



## Episode 2

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# Protests & Repression: How does it work?



This is a transcript from [CIVICUS Voices](#) - a podcast series produced by CIVICUS. In this 6-part series, we will be joined by civil society experts and on-the-ground activists to tell us about their experiences with protesting.

## **Aarti Narsee (Host)**

Welcome to CIVICUS Voices, a CIVICUS' podcast where we hear from people, communities, and organisations defending human rights. I'm Aarti Narsee. For those of you who don't know me, I'm an intersectional feminist, former journalist, and I work as a civic space research officer for CIVICUS. I love listening to stories on the ground and using these stories as a tool to create change. This season on the podcast, it's all about Freedom of Peaceful Assembly. If you don't know what that means, in simple terms, it's about the right to protest. If this is the first time you're listening to our podcast, I encourage you to start at the beginning with episode 1, where you'll learn more about the basics of protesting; that is protesting 101. Over the next few months, we'll be digging a little bit deeper into what it means to protest for different people in different parts of the world in varying contexts. Today, we will be speaking about what protesting looks like if you live in a country where your right to protest is limited. That is you don't have the freedom to express your actions and opinions. And here I'm specifically speaking about countries that are rated as repressed or closed.

What exactly do I mean when I use the term "repressed" or "closed"? On the CIVICUS Monitor, we rate countries according to a five-point rating system: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, and closed. If you live in countries rated as open, it means you have free space to exercise your fundamental rights. If you live in a repressed country, it means that your rights are severely restricted. And if you live in a closed country, it means that there is a complete closure of the space to exercise your rights. When you live in these types of countries, the restriction of rights takes place in multiple different ways. For example, if there's a protest happening, you frequently witness internet shutdowns. Independent websites that report on the actual events happening can be shut down or restricted. So there's lack of access to information and communication. This is commonly used as a tactic by governments to restrict the right to information but also restrict the right to freedom of expression. We're also seeing States passing legislation where they limit the types of protests that can take place. So you have to ask for specific permission, often the permission is not granted. They may limit the place in which protests take place. And often these protests would be met with force. And then we have detention of protesters, so protesters are exercising their right to go out and protest in the streets. They may face arrest, detention, they may be beaten physical force used by authorities or the officials, and they may be prosecuted on trumped-up charges. So this gives you a sense of the types of restrictions that take place in countries that are rated as repressed or closed. And it can be incredibly difficult and dangerous. But somehow the people who are fighting for incredibly important rights, they persevere, because they believe it's worth it. But often at times, they have to kind of get creative to find ways how to move around or navigate these restrictions. So one amazing example of a creative form of protest in a very restrictive environment, is what we've been seeing in Afghanistan. Since the takeover of the Taliban, we've seen women and girls taking to the streets to protest, they are asking for the right to education which is being denied to them. And somehow the movement has evolved and become even more creative. Recently, they've been the creation of secret schools in Afghanistan, where some Afghanistani families offer up their homes, to set up these secret schools for girls. And this is in defiance of the Taliban rule. And basically, these young girls are saying we want the right to be educated and we will not obey the



Taliban rule and these repressive rules that are being put forward by the Taliban. And there's other examples of creative protests happening in other parts of the world. For example, if we move to the MENA region, we see the use of emojis that has been used by Palestinians who are fighting against the occupation, and fighting against online censorship. And they are using social media as a creative means of expressing themselves, and often finding ways to kind of navigate around the government censorship. So using less traditional ways of expressing their stories and expressing the movement online. And this is exactly what we'll hear about today. So we're going to be speaking to an organisation in Palestine who has campaigned for digital rights. And then we move to Colombia where we'll be speaking to organisers of El Paro Nacional or the national strike in Colombia, who faced incredible repressions but still persevered through to fight for social, political, and economic rights.

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So let's kick off the show. I'm going to be speaking to Nadeem Nashif, the founder and executive director of 7amleh, the Arab Center for Social Media and Advancement. 7amleh is doing some incredible research, monitoring, and training, as well as actively campaigning for the digital rights of Palestinians. For example, they campaign for services like PayPal and Google Maps to be open and inclusive for Palestinians. And they get quite creative in the work that they do. Nadeem, thank you so much for joining us and CIVICUS voices.

### **Nadim Nashif (Guest 1)**

You're welcome.

**Aarti:** So for those of our listeners who are less familiar with your work and the circumstances, please tell us about the kinds of repressions that Palestinians are facing at the moment. And how is 7amleh worked against this?

**Nadim:** Yes, so basically, Palestinian people have been living under occupation in the last seven decades. And basically, this occupation obviously has lots of oppression and repression and many methods in the offline world. And as the technology progressed, and our life became part of the internet, this oppression, and repression, and this kind of power relationship moved also to the online. So in many cases, there are attempts to prevent Palestinians from experiencing their freedom of expression on the online by pressuring companies, by doing arrests of people because of what they wrote or said on the online, by also pressuring companies to do the siege because Palestinians are living under siege by the Israeli government. And this siege is not only physical, this is something that was also transformed to the virtual. So meaning that, for example, many of the online platforms are not accessible to Palestinians, because of different excuses because of Israeli pressure, because they have convinced company that it doesn't work for them. You mentioned in the introduction, PayPal, so PayPal is one of the companies that preventing Palestinian from using it while it's allowing Israelis to using it and practicing like very clear way of discrimination against Palestinians. So again, the power relationship moved into the online where the oppression is happening; and we are, as organisation,

recording this, documenting this, and fighting for the rights and the freedoms of Palestinians online.

**Aarti:** The Palestinian civil society is facing an incredible amount of restrictions. How does the government of Israel's recent attacks on Palestinian civil society, human rights defenders, and the media affect these organisations' advocacy and their mobilisation activities?

**Nadim:** Yes, there is ongoing attempt to silence the Palestinian civic society by either like blaming us or being anti-Semites or being a terrorist. And these are heavy accusations that have chilling effects. And I think the aim is to paralyse the Palestinian civic society from being active, from recording specifically the human rights violations and atrocities and war crimes that is being done against Palestinians. So this is something that is ongoing. Unfortunately, sometimes also, we find that other governments also cooperate to certain extent, instead of rejecting these accusations. When we are speaking about Palestinian human rights organisations that have been there for four decades that have been recording, you know, they are winners of awards, they are internationally recognised for their professional work for decades, clearly have nothing to do with terrorism, have nothing to do with antisemitism. They are all for human rights and democratic values. And it's clearly like a false accusation. So sometimes we wonder like why there is no strong reactions against these allegations. And it's a clear game to paralyse and silence the voices. I mean, this is not only actually happening in Palestine, also we're seeing shrinking spaces all over. We see it and many oppressive other regimes that basically civic society and people who are working for human rights are being stigmatised or colored as a you know, terrorists or terrorist sympathisers and supporters. And it's heavy, it's a heavy accusation, serious accusation. And it's being also unfortunately being misused or played sometimes even in our context. Lots of organisations, any outstanding personality, or activist, or a body is being somehow facing the smear campaigns. And this is something that ongoing reality that we are trying to face and to develop tools how to deal with it, and it's not simple at all.

**Aarti:** And we've seen recently the rise of youth in the Palestinian movement, particularly during the Sheikh Jarrah evictions for example. The youth were at the forefront. How important is it for youth movements to develop online activism in response to these evictions and the repressions that are taking place? And how do you think online activism compares to other forms of activism in Palestine?

**Nadim:** Yes, I think it's very important to have the online activism and to have especially when you're in such a situation of occupation and oppression, and you're having this human rights violations daily basis, the camera becomes a tool of resistance. It becomes a very important tool. Actually, you know, the Israeli government started legislation around preventing live streaming, criminalising photography, criminalising video-making. And this comes on the background that for many Palestinians, the camera is the only defence that they have from soldiers and violent settlers, who are attacking them on daily basis. And in many cases, also home evictions, house evictions being prevented because of this live stream. So this is really important. Campaigning is really important. Digital activism in

general, is really important. And we showed that, I mean, if we study the Sheikh Jarrah experience of 2021, and how much there was a global solidarity online movement coming in, and pressuring and in many ways, also preventing these house evictions because we're talking about people that until today, they are resilient, and they are there in their houses and the eviction plan did not succeed as they wanted. Part of it is also because of the international solidarity movement that was created with these people.

**Aarti:** You've mentioned, you know that there's a siege going on both online and offline. We've seen Palestinians taking to the streets, for example, during the Save Sheikh Jarrah protests. But there's an interesting online creativity that is forming in Palestine and on social media in particular. And I'm referring here to the watermelon campaign, which has become a significant symbol of the Palestinian movement for freedom against the occupation. Can you tell us how they are using these creative platforms to form unusual ways of protest?

**Nadim:** Yes, so Palestinian people have been trying to find creative ways and doing creative ways of how to still practice their identity, because our identity is also something that we are attacked, including, for example, the Palestinian flag. So Palestinian flag until today, by the way, is not allowed to be raised by the Israeli army. So Palestinians, in the last decades found different creative ways to express Palestinian flag and the Palestinian colors, which are the watermelon colors. So instead of raising a flag, they would draw a watermelon. And with that technology, and with the algorithms coming up, and in many cases, also, the social media is cooperating with the Israeli side and is deleting many keywords that are related to Palestinians. For example, Palestinian personalities, or Palestinian political movements that by the US administration, or by the Israeli side, are considered as terrorist organisations. And then their name is not allowed to be written on social media, not even if you are criticising them or putting anything. So many people write these words in a way that is coming to overcome that artificial intelligence. So for example, instead of having the letters come together, they write like points between letters. So those are kind of different ways of how to still express yourself and to mention the things that you want to mention, and not replying to the rules or the boundaries that somebody else is trying to limit you about whom you can speak, and then in what way and what kind of what is legal or illegitimate to have, especially when it comes to the national identity that is being so much oppressed in the last decades.

**Aarti:** And I think you touched on a really important point there. So Palestinians are pushing the boundaries online. But this comes with an incredible risk. We've seen this on our work in the CIVICUS Monitor, for example, where we document restrictions. So what is the reaction been to this sort of activism, both from the government from obviously, the Israeli occupation forces? And then again, you know, what is the reaction been amongst allies who are in support of this movement?

**Nadim:** From the Israeli side, basically, there is always attempt to criminalise the Palestinian narrative in order to prevent it. And the general aim would be to manipulate the system in a way that you downplay the Palestinian narrative and story, and that you

would raise the Israeli story and this is being done by criminalising a Palestinian activists and sending them to jail. Sometimes even for really- like sentences and posts that you don't understand how people are in jail for this. So for example, young teenager from Jerusalem, posted on Facebook, something like that we have to go to Al Aqsa Mosque and to defend it from Israeli settlers. And for this, he spent a year and a half in jail. So not even mentioning any kind of violence or call for violence, but just saying this is our holy place, we should be there to defend it, it means that you will be sent to jail. And there are so many examples like this that we are seeing in the last years. And there are so many regulations that Israelis are doing. One of them is, by the way, the Facebook law that now they're trying to put. I mean, officially, it comes to deal with harmful content. But it means that basically anything that the Israeli side would not like would be sent to courts in one side, the second side cannot defend the event itself, with secret evidence can order the companies to take down these contents that by them it's illegal. So there are so many tactics being used to downplay the Palestinian voice and the Palestinian narrative on social media.

**Aarti:** And I think, as you said, you know, it's a chilling price to pay for activism, we are seeing that people are behind bars. But on the other hand, how do you think allies can be of support to organisations like yourselves and activists on the ground in Palestine, including international organisations? What do you think the international community needs to do to support the Palestinian cause?

**Nadim:** I think it's very important that we take a firm stand when there is a human rights violations happening all over the globe. I think we should coordinate better and have an intersectional approach. I think it's important to also share experience between allies and civic societies. Especially that also the methods of oppression are being so much repeated in the different contexts especially in the Global South. And in many cases, Global North is also cooperating and supporting these oppressive regimes, unfortunately. So I think we have lots of things to do also globally. Especially when it comes to the time that we are living online that everything is so quickly spreading, that we are being updated about what's happening now in Palestine and Myanmar and Kashmir, and other places. And that we can share experiences with each other and support each other.

**Aarti:** Thank you so much, Nadim, for joining us and civic voices.

**Nadim:** You're most welcome.

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**Aarti:** That was Nadim Nashif. And I think what really stood out for me in that interview is that young Palestinians are putting their lives on the line. They are in the front line every day. And they are using incredible tools like social media like digital activism, to kind of get around the restrictions in a very obviously repressed situation that Palestinians are currently facing. Now moving from Palestine to a different country, an on-the-ground

perspective of what it means to be involved in a protest in a context and in a country that is incredibly repressed and where protesters face a lot of backlash.

Sandra Sierra is one of the organisers of El Paro Nacional or the national strike in Colombia. Now, these strikes took place over several months in 2021 and came as a result of a tax reform bill. However, protests were met with incredible amount of police repression. Some protesters died as a result, others were injured, others were even reported missing. While many were detained. Sandra explains to us why she didn't think the movement would gain so much momentum, and that once they were organised, people joined because they were frustrated, but they were also motivated to take to the streets. Let's take a listen to her story.

**Sandra Sierra (Guest 2):**

During the national strike, mainly we organised from the neighbourhoods with different people. It was a moment to meet other people and kind of join together in our frustration but also in our desire for change. Many times when there is like a protest in the surrounding areas, you always have police doing stops and search. And this kind of intimidates the people from going there. One time we were with some friends and they did a stop and search. You know we had some scissors and some paper and they kind of took away the scissors but it was this paper scissors very small and they were going to take one of my friends because he didn't have his original documents on him and these kind of things-kind of intimidating of the police from the start. The media says the complete opposite that really happened during the protest. This is very frustrating and I think is one of the most important tools that the government has to kind of do repression, to kind of shut the voice of the people that are on the ground, and the violence against the protest. If I think of a moment that stayed with me is seeing youth bleeding, you know.... after being hit, by the- by the police [crying]. Of course, this- seeing this so- so up close, somebody who's been with you, you feel like you understand this person, and his frustration, and then seeing that he is bleeding and you don't know what's going to happen to this person. This is one of these moments that really stays with you the most, you feel like you don't know what to do- that you don't know how this happens. This is unfair, basically, because you believe that what we're doing is so just and it's so right. But also the good moments that stay with me the most is seeing kind of like the people in the neighbourhood cooking and taking pots to the street making food for the people who've been protesting. Also, another thing that is typical of, you know, being repressed, is that the government just really doesn't listen, it just really doesn't care. It's like we're putting forward a problem of hunger, of unemployment, of poverty. And the response from the government is, "you are mad" or "you are terrorists", instead of solving the problems that is making the people go outside. Instead of sitting and saying, "What can we do to negotiate? What can we do to make things better? Why is this happening? Why is there so many people outside protesting?" So I think one of the biggest ways that you feel repressed is by just not being listened, and just being treated as rebels without cause, whereas I see in the street is rebels with cause.

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**Aarti:** That was Sandra Sierra. And you can hear the emotion that she expressed talking about the protest, where protesters were missing, people died, and people put their lives in the front line. And this is the situation that happens and unfolds in countries and contexts where there is a lot of repression and when there isn't much space to advocate for your fundamental rights. I also think it's important to think about the role of the media that she touched on there where in a country where the space is very repressive, often there is huge government control over the media representation. And in this case, you can see how mainstream media was used as a tool or a mouthpiece of the government, and how that can play a role in changing the narrative or the reasons and motivations behind protests. And the last thing I think, which I draw from that interview, you know, is the solidarity of communities, how people came together to support each other in different ways as neighbors and as people with a common struggle.

Well, that's it for our second episode, I hope you learned something about the realities of activists on the ground in repressed and closed situations. The types of tactics that they're using to get around the restrictions. But also, I think this episode really highlighted to me that the price of activism can be death, it can be detention, and it's an incredibly chilling one, the price that they're paying to put their lives on the line to demand fundamental rights. If you're interested in additional resources on protests, I suggest you take a look at the Online Global Protest Tracker by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. It's a really interesting and cool tracking system that keeps a good log of protests internationally and also includes some protests in repressed spaces. This season in CIVICUS Voices we'll be digging deeper into the right to protest looking at how protests are taking place in all parts around the globe. How activists are kind of using different tactics to protest for their fundamental rights. We'll release new episodes every two weeks and next time we'll be looking at youth in protest. Specifically, what types of protests are happening with youth involvement? How does Youth Activism reflect on the ground?

You can find CIVICUS online and on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Subscribe, listen and rate the podcast on your favorite podcast app. Thank you to our brilliant guests featured on today's episode. CIVICUS voices is produced by Amal Atrakouti, Elna Schutz, Jamaine Krige, and the CIVICUS team. My name is Aarti Narsee. Goodbye.

