrested on 25 March 2024 following the publication of a book criticising the alleged use of propaganda in the government's public information campaigns. In May 2024, Sissoko was sentenced to two years in prison, one of which was suspended, and a fine of around US\$4,900. In Mozambique, private security guards assaulted and threatened reporter Jorge Marcos and camera operator Verson Paulo of STV as they covered an event organised in Zambézia province by opposition party RENAMO in May 2024, ahead of the October 2024 general election. In Senegal, Cheikh Yerim Seck, founder of the Dakaractu news site and contributor to Jeune Afrique, was summoned, questioned, detained and charged ahead of legislative elections.

Americas

In Brazil, over 37,000 cases of offensive and derogatory posts targeting the press on social media platforms during the first round of Brazil's municipal election campaign were documented. There were also cases of assaults against journalists during political rallies and interviews in nine major cities.

El Salvador the situation for journalists further deteriorated during the general and municipal elections held between February and March 2024. During this period, 319 documented violations of press freedom, mainly perpetrated by public officials were recorded by the Association of Journalists of El Salvador.

Asia

In Bangladesh, on 6th January 2024, the day before the election, the *Daily Manab Zamin* newspaper's website was blocked in Bangladesh following its critical reporting on the government. On election day, a dozen men wearing badges of the Awami League, the then ruling party, physically attacked seven journalists, beating them with iron rods and bamboo sticks, while they covered an assault on independent candidate Aatur Rahman outside a polling station. Several pieces of equipment, including cameras and microphones, were confiscated or broken. In India in May 2024, journalist Raghav Trivedi was reportedly beaten up and locked into a room by ruling Bharatiya Janata Party workers while covering home minister Amit Shah's rally in Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. In Pakistan, ahead of elections, in December 2023, the authorities temporarily slowed down internet services and blocked access to major social media platforms amid a rare online rally

organised by the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. On 7th January 2024, internet and social media services across Pakistan were severely disrupted as the PTI prepared to launch a massive online campaign ahead of elections. On 20th January 2024, the authorities disrupted social media and internet services again to undermine a PTI "virtual" election rally. In Sri Lanka, in September 2024, international journalists attempting to travel to the country to cover the presidential elections faced visa delays or even outright refusals.

Europe

In Romania, two days prior to the presidential run-off set for December 8, Romania's Constitutional Court invalidated the first-round results, citing evidence of significant interference from a Russian propaganda campaign. Additionally, the 2024 Media Freedom Report by the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) highlighted a critical state of media freedom in Romania, with a decline in editorial autonomy in national media. This report also noted that significant political expenditure on media advertising predominantly favoured outlets aligned with the government, sparking concerns about the independence of the press. In Moldova, the electoral campaign was awash with disinformation, featuring deepfake videos and false allegations against Sandu, the pro-EU candidate who ended winning the election. Numerous fake social media accounts emerged and proliferated, opposing Sandu while amplifying pro-Russia sentiments. Narratives suggested that supporting the EU or Sandu could lead Moldova into conflict, as it happened with other Georgian disinformation campaigns.

Middle East and North Africa

In Iran, journalists have been under severe pressure to toe the state line on the elections and have faced expulsion, arrest, torture, arbitrary detention and prosecution for refusing to do so. Reportedly, several Iranian journalists were arrested, summoned and prosecuted ahead of the elections, particularly during Iran's Guardian Council finalisation of the list of candidates. In Tunisia, numerous journalists were arrested between May 2024 and December 2024 under pretexts often deemed arbitrary or unjustified. Additionally, a wave of arrests targeted 15 content creators beginning in November 2024. These arrests aim to intimidate those who criticize the authorities or defend human rights, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship among human rights defenders and civil society actors. The authorities have also used technology, including monitoring social media and electronic communications to target activists and critics of the regime whilst restrictive laws, such as Decree-Law 54, have been used to criminalize online expression, particularly criticism of government policies or electoral practices. These laws have reinforced censorship and limited freedom of expression for citizens and marginalized groups. Reportedly, actors linked to the authorities have used social media to conduct disinformation and defamation campaigns aimed at stigmatizing

CSOs, activists, and excluded groups, accusing them of being foreign agents or enemies of the state.

Main trends from the "super election year"

Among patterns that emerged from the "super election year" is the **increased use of arbitrary detention as a prominent tactic to punish protestors and prevent other potential mass protests through intimidation** including in a pre-electoral and post-electoral context. Hundreds of human rights defenders and activists, including young protesters, were arbitrarily imprisoned in record numbers for their participation in the election-related protests. In Mozambique, for instance, hundreds of children have also been detained following nation-wide post-election protests of October. We have consequently witnessed systematic violations of the right to freedom from arbitrary detention of peaceful protestors, particularly youthful protestors, and the need for independent investigations of alleged cases to ensure access to justice and accountability where grave violations have occurred.

In some countries highlighted above where elections were held, **human rights violations and abuses including violations of protest rights have been coupled with attempts to undermine the right to freedom of association, discrediting and isolating civil associations through foreign influence legislation**. For instance, attempts to restrict civil society access to foreign resources have been documented in Georgia, where a law mandating that CSOs receiving funding from abroad register as "foreign agents" was passed, and in Tunisia where a proposed NGO law would grant authorities broad discretion to refuse the establishment of an organization seeking registration, whilst in India the stigmatizing labelling of NGOs as "antinational" or "terrorist" has become commonplace.

Restrictive measures and actions were not limited to authoritarian governments, where "autocratic elections" were held. In Serbia, for instance, credible evidence suggested that non-residents were improperly registered and bussed in on election day to influence the outcome of the election for control of the capital, Belgrade. These allegations triggered anti-government protests, which the populist ruling party characterised as foreign-inspired attempts to undermine Serbia, restricting civic space while facing little international pressure. In Slovakia, amendments to core CSO laws passed their first reading, requiring organizations receiving over €5,000 annually from foreign sources to declare as 'foreign-funded.' The Ministry of the Interior could dissolve CSOs failing to meet reporting requirements.

In some electoral contexts, we have witnessed an escalation repression of dissent and political freedoms, through major amendments to existing legislation including amendment of legislation conferring powers to judicial institutions. In Algeria, for instance, state authorities have introduced penal code amendments to further restrict

freedoms, leading to the dissolution of political parties, CSOs, and independent media. These changes have fuelled arbitrary arrests, including that of Yacine Mekireche, a member of the suspended Democratic and Social Movement (MDS), who was arrested on 6th August 2024 for social media posts. On 20 August, at least 60 political activists from the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) were arrested while commemorating the Soummam Congress of 1956. Protestors also faced arrests and crackdowns. In June, police disrupted a book signing in Bejaia, closing the bookstore and arresting attendees for an “unauthorized gathering” These actions highlight Algeria’s escalating repression of dissent and political freedoms. In Tunisia, amendments stripped the Administrative Court of its jurisdiction in electoral matters, enabling the exclusion of opposition candidates and weakening judicial oversight over administrative court’s procedures and decisions. Authorities intensified their crackdown on critics, arresting over 100 members or supporters of the Ennahda party between 12th–13th September 2024. While 17 were released on 25th September, at least 96 remain detained under the 2015 counter-terrorism law, which allows 15 days of detention without charge and limited access to legal counsel. They are also being investigated under Decree Law 54 on cybercrime for “insulting the president”.

Furthermore, in numerous electoral contexts ***civic space has proven to be particularly dangerous for historically excluded groups***. New measures adopted prior to the elections and related dynamics have often reinforced the marginalization and exclusion of these groups, undermining their right to full, free, and fair participation in public discourse and hindering the principles of inclusion and equality, which are essential to ensuring genuinely democratic and representative elections, as the cases of Georgia and Tunisia have witnessed. Nevertheless, some *positive examples* are to be highlighted, notably the cases of Guatemala and Sri Lanka.

The widespread lack of measures to encourage collaboration and participation of CSOs in decision-making or in the development of policies related to the electoral cycle, coupled with the closure of dialogue with CSOs and in some cases with the exclusion and harassment of CSOs working on electoral monitoring and integrity is another worrisome trend, which undermines civil society engagement and commitment to electoral transparency and monitoring democratic processes.

The global repercussions of the "super election year" on the protection of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association were multi-fold. First, *the right to freedom of association was weakened as a key enabler of peaceful assembly and meaningful participation*. At the same time, *the right to freedom of peaceful assembly - which was severely restricted primarily through undue restrictions to pre- and post-election protest rights – has come increasingly under attack, with state authorities impeding, deterring, punishing and cracking down on those organizing and participating in peaceful election-related protests that occurred across different geographical contexts in response to perceived problems with the organization of elections and alleged electoral fraud. In*

some of these countries, protests are still ongoing or are likely to resume. Second, in 2024 the absence of popular and equitable electoral campaigns in numerous contexts, further aggravated by the inability of citizens to gather and express their concerns or support candidates of their choice, weakened the overall legitimacy and inclusiveness of the electoral process. Several specific legislative and policy measures have had a significant negative impact on the ability of citizens, particularly on (but not limited to) excluded groups. As a result, in 2025 civil society is left with a higher burden of mobilization to push back against restrictive measures threatening associational and protest rights. Third, the increased use of technology to strengthen repression, such as digital surveillance, cybercrime legislation, which often served as a basis for justifying arrests or legal actions, as well as disinformation and defamation campaigns, Internet shutdowns and network disruptions further impeded access to information and the organisation of peaceful protests, hindering the democratic process and full public participation, particularly participation of excluded groups.

Conclusions

A year when the largest number of people ever went to the polls has ended. A year when among democracies alone over 80 percent saw the incumbent party lose support compared to the last election. In 2024 we have seen a regression in fundamental freedoms manifest in many ways in electoral contexts. This is evidenced by new or proposed regressive laws, erosion of democratic checks and balances, threats and intimidation against a range of civil society actors.

More than ever, the role of civil society is essential for democracy: it monitors authorities and ensures that governments uphold international standards, exposes serious human rights violations and corruption, advocates for accountability and promotes awareness and civic education. In the context of elections, civil society can mobilise citizens as independent observers and facilitate public debates to strengthen democratic participation. Civil society can also play a role in the mitigation of risks associated with increasing restrictions to the rights of freedom of peaceful assembly and association. To this end, the role played by the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association is essential towards ensuring inclusive, participatory and more credible elections.

In the vast majority of cases, during 2024 elections governmental authorities have not implemented any measures to encourage collaboration and participation of CSOs in decision-making or in the development of policies related to the electoral cycle. On the contrary, we have witnessed a pattern of systematic exclusion of civil society, which constitutes a direct obstacle to the crucial role these organizations play in strengthening transparency, inclusion, and the credibility of elections.

Human rights are essential to a "meaningful and inclusive electoral process" and the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are prerequisite rights.

Nonetheless, due to their nature, they are among the most threatened rights in the context of elections. Electoral processes in 2024 have triggered numerous serious human rights violations related to the exercise of FoPAA in both electoral democracies and countries where elections falling short of democratic standards were held, with intensified restrictive measures and actions in the former and arbitrary arrests and detentions, surveillance, ill-treatment and torture and other human rights violations and abuses in the latter.

Nonetheless, there are still plenty of elections to come. The "super election year" has exacerbated some of the pre-existing trends such as political repression at the global level, growing restrictions on fundamental freedoms, and attacks on civil society working to defend citizens' rights. These trends have been coupled with growing economic strife, climate change, conflict, and repression of civil society, particularly excluded groups, leading to displacement and migration.

Almost every incumbent party worldwide facing election in 2024 lost vote share. In the near future, even when elections are free, fair and credible; voters are likely to keep rejecting incumbents due to the combined effect of these trends. Current broader restrictions to the rights to FoPAA, particularly in electoral contexts, can only have a detrimental effect on many of these broader trends, leading to *de facto* restrictions to right to participate in public affairs.

Recommendations

Freedom of peaceful assembly

To Governments:

- Take measures to foster a safe, respectful and enabling environment in which civil society activists and journalists can operate freely and exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly without fear of attacks, harassment, intimidation, or reprisals in line with international human rights commitments, including in electoral contexts.
- Desist from using excessive force against peaceful protesters, stop pre-empting and preventing protests and adopt best practices on freedom of peaceful assembly, ensuring that any restrictions on assemblies comply with international human rights standards including in electoral contexts.
- Ensure the full right to freedom of peaceful assembly in a sufficient time prior to the election so as to allow political organization and campaigning, securing information to voters on candidates and issues.
- Establish fully independent and effective investigations into the excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies and officers during protests related to elections, and bring to justice those suspected of criminal responsibility.

- Ensure the safety of civil society actors, including journalists and election monitors.
- To take measures against unreasonable or unlawful pre-trial detention against arrested protestors as a form of punishment and intimidation against protestors who participated in election-related protests. Ensure that arrested persons are afforded bail as a right.
- Refrain from enacting restrictive (draconian) laws against CSOs, particularly during the pre-election period.

To The United Nations and International Bodies:

- Urge states, including those where general elections are upcoming, to repeal or substantially amend restrictive legislation that is not in accordance with international law and standards on freedom of peaceful assembly.
- Promote full accountability for restrictions on civil society undermining the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association in electoral contexts.
- Disseminate and implement the [UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#), especially among Resident Coordinators (RCs) and United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs), particularly in electoral contexts.

Freedom of association

To Governments:

- Refrain from using restrictive laws and policies such as Control, Regularisation, Performance and Financing of NGOs Laws as tools to arbitrarily restrict, suspend and/or close NGOs in pre-electoral and post-electoral contexts.
- The right to freedom of association, as well as the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of assembly must, if not previously secured on a permanent basis, be ensured in sufficient time prior to the election so as to allow political organization and campaigning, securing information to voters on candidates and issues.
- Protect and promote the right to freedom of association and integrate this right into relevant electoral laws and code of conduct.

To The United Nations and International Bodies:

- Codify well-established principles and obligations relating to freedom of association drawing on a wealth of other sources of standards and law including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) reports, UN Human Rights Council resolutions, and UNSR/FOAA reports, as well as jurisprudence and guidelines from regional bodies.
- Urge states to repeal or substantially amend restrictive legislation that is not in accordance with international law and standards on freedom of association.

- Disseminate and implement the UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, especially among Resident Coordinators (RCs) and United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) ahead of elections.

Effective and inclusive public participation:

To Governments:

- Ensure freedom of expression is safeguarded in all forms by bringing all national legislation into line with international law and standards and refrain from censoring conventional and social media before and during general elections. Ensure that any restrictions are subject to oversight by an independent and impartial judicial authority and in accordance with due process and standards of legality, necessity and legitimacy.
- Provide financial and technical assistance to CSOs, particularly those focusing on human rights and electoral transparency. This includes funding for legal aid, public awareness campaigns, and security measures for activists at risk.
- Repeal or amend, before general elections are held, any legislation that criminalises expression based on vague concepts such as ‘fake news’ or disinformation, as such laws are not compatible with the requirements of proportionality.
- Maintain reliable and unfettered internet access and cease internet shutdowns that prevent people obtaining and sharing essential information during electoral cycles.
- Publicly condemn defamatory remarks, threats, acts of intimidation, stigmatisation and attacks on HRDs, civil society groups and excluded communities occurring during electoral cycles.
- Encourage historically excluded groups, including women, LGBTQ+ community, Indigenous peoples and migrants to actively participate in the electoral process.

To The United Nations and International Bodies:

- Take the necessary measures to ensure that activists and civil society personnel are not put at risk during electoral cycles because of the information they provide, and publicly call out states that impose restrictions on civil society participation.
- Independent observer missions should be deployed to monitor the situation, including elections and the treatment of protesters. Their presence can act as a deterrent to excessive force or manipulation.
- Produce a Guidance Note on the Participation, Protection and Promotion of historically excluded groups in the context of electoral process.