

YEAR IN REVIEW

NEW DEMOCRATIC
CRISIS AND CIVIC
SPACE



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CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NEW DEMOCRATIC CRISIS

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Each year the CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report examines the major events that have involved and affected civil society around the world. We seek to celebrate our achievements as civil society, identify the challenges we have faced and assess how recent events have impacted on civil society, as well as how civil society has responded to them. This section of the report looks at the recent resurgence of populist politics and its impacts on the space for civil society. Other sections discuss the freedom of expression as a vital part of the space for civil society, citizens' mobilisations in protest movements and the international-level actions of civil society.

Our report is of, from and for civil society. As well as the four parts of our year in review, our report has a special section on this year's theme, civil society and the private sector, including 27 guest contributions from civil society activists, leaders, experts and stakeholders, and a thematic essay that draws from those contributions. This report is also informed by responses to our annual survey of members of our Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA), made up of national and regional-level civil society coordination and membership bodies, and a series of interviews with members of our alliance who were close to the year's major stories. We are very grateful to all our contributors for their efforts in helping to develop this report.

A NEW THREAT HAS
COME FROM THE
CURRENT TURN
TOWARDS FAR-
RIGHT, POPULIST
AND NATIONALIST
POLITICS

INTRODUCTION

This, the sixth edition of the CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report, comes at a time of widespread political upheaval. As part of that upheaval, civil society is under attack as never before. A new threat has come from the current turn towards far-right, populist and nationalist politics. This is being seen in many countries where the argument for constitutional and participatory democracy based on the rule of law and the international human rights framework was long believed to have been won. The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), our new online platform that tracks the space for civil society in every country of the world, reveals that civil society faces serious threats in 106 countries, over half of all UN member states. New laws and regulations are being introduced to constrain the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs) to form and act; peaceful protests are being broken up by force and protesters detained; activists who speak out on controversial issues are being harassed, jailed, attacked and killed.

The [first](#) State of Civil Society Report, published in 2012, analysed the key events that shook civil society and political institutions alike in the early years of this decade. That too was a time of turmoil, but also of opportunity for civil society. Mass protests erupted in many parts of the world, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe and the USA. Citizens mobilised to demand more of their governments, challenge entrenched elite power and express their outrage about economic inequality, human rights abuses and the lack of livelihoods.

Six years on, the world may seem very different. The odd dictator was toppled in MENA, but repressive forces fought back with a vengeance, both in MENA, where the space for civil society is now almost uniformly repressed and closed, and around the world. The CIVICUS Monitor shows that respect for the core human rights on which civil society depends – the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression – is lacking in every global region.

It's tempting to feel that the world has turned a long way away from the optimism we shared in 2012. In 2012, the possibilities seemed progressive. Through protests and campaigns, citizens were demanding their rights, urging accountability and making positive international connections between different movements. In comparison, the 2017 picture seems a rejection of this. In many different countries, citizens have used their votes to deliver political shocks, embraced more extremist positions and invested their faith in hard-line leaders. The political agenda has been pulled sharply rightward. Political discourse in many of our countries has become coarser, less nuanced and more racist, sexist and xenophobic. A high level of popular support has mobilised behind the strengthening of borders, the building of walls and the withdrawal from international institutions. Human rights, respect for diversity and internationalism are under attack: the new United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, [António Guterres](#), characterised the disregard for human rights, fuelled by rising populism and extremism, as “a disease that is spreading.”

These negative trends build on, and reinforce, patterns of restriction of civil society. The hard-right, arguably neo-fascist, leaders who have come to power in several states directly threaten civil society. When civil society is associated with internationalism, seeks to defend human rights and stands up for excluded groups who are denied a fair share of power, it is attacked by political leaders who reject such values. When sexism becomes normalised, activists for women's rights face heightened attacks. When political leaders rule in the interests of the blocs of people who predominantly vote for them, rather than in the interests of societies as a whole, dissent may be seen as anti-democratic or against a narrowly-defined national interest, and civil society is restricted because it offers platforms for dissent. When mean and xenophobic notions of the national interest are asserted, civil society can find itself constrained by actions framed as being in the defence of national security or the interests of majorities.

The outlook for civil society may seem gloomy. But it is important to understand that the citizen anger that shaped the mobilisations we reported on in 2012 is not so different from that that fuels the regressive politics of today. Civil society, we believe, has not as a whole adequately engaged with, understood or tried to shape the citizen anger that drives today's dismal politics. But it is beginning to do so, and it is starting to fight back. In the vast mobilisations that have greeted each neo-fascist shift, and every attempt to reassert human rights, the potential for response can be seen. The fight is not over yet.

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INTRODUCING THE CIVICUS MONITOR

For the first time, the State of Civil Society Report's review of trends in civil society is able to draw from the analysis of the CIVICUS Monitor.

The CIVICUS Monitor, launched in October 2016 and covering every country in the world by April 2017, is a new tool that assesses and rates the state of the space for civil society - civic space - in every country of the world. The CIVICUS Monitor draws from civil society-generated data from a range of sources and, through a multi-stage process of scoring and verification, establishes one of five ratings for a country's civic space conditions: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. The CIVICUS Monitor is frequently updated, meaning that, over time, it tracks whether a country's civic space is improving or worsening, and helps identify and analyse the factors behind this.

The [initial reading](#) of the CIVICUS Monitor as of April 2017 is, not surprisingly, gloomy: only 26 states out of 195, representing just three per cent of the world's population, are assessed as having fully open civic space.

What this widespread restriction means is that rights guaranteed by international law are being routinely denied. For citizens, this means that they are denied opportunities to have a say on the issues that affect them, and so their needs are not addressed. There are [clear correlations](#) between the quality of a country's civic space and its performance on the Human Development Index, its level of equality as expressed on the Gini Index, and its standards of electoral democracy, as captured on V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index. In short, life is better in countries that have open civic space. But open civic space is the exception rather than the rule.

The CIVICUS Monitor confirms the trends in civic space that CIVICUS has tracked for several years: it makes clear that the restriction of civil society has become the norm, rather than the exception. Restriction is taking place around the world, in both the global south and global north, and in every global region: while civic space restriction is seen most strongly in states in Africa and Asia, every continent has obstructed civic space. Restriction is happening in countries that have relatively well-entrenched democratic political systems as well as those where institutions are weak; in countries with different colonial histories and levels of economic development; in countries that range across the political spectrum from democracies to autocracies; and in countries run by leaders of all political persuasions. The restriction of civic space, it is now clear, is a global reality, and must be seen as a global emergency.

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UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY AND DYNAMICS OF RESTRICTION

The last year brought fresh recognition of how prevalent and sustained the assault on civil society now is. The World Economic Forum, in its [2017 Global Risks Report](#), for the first time recognised the increasing restriction of civic space as a threat to social, political and economic stability.

However, the restriction of civil society is not new. Today's trends pattern onto and reinforce an assault on civil society that has been occurring for years, as tracked through successive editions of this report. It is important to understand the history and dynamics of civic space restriction; some major geopolitical tipping points can be traced that have appreciably changed the conditions for civil society, such as the post 9/11 security environment, the rise of China and the spread of new technology. Our analysis over the years has tracked some of the key drivers and enablers of the restriction of civil society that current regressive political trends reinforce:

- the increased global emphasis on fighting terrorism and related concerns of safety and stability, which have enabled some states to restrict civil society in the name of combating terrorism, seen a widespread conflation of dissent with terrorism, and encouraged states to see a [trade-off](#) between respecting human rights and fighting terrorism;
- more recently, but similarly, a backlash in the global north in particular against migration and refugees, which has seen a renewed emphasis on measures to limit their flow, rather than to realise their rights or address the human rights abuses that people may be fleeing;
- a backlash to past civil society successes: for example, the mobilisation potential demonstrated in MENA and elsewhere in the early years of this decade put many states on the defensive and led to the introduction of pre-emptive measures, while the success of civil society in using new media to mobilise, organise and promote causes has led to an assault on online civic space;
- the rise of new international sources of support for states, notably from China, which does not attach human rights conditions to its support, and favours the funding of large-scale infrastructure development projects, which can further harm human rights and the civil society that upholds rights;
- the changing shape of development aid, with some established donor agencies realigning their aid agendas around trade and diplomatic advantage, as well as security and anti-migration priorities, and giving less emphasis to the realisation of civil society rights;
- the rise of transnational business, including extractive and financial industries, and the outsourcing of manufacturing supply chains to global south countries: as discussed in this report's thematic section on civil society and the private sector, large-scale businesses can have negative human rights impacts on communities and the civil society that defends communities, and can resist pressures for accountability and democratic oversight.

Often these different drivers interact and amplify each other, suggesting a need for in-depth contextual analysis of the drivers of pressure on civil society in any given country. Further, the actors that attack and restrict civil society may vary according to context. Threats can come from political leaders, including local-level politicians and leaders of extremist parties; extremist political and religious groups, including terrorist groups; organised crime groups; unaccountable

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Bwana Collins

state and private sector security forces; and large corporations. There is also growing awareness of the impacts on civic space of hate speech spread by online trolls, some of them organised, but many of them individuals acting independently. Connections between these different regressive forces, often characterised by webs of corruption and illegality, are very dangerous for civil society.

Notwithstanding this, analysis of the CIVICUS Monitor data shows that the key source of restriction for civil society is still the state. The state has a range of grounds on which to restrict civil society and a variety of tactics of restriction. These have now been clearly identified and delineated, and include:

- the introduction of restrictive new laws to constrain how civil society can form, act, report on itself and receive funding, passed, for example in 2016 [Belarus](#), [China](#) and [Egypt](#);
- the forced suspension or closure of CSOs, or attempts to do so, seen recently in [Benin](#), [Ecuador](#) and [Iraq](#);
- biased and flawed judicial proceedings that prevent activists and organisations from carrying out their mandates, as experienced lately in [Armenia](#), [Iran](#) and [Zimbabwe](#);

- the vilification of civil society members through verbal attacks and hate speech, seen in the past year in [Cambodia](#), [Poland](#) and [Tanzania](#);
- measures to close down online space, including in [Bangladesh](#), [Lesotho](#) and [Oman](#);
- the imposition of travel restrictions on civil society members, experienced by activists from [Azerbaijan](#), [India](#) and [Sudan](#);
- the denial of the right to protest peacefully, often by violent means, including in [Chile](#), [Ethiopia](#) and [Kazakhstan](#);
- arrests, imprisonment and arbitrary detentions, including in [Bahrain](#), the [Democratic Republic of the Congo \(DRC\)](#) and [Venezuela](#);
- the use of force, both state-sanctioned and extrajudicial, including physical attacks and assassinations, not least in [Honduras](#), [Kenya](#) and [Ukraine](#).

Many more examples could be offered. According to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), between June 2016 and March 2017, the main ways in which civic space was violated were:

- detention of activists (160 reports between June 2016 and March 2017)
- disruption of protests (113 reports)
- use of excessive force against protests (112 reports)
- attacks on journalists (101 reports)

Time and again such tactics are applied, combined in different measures, and borrowed from one state to be used in another.

Restrictions work by absorbing the energy of civil society, constraining the leaders of CSOs and exerting a deterrent effect. Too often, civil society's energies are absorbed in jumping through ever-increasing compliance hoops as laws and regulations introduce growing regulatory requirements, or in seeking resources to sustain themselves in contexts where states have made it harder for CSOs to receive funds from international sources. Harassment and detention of activists and journalists, and hate speech and violence towards them, can encourage self-censorship and a withdrawal into activities that are less exposed.

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FORCED CLOSURE: THE ECUADOR EXPERIENCE

In August 2016, Ecuador's Ministry of Education forcibly dissolved the country's most important teachers' organisation, the National Teachers' Union (UNE). The union was closed for allegedly disregarding its statutes and violating laws on the operation of social organisations, but in the view of [Rosana Palacios Barriga](#), UNE President, the decision was political. Conflict between

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the union and state began when the union urged then-President Rafael Correa to adhere to a Ten-Year Plan for education agreed at a referendum in 2006; the union demonstrated its power in a national strike in 2009 that defeated proposed changes. As Rosana explains, the forced closure was the endpoint of a series of manoeuvres to curtail the UNE's power, as part of a broader pattern of limiting the freedom of association and [ability to express dissent](#) in Ecuador, a trend seen particularly in the run-up to the February 2017 election:¹

¹ This is an edited extract of an interview conducted in March 2017. The full interview is available at <http://bit.ly/2oyGr2V>.

The dissolution of UNE is part of a formula that responds to the regime's central objective of eliminating all forms of civil society organisation and participation in policy-making, human rights advocacy and the promotion of public freedoms. In other words, it is part of its strategy to stay in power.

In its eagerness to eliminate our organisation, and more generally all organisations that do not follow their mandate, as well as to dominate the remaining ones, the government issued [Executive Decree No. 16](#) of 4 June 2013, the Regulation for the Operation of the Unified Information System of Social and Citizen Organisations. This decree was unanimously rejected by independent civil society, since it blatantly violated the freedom of association. The decree established new procedures and requirements for the legal recognition of CSOs and introduced an evaluation process to authorise international CSOs to operate. It also forced Ecuadorian CSOs to re-register, imposed excessive information requirements that could be used against organisations, and granted the government wide discretion to reject requests for legal recognition or to dissolve organisations on the basis of vague arguments related to diversion from their stated aims, involvement in partisan activity, interference with public policies or disturbance of state security or public peace.

Thanks to the support of civil society, including trade union organisations, civil servant organisations and international organisations such as the World Federation of Trade Unions and Education International, we managed to get the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the UN to denounce Executive Decree No. 16. A claim of unconstitutionality was filed before the Court of Justice in Ecuador. The first victim of dissolution as a result of the application of Decree No. 16 was the environmental organisation [Pachamama Foundation](#), shut down in late 2013.

Meanwhile, the government used a tactic of criminalisation against UNE leaders. Mery Zamora, UNE President between 2007 and 2010, was accused of sabotage and terrorism for allegedly inciting a school's students to take

to the streets during Ecuador's 2010 police revolt. She was found guilty on the basis of fake evidence and sentenced to eight years in prison. She was later declared not guilty on appeal and did not have to serve her sentence. However, the Office of the Public Prosecutor subsequently filed new charges against her for allegedly violating the rights of the state.

Other national leaders were imprisoned for a year. Dozens of provincial and local leaders were removed from their positions. Large numbers of administrative inquiries were initiated against teachers known to belong to UNE, many of whom were dismissed from their jobs or removed from their workplaces.

The new UNE leadership, including myself, elected for the period 2013 to 2016, was not officially recognised. UNE's Electoral Committee argued that the government's action was illegal, but it faced complete administrative silence for almost a year, after which it was eventually told that UNE had failed to deliver the required documentation. We suppose that the documents we had delivered were deliberately misplaced.

In 2015 the Ministry of Education set up a parallel union, the Teachers' Network for Educational Revolution, which did not meet any of the requirements that had been imposed on UNE. This violated international standards, including [ILO Convention 98](#) on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.

Education authorities have taken action to force teachers, through illegal procedures, to join the new organisation. At the same time, they have prevented UNE leaders from entering learning establishments. Circulars were issued that introduced sanctions against school authorities that permitted UNE leaders to come into their premises, allowed teachers to meet in assemblies, go to the union's premises, or allowed the dissemination of information on the situation of teachers. Finally, the



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authorities took control of the Unemployment Fund for Ecuadorian Teaching Staff, UNE's financial entity, containing US\$405 million.

The government has created parallel organisations in other sectors as well, including the Ecuadorian University Students' Front, the Front of Secondary Students of Ecuador and Seguro Campesino. In 2014 it established the government-friendly Unitarian Workers' Central in order to confront traditional trade union federations. The same has happened in the field of women's movements, environmental movements and land rights organisations. At the same time that these new organisations were being mobilised, anti-worker laws were put in place to criminalise social struggles, and the state's repressive apparatus was used against genuinely representative organisations.

The fear is that the UNE will not be the last CSO to be forcibly closed. At the time of writing, there were moves to shut down [Acción Ecológica](#), a CSO that advocates on the environmental impacts of the mining industry, a [politically sensitive](#) topic in Ecuador, and the government had [introduced a bill](#) making further provisions on CSO registration and dissolution.

Not all CSOs experience restriction in the same way. CSOs and activists most risk restriction whenever they work to expose state malpractice and corruption and demand democracy and accountability; take positions deemed to be controversial, including on grounds of national security, stability and public morality; seek to realise human rights and call attention to human rights abuses; claim rights for excluded groups; call for a fairer distribution of power and wealth; and question the impacts and working practices of large corporations. For example, the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) indicates that most detentions of civil society activists come when activists are perceived to challenge or criticise state institutions, policies and officials, and when they advocate for or draw attention to human rights abuses.

CSOs and activists experience less restriction when they prioritise charitable or social welfare activity, and when they deliver services. This divide is seen for example in [Tanzania](#), where Kepa Tanzania, an AGNA member, notes that the state treats civil society differently according to what it focuses on:²

There is great involvement of CSOs doing service delivery and those working on women, gender and children's rights. They are often consulted in policy-making processes, government programmes and other events organised by the government. On the other hand, there is a closed relationship with CSOs doing advocacy on land rights, defending human rights and human rights defenders, and those working on governance.

² All Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA) contributions in this report are edited extracts from a survey of AGNA members conducted between December 2016 and March 2017. The responses will be published separately in full.

For the past 10 years, we experienced positive and open relationships between the government and CSOs. CSOs were involved in decision-making processes, for example, on the constitution review process. The situation changed during and after the general election in October 2015, and continues to the present day. The relationship between CSOs undertaking advocacy on human rights and government is getting worse. The reason for the change in relationship is the new leadership, which does not accept criticism.

In response, in March 2017, Tanzanian CSOs [launched](#) a year-long campaign to urge the state to respect civil society freedoms.

Similarly, in [Nepal](#), the growing role that civil society is playing in advocacy, and in raising citizens' awareness of political accountability and governance issues, is starting to produce some [mistrust](#) and negativity from political office holders, according to the NGO Federation of Nepal, another AGNA member:

In general, relations between civil society and the government are not bad. But political parties, office bearers and bureaucracy have negative attitudes towards CSOs to some extent. Government officials started to perceive CSOs as a threat rather than counterparts. Many CSOs are becoming involved in policy advocacy and monitoring roles, which is not positively taken by government officials. Because of the instability of the government, government agencies have not been able to deliver public goods and services as per the aspirations of the people and are unable to fulfil their demands. But in contrast, the level of awareness has been continuously rising in the country and the level of demand for political accountability and good governance is increasing. Political leaders and bureaucrats blame CSOs for this happening.

Civil society groups may be tolerated when they do not criticise the state and political power-holders; they may even be encouraged, cultivated and rewarded with patronage when they take pro-government lines. The intent is often to divide civil society into a camp that is characterised as supportive of development, stability and national unity, and one that is hostile. While the diversity of civil society should be recognised as one of its great strengths, there is a need to be clear that the civil society the world needs is the civil society that upholds and advances human rights and seeks positive change. Regressive and conservative civil society forms exist and states may encourage those forms, as in the example of [Poland](#), covered in part three of this review, but it is progressive civil society that is under attack and that this report is concerned with.

As in the example of Ecuador above and, as AGNA member Coordinadora Civil reports, in [Nicaragua](#), in the worst cases, states may attempt to set up a parallel and captive pseudo-civil society, something that can fuel civil society self-censorship:

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Grzegorz Żukowski



There is a perception that the government is carrying out a strategy to set up parallel organisations to those of civil society in order to create divisions, promote internal contradictions and skimp resources from independent organisations. Blatant violations are observed of administrative rules, mainly by government institutions and autonomous agencies, all of which exert pressure and engage in administrative harassment. This has led to economic destabilisation, fear, self-imposed silence and censorship among former human rights advocacy organisations—organisations that used to work on issues such as education, children's rights, workers' and women's rights, sexual diversity and freedom of thought.

There is latent and silent fear among the citizenry, which is inhibiting them from participating in mobilisations and playing a role in participatory spaces within local government and autonomous institutions. For instance, some 10 years ago CSOs participated in municipal councils, children's commissions and local networks against violence. Nowadays only state institutions and partisan organisations aligned with the ruling party participate in these. The

government organises large groups of citizens, pays them and mobilises them with state resources in order to carry out political events in public squares and buildings. These are mainly made up of young men and women below 20 years of age.

A similar isolation of independent civil society is noted in [Venezuela](#), which is politically polarised and [lacks neutral state institutions](#), reports Sinergia, also an AGNA member:

Since almost the beginning of the late President Hugo Chavez's term in office, relations between the national government and CSOs have clearly undergone gradual deterioration, steeply worsening in 2009 with the enactment of a set of laws that were the basis of the so-called 'Communal State'.

The very ideological stance of the government, the increasingly visible intervention of the military in public affairs, as well as the government's refusal to create spaces for dialogue based on tolerance towards those who not share their proclaimed ideological convictions, which they try to turn into policy through the discretionary use of state resources, have resulted in an increasing segregation of autonomous CSOs devoted to advocacy and the promotion of citizen action.

In short, in numerous contexts, those who control the levers of state power are waging war on dissent. Civil society is least tolerated when it acts as the arena where dissent is expressed, debate takes place and alternatives are articulated. CIVICUS Monitor analysis also indicates that conditions of political polarisation or conflict further raise the stakes and make it more likely that activists will be detained: in polarised conditions, anyone seen as not being on the state's side will run the risk of being associated with the opposition. What should be understood is that it is the state, not civil society, that deems civil society to be playing a political role.

In many countries, restrictions also spike ahead of, during and immediately following elections. This was seen in 2016 in [Gabon](#), [Macedonia](#) and, in a case discussed in part two of this review, in [Zambia](#). The trend continued into 2017 in [Ecuador](#), [Turkmenistan](#) and [The Gambia](#), also covered in part two of this review, and in the Turkish referendum, discussed below.

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THE FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION: FINDINGS FROM A THREE-YEAR SELF-ASSESSMENT PROGRAMME

One of the ways in which the energy and initiative of civil society can be stifled is through the imposition of bureaucratic regulations: these can have the effect of causing CSOs to spend time and resources in compliance, distracting CSOs from what should be their core concerns: the pursuit of their missions and the service of their key stakeholders. In the worst cases, laws and regulations can starve CSOs of the ability to receive funds, and even, as in the example of Ecuador, force CSOs to close.

In 2016, civil society in 22 countries in Africa, the Americas and Asia concluded a first wave of national-level civil society self-assessments on the enabling environment for civil society.³ Across the countries, civil society applied the [Enabling Environment National Assessment](#) (EENA) tool, developed by CIVICUS and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL). Civil society in each country followed a common methodology to assess the environment for civil society, including the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, relations with the state and civil society resourcing. The EENAs focused in particular on the impact of laws and regulations concerning civil society. None of the 22 EENA countries is classed as having fully open civic space by the CIVICUS Monitor, and the majority are rated as having civic space that is obstructed or repressed.

Taken together, the EENA reports show that established international best practice in the regulation of CSOs is hardly ever followed. The rights that exist in international law mean that at the domestic level CSOs should be free to form and function independently, without having to consult, inform or obtain the permission of state agencies.

But in several countries, notification regimes exist in which CSOs must notify state agencies at key stages of their life cycle, such as when they form, undertake activities, hold meetings or receive resources. Worse, in some countries CSOs must seek the state's permission to do these. In many countries, CSOs are not free to act without the state's permission, even when notification regimes exist on paper: state agencies, officials and security forces may exceed their powers and treat the need to be notified as giving them de facto veto power.

More broadly, across the EENA research as a whole, CSOs find the laws and regulations that govern them to be far from enabling, undermining constitutional provisions that claim on paper to recognise the importance of citizens' participation.

³ The 22 EENA countries were: Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Honduras, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama, the Philippines, South Africa, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia.

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While part of the problem is that legal and regulatory regimes may be piecemeal, incomplete and out of date, in many contexts the situation has been exacerbated by recent changes.

In a number of countries, laws have been passed in recent years that worsen the environment for civil society by restricting fundamental rights. Restrictions are often made on grounds such as the protection of national security and public order, and the prevention of terrorism, but they have the effect of making it harder for CSOs to form and function. In some countries, states are insisting that if CSOs are to receive resources they must align with national development priorities, something that undermines the autonomy of civil society. Across the 22 EENA countries, many more disabling laws than enabling laws have recently been passed.

Disabling laws and regulations leave scope for selective and politicised interpretation, such that CSOs perceived to work on contested subjects and pose controversial questions can be targeted. In the worst cases, restrictions in the environment for CSOs suggest a deliberate attempt by states to limit the roles that CSOs can play and the topics they can work on, and to constrain the autonomy and hinder the effectiveness of CSOs.

What the hundreds of CSOs that took part in the EENA research across the 22 countries have made clear is that they do not seek a landscape free from regulation, and they do not necessarily want to work in isolation from the state. Many CSOs want to work in partnership with their state, but they want to do so as genuine partners, rather than as limited and contracted junior partners; they want to be free to define their own agendas and be accountable to their constituents while also cooperating with the state, working on shared agendas and bringing citizens' voices to the state.

CSOs will welcome legislation and regulation that is genuinely enabling and recognises the important roles that CSOs play in society, as these help CSOs to demonstrate their legitimacy and distinguish themselves from fake CSOs. Above all, CSOs want laws and regulations that are predictable, manageable, transparent and free from political interference. The present reality is often far from this ideal.

THE NEW DEMOCRATIC CRISIS: A FRESH ATTACK ON RIGHTS

What has changed in recent times is less the source or tactics of the attack on civil society, but more the confidence of those attacks, and the contexts where the attacks are happening. Those who repress the freedoms of association, assembly and expression now do so more blatantly. And they do it in [long-established](#) democratic states as well as more fragile democracies and non-democratic states.

In several countries, a conscious political project, at its worst neo-fascist in intent, has formed to overturn long-established expectations about how democracies should behave. This project disparages internationalism and rejects ideals of human rights and social justice, even when these are enshrined in constitutions

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and the international agreements to which states have long been parties. It organises around narrow and ethnically charged notions of [nationalism](#). The project dismisses attempts to challenge exclusion, or to encourage respect for human rights and diversity, as so much ‘political correctness’ or ‘virtue signalling’: an attempt to push cosmopolitan and globalist values that is unnecessary, unhelpful or out of touch with the presumed views of majority population groups. Action on climate change may be [disparaged](#) in similar terms, as a threat to freedom and economic growth. The project prioritises economic growth and job creation, for long-established population groups, if not for more recent migrants; this is generally to be enabled by the removal of restrictions on business, along with stronger immigration controls.

The figureheads of this project form a new cadre of political leaders, which has emerged to take power on populist tickets. These new leaders often position themselves as mavericks or political outsiders, free from the constraints of established political consensus and so able to take the hard decisions that conventional politicians shirk. They often come packaged as hard men - they are usually men - able to restore a country to past glory and defend traditional values, however imagined and contested these may be in reality.

They generally come to power democratically, by winning elections, but following elections, may characterise the expression of further dissent as anti-democratic or harmful; elections are positioned as decisive, and dissent following elections is not seen as part of a participatory democratic process. The rule of law matters less than rule by edict; judicial and legislative institutions will be attacked when they attempt to exercise checks and balances against excessive executive power. Once elected, leaders tend to centralise and personalise decision-making, surrounding themselves with narrow coteries of advisors, often drawn from business elites, who benefit from the easing of business regulations. They may well make decisions that accord with the interests of the blocs of voters who elected them – often made up of members of a society’s dominant and long-established ethnic groups, often slanted towards men – but these interests will be pursued at the expense of minorities and non-supporters, including many in civil society. The project needs scapegoats and soft targets, and its leaders garner support by demonising excluded groups as being responsible for contemporary problems.

While this typology makes generalisations, many of its facets could be observed in multiple countries in 2016 and 2017. In the early months of 2017, much attention focused on the often bizarre and petulant behaviour of the Trump administration in the [USA](#). But it is dangerous to see the USA as an outlier. Other examples, as highlighted in previous State of Civil Society Reports and on the CIVICUS Monitor, can be observed in [Hungary](#), [India](#), [Israel](#) and the [Philippines](#), discussed in detail below. What should be clear is that the present political crisis goes beyond the USA, and manifests in the global south as well as the global north. The risk is that President Trump’s rise to power may further embolden strongmen leaders [elsewhere](#).

2016 saw strongmen leaders continue to flex their muscles. In [Turkey](#), President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the July 2016 attempted coup as an opportunity to force through sweeping new restrictions on human rights and civil society, as AGNA member the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TUSEV) relates:

Following the coup attempt, on 21 July 2016 the Turkish authorities informed the Secretary General of the Council of Europe that Turkey would notify derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights under Article 15 of the Convention. The government extended the state of emergency for another three months, which came into effect on 19 October 2016. The government conducted mass arrests of military personnel, detained several thousands of judges and journalists, and thousands of civil servants were dismissed in connection with the coup. The decrees passed under the state of emergency introduced restrictive measures affecting civil society in general.

The state of emergency allows the Council of Ministers, chaired by the president, to issue statutory decrees that carry the force of law. Further, the Council of Ministers can issue regulations suspending or restricting the use of fundamental rights and freedoms, including the freedom of association. The mechanisms of checks and balances were not put in place to ensure safeguards against disproportional measures and to preserve the separation of powers and the rule of law. The state of emergency allows the president and cabinet to bypass parliament when drafting new laws and to restrict or suspend basic rights and freedoms.

The state of emergency was extended further in January 2017. By then, it was estimated that [195 media outlets](#) had been shut down, more than 80 journalists [imprisoned](#), over 37,000 people [arrested](#) and at least 100,000 people sacked from public sector jobs. The high number of sackings of [teachers](#) and university lecturers and detentions of journalists – unlikely leaders of an attempted military coup – made clear that the purge was a broader attack on dissent and the freedom of expression.

Under such repressive conditions, and amidst a continuing [state of emergency](#), how could a free and fair [referendum](#) possibly be held? And yet the country pushed ahead with a vote in April 2017 to give the president expansive new powers. The referendum, carried by a narrow 51 per cent to 49 per cent majority, was preceded by a widespread campaign of state repression of dissent, which left [few opportunities](#) for people to campaign against the changes. Little wonder that European Union (EU) observers [criticised the vote](#) for not being free or fair.

Other macho leaders have continued to enjoy power. In [South Africa](#), President Jacob Zuma continued to defy opponents, including many in the ranks of his [own party](#), by pursuing a highly personalised style of rule, at times seemingly hiring, [firing](#) and [undermining ministers](#) at whim. He has held on to power even in the face of continuing mass protests, covered in part three of this report, and the administration has lashed back at civil society by [accusing](#) CSOs of collaborating with foreign forces to destabilise the country. [Indian](#) Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cultivation of populism and ethnic nationalism, discussed further below, is longstanding, and goes hand in hand with his government's [crackdown](#) on civil society, including civil society that defends the environment against large-scale infrastructure projects, seeks the rights of excluded groups and exposes human rights abuses committed by security forces. The [template](#) for the present wave of strong-arm, highly personalised leaders is [Russia's](#) President Vladimir Putin, who has [continued to repress](#) dissenting civil society at every opportunity while developing connections of international influence with other repressive leaders. Given this configuration, and events in Brazil discussed

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Fibonacci Blue



in part three of this review, any hopes that the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) grouping of states could be a global south force for good are clearly naïve.

While those who have come to power by winning elections command the headlines, the new, regressive politics does not necessarily have to gain power to make an impact. It can work by influencing mainstream political agendas to take more populist and nationalist directions. Far-right and nationalist political parties that once were dismissed as extremist fringe groups have advanced up the political agenda in several European states, including in Denmark, France, Germany and Italy. In [Austria in 2016](#), it took a second [presidential election](#) before the far-right candidate was defeated; the result of the first ballot, overturned by court order, saw less than one percentage point separate the two candidates. In the Netherlands, the worst case scenario that far-right Geert Wilders, convicted of racial [hate crime](#) in December 2016, would come first in the March 2017 election did not transpire, but his party came second, and the winning party [adopted](#) much of his anti-migrant rhetoric. Several European states have steered a more rightward and insular course in response to the growth of far-right groups. This is exemplified in the anti-refugee policies recently introduced in many states, and in the way that the UK's politics have reshaped around hard-line interpretations of the June 2016 EU referendum decision.

THE IMPACTS ON CIVIC SPACE

In part, the current regressive turn has been enabled by the prior degradation of civic space. Civil society in many places has become weakened and placed on the defensive, and so is less able to respond to new emergencies. In the worst cases, the weakening of the fabric of civil society may be seen as an essential part of the groundwork for establishing the current regressive political project.

Civil society space is threatened further by the new political crisis, because leaders who ride populist waves to power tend to resist accountability and democratic dissent once in power. The organisation of protests following elections may be labelled as anti-democratic. Those who expose corrupt relationships or conflicts of interest may be labelled as disruptive, or agents of outside forces. The real risks of transnational terrorism may be repurposed to impose unjustified restrictions. At the time of writing it may be too soon to say how US civil society will be impacted on by President Donald Trump, but the indicators are not good: those countries that have followed similar trajectories, such as Hungary, India and Russia, have treated civil society increasingly badly.

Alarmingly, the new political leaders have persuaded many citizens that the constitutional and international safeguards that uphold rights and enable scrutiny and accountability are not needed. Groups of citizens have been convinced that their rights can be trusted to leaders. Further, rights have been demonised. Through a relentless repetition of simplistic messages, new political leaders have persuaded mainstream population groups that rights are [impediments](#): that rights are enjoyed by and facilitate terrorists, asylum seekers and migrants. This is enabling a historic [roll back](#) by states of the rights commitments made in the wake of two world wars to protect us from the horrors of war and totalitarianism.

The popularity of attacks on rights, among some population groups, creates a challenge for civil society: as the example of the Philippines below suggests, attacks on human rights may enjoy high levels of public support. Civil society then faces the difficulty of taking a stand on a position that is publicly unpopular; when civil society does so, it becomes easy to characterise civil society as being out of touch with public opinion, or promoting foreign values that go against national values and democratic decisions, giving grounds to attack civil society. In such circumstances, civil society can face questions of how it chooses which battles to fight, and confront dilemmas between self-censorship and staying true to its values.

A further challenge for civil society, in the global south in particular, is that when these political shifts occur in states that have long been considered mature or consolidated democracies, it normalises regression and sends a message of encouragement to leaders of more autocratic states. The challenge is that if established democracies that are active players in the international system cannot abide by high human rights standards, why should any state?

Alongside this, a rejection of internationalism and the values that underpin it [weakens](#) international institutions, the focus of part four of this review, and

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reduces their value to civil society as a source of human rights norms and monitoring of rights violations. Additionally, when global north states that are prominent donors shift strongly rightward, their donor policies can change, moving away from support to human rights and civil society and towards national self-interest, and particularly security and economic interest. Further, the soft power that donors may enjoy to encourage state behaviour that is respectful of civil society, democracy and human rights is eroded when donor states do not respect these norms domestically.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES IN THE PHILIPPINES

In 2016, the Philippines offered an example of how citizens could embrace a controversial and outspoken leader, and how human rights, including civil society rights, are harmed by such moves.

Rodrigo Duterte was elected President of the Philippines in May 2016, winning 39 per cent of the popular vote. President Duterte, long-time Mayor of Davao City in the Mindanao Region, immediately escalated his campaign of extrajudicial killings from the city to the

national level, under the pretext of tackling drug crime. Civil society groups claimed that [1,400 people](#) were illegally killed by death squads in Davao since 1998. After Duterte assumed the presidency, police forces and vigilante gangs were allowed to run amok, with rumours of secret police [death squads](#) in operation. By January 2017, when President Duterte [ordered the police service](#), but not other forces, to suspend anti-drug operations, it was estimated that over [7,000 people](#) had been killed in Duterte's crackdown.

These killings, and impunity for them, were not merely condoned by President Duterte; they were actively approved of and encouraged by him. For example, in August 2016, President Duterte [released a list](#) of officials and politicians said to be involved in the drug trade, [several of whom](#) gave themselves up to the police rather than risk vigilante killings; the suspicion was that many on the list were his political enemies. As 2016 went on, new evidence came to light of President Duterte's [active role in ordering and funding killings](#) in Davao, and by December 2016, President Duterte was emboldened enough to boast of his past, direct role in killings, and [threaten to murder](#) corrupt government officials. He also [compared himself to Hitler](#), threatened to kill millions of drug users if need be, and suggested he might suspend [habeas corpus](#), an essential protection against unlawful detention. '[Kill lists](#)' were reported to be in circulation.

The attacks were a blunt instrument. Even if you believed the flawed logic that the best way to eradicate drug crime is to kill drug dealers, the culture of impunity and political rhetoric meant that many people who had committed no crime were killed; one could literally get away with murder, providing one was able to label the victim as a drug criminal. There were suggestions that the police were [planting evidence](#) and falsifying reports to justify killings. Ultimately, violence begets violence: when people realise they can get away with violent criminality, they are emboldened to commit further acts of violence, and the rule of law is eroded. Such impunity most endangers the excluded and least powerful, as [Roselle Rasay](#) of the Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO) indicates:⁴

At a community level the threats create fear because the police go from house to house asking people to write their names and if they use drugs. Some people wouldn't know what these forms mean. They just submit their data depending on the situation in the community. It creates trouble within some communities because neighbours would point to each other. Some people in the community can also write down names of people they do not like. Some of those using drugs will point to others.

⁴ This is an edited extract of an interview conducted in December 2016. The full interview is available at <http://bit.ly/2hkukFT>.

THIS RECENT WAVE
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A BROADER PATTERN
OF HUMAN RIGHTS
ABUSES

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The majority of those killed are from the poorest communities who may not even be drug users. There are very few big names being caught up in this, save for a mayor who was killed after he voluntarily submitted himself for investigation because the authorities were looking for him. He was killed right at the jail. The impression was that he had knowledge of who else had knowledge on drugs matters.

This recent wave of killings should be located within a broader pattern of human rights abuses. The Philippines has long been a country in which investigative journalists, human rights defenders and civil society activists working to expose corruption and realise land and environmental rights face high levels of risk and impunity; [Front Line Defenders](#) has consistently rated the Philippines as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders. Those suspected of direct involvement in the drugs trade are not the only targets. In [June 2016](#), President Duterte suggested that there could be justification for the killings of journalists, a [continuing problem](#) in the Philippines. In [November 2016](#), he also blamed human rights defenders for the country's perceived drug problem, and threatened to kill them too. The lesson from the Philippines in 2016 was that if democratic language and actions are not taken on, the perpetrators become more confident and less concerned about backlash, and their words and deeds intensify.

Roselle Rasay makes clear how the threat of attacks extends to those who criticise the killings and seek to uphold human rights:

The president said he will kill human rights advocates if the campaign against drugs is stopped because of them and the illegal drug problem gets worse. The Commission on Human Rights is also being attacked by the President. There is apparent inaction by police authorities on reported cases of extrajudicial killings, with all of them being lumped into 'deaths under investigation'.

The president himself is encouraging, through his statements, vigilante actions, and for citizens to take up arms to kill drug pushers or users. The president has taken the side of the police being investigated for abuse in the anti-drug campaign. He badmouths and undermines the Commission on Human Rights and other nations and institutions that call for investigations of blatant human rights violations in the anti-drug campaign. He also personally attacks and encourages, if not orchestrates, an all-out attack by his Justice Secretary and allies in Congress against Senator Leila de Lima, who led the Senate investigations on this drug war, all to apparently silence or undermine the opposition.

Senator de Lima, a vocal critic of the government's actions, was subsequently [arrested](#) in February 2017 on drug-trafficking charges she claims to be false.

The challenge for civil society was that many citizens seemed to support the president's actions: an [opinion poll](#) in July 2016 indicated that 91 per cent of Filipinos trusted President Duterte, compared to only 35 per cent who trusted the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. While this may have reflected a honeymoon effect, by October 2016, when the killings were well under way and highly visible, [another poll](#) gave President Duterte an approval rating of 76 per cent, while a [further poll](#) put the figure at 86 per cent. It could be argued that those most threatened by the wave of killings and impunity were society's

most excluded and voiceless people, who were therefore likely to be under-represented in such polls. But still, the risk was that civil society, in seeking to uphold human rights, defend civic space and challenge impunity, would find itself at odds with public opinion.

The challenge for civil society was one of finding a way to acknowledge the legitimacy of public concerns about crime, and understand that levels of public support for President Duterte may arise partly from [anger](#) that past presidents have failed to tackle crime or have been seen as corrupt and complicit in the drugs trade, while asserting that killings are not the way to address those grievances. A further challenge for civil society, in taking on regressive actions that have a level of popular support, is the threat of backlash, with civil society in the Philippines experiencing vindictive and intrusive online trolling and threats and intimidation from political and security force figures. Roselle Rasay sets out how the campaign of killings divided civil society:

Among CSOs, some are very much against it and are emboldened in their work and are very vocal about their sentiments about the campaign. Others do not openly express their disagreement of the campaign because they are careful not to jeopardise other advocacy actions they are working out with government, such as the peace talks, agrarian reform and others.

Some in civil society did, however, respond. The [Catholic Church](#), an important social force in the Philippines, expressed its alarm at the killings, and condemned as immoral an offer made by one city mayor to pay the police cash rewards for killing drug suspects. Civil society activists worked to create [new platforms](#) to uphold the rule of law, including the Task Force for Detainees of the Philippines, a CSO that documents violations, advocates for investigations and supports victims and families, and the In Defence of Human Rights and Dignity Movement, formed by around 30 CSOs to provide legal services to the families of those killed. In November 2016, a number of activists [launched](#) the Network Against Killings in the Philippines in order to take a non-partisan civil society stance against the killings and urge that the rule of law be upheld. The [February 2017](#) anniversary of the 1986 People Power Revolution also saw protest marches against President Duterte, as well as in his support. Roselle Rasay sets out some of the other ways in which civil society responded, including by raising awareness of rights and protection strategies, but also the negative reaction this could bring:

While civil society is largely divided in their opinion or position, there are still some quarters that have mustered the courage to go public and have denounced the excesses of the present administration. This is being done in various ways, such as mobilisation and other actions against extrajudicial killings. Several human rights groups and peace groups, including my

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organisation, CODE-NGO, have condemned the campaign, by issuing statements in traditional and social media condemning the killings. In social media though, these statements usually receive nasty responses from supporters of President Duterte, many of whom appear to be funded trolls. Lawyers taking up cases are also being attacked in this way.

The CODE-NGO general assembly recently passed a resolution calling on arms of government to uphold human rights in the anti-drug campaign. Discussions are also ongoing among CSOs about providing orientation to their partner communities on how to protect themselves and assert their rights against house searches or arrests without warrants by the police.

In the past, we have been successful in improving policies related to the regulation of CSOs and in improving the public image and public support for CSOs. However, it is too early to tell if CODE-NGO and other CSOs can successfully defend and promote civic space given the President's pronouncements and actions.

Ultimately, President Duterte will be judged by how well he meets the [most urgent needs](#) of Filipinos, such as controlling inflation, creating jobs and challenging poverty. It should be clear that the current climate of murder and impunity is not going to do anything to address the Philippines' underlying economic and social problems, and that only in conditions where citizens feel protected from violence from all quarters and are able to express their views without fear are real solutions going to come. The rhetoric that President Duterte's past actions in Davao helped to reduce crime and violence has been proved to be [false](#), and needs to be taken on and [critiqued](#).

Civil society needs international support in such contexts, but it is not easy when nationalism is being asserted and international institutions are being rebuked. The international sphere attempted to respond: the International Criminal Court's (ICC) [Chief Prosecutor](#) suggested that a preliminary investigation could be opened, and the [UN special rapporteur](#) on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, attempted to visit the Philippines, but was forced to pull out after the state attempted to impose an unprecedented number of [conditions](#) on her visit. These included an insistence that the special rapporteur swear an oath and be subject to questions by President Duterte, provisions that would crucially undermine the rapporteur's independence. In a further show of international concern, [in December 2016](#) the Philippines' traditional ally, the US government, deferred the renewal of an aid package, while the [month before](#) it halted the planned sale of assault rifles to the police.

In response, President Duterte attacked [UN institutions](#) and [the ICC](#), and threatened to pull out of them. He also attacked the [EU](#), [repeatedly distanced himself](#) from the USA and publicly cultivated alternate connections with [China](#) and [Russia](#). The international calculus may have changed with the coming to power of President Trump, who President Duterte claims [praised](#) his drugs policy in a warm phone call, indicating how the new political leaders support each other internationally.



What this suggests is that international engagement with the Philippines that does not criticise President Duterte's approach will be welcomed, and that which criticises it will not. Human rights discourse will be rejected, but there is not a straightforwardly isolationist rejection of international cooperation; rather, international links are welcomed when they enable the propagation of regressive, illiberal norms.

UNDERSTANDING ANGER

If civil society is to withstand the impacts of these changes and mount a response, then we need to understand, acknowledge and work with rather than against the public anger that regressive political leaders are tapping into, stoking and directing. There would appear to be three distinct phases of populist revolt. First there is a sense of grievance. This is then processed to form a clear narrative and build a constituency. This then leads to a political movement framed around a simplistic set of solutions. Without the sense of grievance, none of the rest happens.

While the world of 2017 may look markedly different to that of 2011, what they have in common is high levels of citizen anger. The rage that fuelled recent political shifts may not be so distinct from the anger that sparked the mass protests of 2011. People in many parts of the world feel themselves being left behind by the tides of economic globalisation. Recent research provides evidence that economic globalisation has [disproportionately](#) benefited the already wealthy, while the poorest have benefitted little or less; further, incomes in many

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advanced economies have plateaued or are in retreat, such that successive generations now face the once unimaginable prospect of being [poorer](#) than the generation before them. Many people feel they are struggling to make ends meet and are working harder while feeling poorer. Their [employment](#) is less secure than it used to be, and may be vulnerable to outsourcing, while the safety net provided by state welfare is shrinking. This group of people has been branded the '[precariat](#)'.

At the same time, in countries that experienced the worst shocks of the early 21st century economic crisis, citizens saw their governments react by bailing out financial institutions and protecting big business, even while slashing public funding. The [Panama Papers](#) leaks exposed the intricacy of the connections between elected politicians and the financial institutions that help them manage their wealth: 140 politicians and officials from over 50 countries were [revealed](#) to be linked to offshore financial management schemes connected to Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca. The leak highlighted the wealth of political leaders and their separation from voters; it shed light on the interconnected nature of elites, and provoked the question of whether political leaders make decisions in defence of their wealth and the secrecy that protects it.

Some people feel that governments are privileging particular groups at the expense of majority populations. They may feel [bewildered](#) and left behind by the pace of contemporary change, in employment practices and in the uses of technology. [Men in particular](#) may feel that their established [roles](#), in the workplace and society, are being undermined by changes in employment and advances in women's rights. People may see their neighbourhoods being reshaped by transnational businesses and by migration. They may fear crime.

This feeds into and reinforces perceptions that conventional political leaders are isolated, corrupt and ruling in their own interests and those of their circle, rather than in the interests of wider groups of citizens. Citizens may see the political competition on offer as being very limited, with established political parties and conventional leaders all sounding and looking the same and offering similar policies. Working people may feel that parties of the centre-left that traditionally stood for their interests [no longer](#) speak for them. They may see established political processes as giving them inadequate opportunities to express the anger they feel and to influence their societies and their politics. At its worse, this anger may manifest itself in a rejection of the notion of democracy itself: there is [some evidence](#), in established democracies at least, that [respect for democratic institutions](#) is falling and support for authoritarian leadership is rising.

THE CAMPAIGN WAS
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STORIES VIA SOCIAL
MEDIA

What seems clear is that there is a crisis of trust: the 2017 [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), which measures citizens' levels of trust in government, business, CSOs and the media, records an unprecedented fall in trust in all four spheres. CSOs remain the most trusted type of institution, but trust in them [has declined](#), as it has for all other institutions. The Barometer also reports a lack of belief that the system works for them among majority populations in most countries surveyed. There are major and growing gulfs between the trust in the system that affluent, well-educated and well-informed people feel, and the trust felt by the rest of the population. The biggest such trust gaps are observed in the USA, UK and France, all countries which have seen surges of populist anger; these three are also countries in which, according to a [recent survey](#), a majority of their citizens feel their country is on the wrong track, and where key concerns such as terrorism, immigration and unemployment respectively have offered fertile ground for populism.

Citizens who feel like this will seize any opportunity they can to communicate their anger. They will protest on the streets and through social media. They will vote for populist leaders who promise simple solutions. They will [reject candidates](#) from mainstream political parties, as happened in the 2017 French presidential election. They will hijack referendums, when these are offered, and make them about something else, an occurrence seen several times in 2016: [Colombia's referendum](#) on the peace process was loaded with a range of socially conservative concerns about the pace of political change, and narrowly defeated; [Italy's referendum](#) on constitutional change provided the pretext for a protest vote organised by an unlikely coalition of self-defined anti-establishment parties; and the [UK's referendum](#) on its membership of the EU provided an opportunity to express disaffection about migration, employment and the remoteness of the political elite from many parts of the country. In all three countries, an angered bloc of citizens hijacked a referendum as a vehicle to articulate its rage and experienced the satisfaction of handing the establishment a defeat.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE COLOMBIAN PEACE REFERENDUM

The peace deal negotiated to end the decades-long armed conflict between the state and guerrilla groups, principally the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), went to a public referendum in October 2016. The outcome was a narrow 'no' vote, 50.2 per cent versus 49.8 per cent, against the deal, sending shockwaves through Colombia's political establishment, and also civil society, which had largely campaigned in favour of the deal.

The campaign was characterised by [polarisation](#) and the spread of [populist scare stories](#) via social media. As AGNA member the Colombia NGO Federation (CCONG) sets out, civil society that campaigned for a 'yes' vote had to take on a barrage of political misinformation and misunderstanding, and at some risk to themselves:

CSOs undertook outreach actions to inform citizens about the real scope of the agreement in order to delegitimise the fake arguments that had caused fear among certain sectors of the population; social mobilisation actions, aimed at putting pressure on political actors to move forward with the revision of the agreements and with not abandoning the path of peace; and sensitisation actions to strengthen the political and democratic culture of large

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sections of the country, particularly among young people. It acted on the understanding that although technology is a tool, democracy is built at the polls, through political advocacy and in the course of processes of political dialogue.

This being the most important process in the country's history, some legal and illegal actors advanced communication strategies to discredit CSOs, portraying their rights advocacy actions as destabilising democracy. Many CSOs that campaigned for the 'yes' option in the referendum suffered attacks on their headquarters and persecution of their leaders.

The fact that 'no' won reflected a high degree of social and political polarisation in Colombia and implied great risk for those sectors of the population and civil society that mobilise citizen action to promote rights, express themselves critically and play a role in the territories in conflict.

As [Carlos A Guevara](#) of Somos Defensores (We Are Defenders) relates, civil society has long played a largely unrecognised role in working to build peace in Colombia:⁵

Civil society does not get much press coverage, but the truth is that it is the lynchpin of peace-building in Colombia. For many years human rights defenders have fought for a negotiated settlement of the conflict and they are now the main activists for peace. Since the peace talks began, the entire civil society – at the national, regional and local levels – made proposals to bring peace to the territories, and it took those proposals to the negotiating table. For example, the issue of how violence affected women differently entered the negotiations through the work of the Colombian women's movement.

Civil society has also been targeted by those who oppose peace, and the situation for civil society remains difficult, as CCONG sets out:

Paradoxically, as the peace agreement was being renegotiated, the rates of persecution and murder of social leaders on the ground increased exponentially. Indeed, media research and official and CSO statistics show that [close to 70](#) social leaders were assassinated, and the number of threats and attacks also increased.

⁵ This is an edited extract of an interview conducted in April 2016. The full interview is available at <http://bit.ly/2mBJupl>.

⁶ This is an edited extract of an interview conducted in March 2017. The full interview is available at <http://bit.ly/2nIU4o>.



Janaina C. Falkiewicz

[Carlos Andrés Santiago](#) of the Corporation for the Defence of Water, Territory and Ecosystems (CORDATEC), an organisation that defends water, land and the ecosystems of San Martín, in the Cesar region, also relates how peace has brought [new threats](#) to [civil society](#), including civil society that defends the environment:⁶

A vacant space has remained that is now being occupied by new armed groups or criminal gangs. We are witnessing a transition from a great conflict between two armed actors to a set of diverse conflicts around social issues, many of them linked to environmental causes, such as land use conflicts involving victims who demand the restitution of their land and struggles in defence of water and, particularly in communities like ours, mobilise against extractive projects.

The extinction of the conflict with the FARC, which yielded countless victims, therefore

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correlates with an increase in the number of [murders of social and environmental activists](#) and also the visibility of human rights defenders active in territories and communities.

[Gina Romero](#), Executive Director of the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy (RedLad) further sets out the challenges for civil society, but also the opportunity that peace could offer to articulate dissent differently:⁷

In the last two years of negotiations the number of deaths and disappearances caused by the FARC was very low. Other actors have been the source of threats against human rights defenders. In other words, while the peace agreement effectively guarantees better conditions regarding actions by the parties that have accepted its terms, at the same time it can result in an increase in violence, as happened during the first couple of years of negotiations, from others actors that are trying to place themselves in a position to replace demobilised groups.

In the Colombian imagination, protest has long been closely associated with guerrilla movements, which means that it has been historically seen with suspicion. In this sense, it is possible for this process to finally free the symbolic space that the FARC has long occupied as the representatives of the struggle for social equity - a banner that they lost somewhere on their way - and to end up vindicating the exercise of the right to protest.

The peace deal was renegotiated and approved by Congress, rather than through another referendum, in [November 2016](#). But, as Carlos A Guevara suggests, the agreement should only be the beginning, and there is a need for long-term engagement:

Civil society has long been demanding that the international community not leave Colombia. Government has hinted that when the peace agreements are signed, the conflict and human rights violations will be over for good. However, countries emerging from this kind of conflict have typically faced post-conflict scenarios of violence lasting for five to ten years, with violence peaking at even higher levels than those of the late conflict era, because this is the time when society struggles to accommodate its new members.

International verification agencies should not leave Colombia as soon as the peace agreements are signed; we will need at least ten years of accompaniment. The conflict has not yet been resolved in a profound and definitive way: we are at a point where we are talking about the demobilisation of the guerrillas and not yet about building peace. So first, resources will have to be invested in turning peace-building into a citizen matter. Second, we will need financial support to explore new protection alternatives for defenders. Third, we will need help in reacting to new sources of oppression

⁷ This is an edited extract of an interview conducted in September 2016. The full interview is available at <http://bit.ly/2muVUQU>.

brewing in the territories, particularly those around extractive industries. And the international community has a huge responsibility in that regard, because the big mining companies that are coming over are American, Brazilian, British, Canadian, Japanese and Spanish, among others. All these countries should cooperate on human rights with our government and our CSOs.

While the inequality that most starkly marks today's world is that between the incredibly rich and everyone else - with [Oxfam](#) revealing in 2017 that the world's eight richest men own the same wealth as half the world's population - much of the focus of the present people's anger does not fall on the very wealthy. Rather it falls on the [professional class](#) that generally controls access to power. When political campaigns talk of people 'taking back control', this is the class they want to wrest control from: professional politicians, career civil servants, the heads of public media, public intellectuals, experts: during the UK's 2016 referendum campaign, a [prominent pro-leave politician](#) announced that "people in this country have had enough of experts."

In a perverse trick, anger fuelled by economic globalisation has been captured by economic globalisation's winners - by members of wealthy elites, such as those gathered in President Trump's [cabinet of billionaires](#) - even though they may position themselves as mavericks and outsiders. Because established political parties are rejected as complicit in a shallow neoliberal consensus, hard to tell apart and unable to offer radical solutions for present problems, populist figureheads have been able to capture the imagination, shape the narrative of disaffection and command support. Anger that might be directed at the very wealthy and at the structures of economic globalisation is instead being focused on the professional gatekeeper class that is strongly associated with economic globalisation.

The new breed of political leaders is [encouraging hostility](#) towards the gatekeeper classes, but also urging people to punch down, and blame those who have even less for the insecurity they feel: in numerous contexts anger is being directed at migrants and refugees, people who receive welfare, and the recipients of foreign aid. It is being focused on those visibly different to dominant population groups, and the attack is gendered. The cultivation of division is no by-product of the new political project; it is essential, as populist figureheads seek to segment the population and forge an alliance of the disaffected, defined as much by what they are against as what they are for.

Civil society finds itself on the margins of the argument, and attacked as part of the professional class when it stands up for rights and defends those who have the least. This happens even though many in civil society have for years been at the forefront of critiquing how economic globalisation is practised and seeking a fairer distribution of economic and political power. But now in civil society we find ourselves on the back foot, caught out by the backlash, our arguments eclipsed by simplistic, regressive appeals.

In considering how that anger has been moulded and directed, there is a need to look at the ways that new political leaders are communicating and reaching audiences, particularly through their use of new media.

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MOVING THE WINDOW: NEW MEDIA AND THE NEW POLITICAL PROJECT

Although they may make a nostalgic appeal to the restoration of traditional values and past glories, the current wave of populist leaders understands and ably harnesses the power of new media, particularly social media. If the past year has proved anything, it is that political discourse is important; the command of narrative and the shaping of the terms and territory of debate can be a precursor to political power. The current regressive political project therefore explicitly engages in a battle of ideas. The intention is to shift what is often described as the [Overton Window](#) – the range of political ideas on which it is possible for politicians to stand and win an election. This shift cannot be effected without engaging with and shaping public opinion; the public needs to find acceptable what it would once have considered unsayable. The previously outrageous becomes normalised, and opinions once too distasteful to share leak into and tilt mainstream political discourse. New media is the key battleground.

Many of us in civil society invested great hopes in the burgeoning of new media. The potential seemed obvious: people could articulate their views directly and use new tools to ask questions of those in power, expose governance deficits, promote causes and self-organise. Citizens had new opportunities to educate themselves, enabling them to cut through bias, particularly media bias in contexts where the state keeps a tight rein on public broadcasting. And indeed, there are [many examples](#) where citizens have used these new tools to good effect: in [Brazil](#), a mobile phone app has enabled citizens to monitor progress on electoral promises made by politicians; in [Indonesia](#), citizen-generated data has helped to improve local government decision-making; in the 2017 protests in [Romania](#), discussed in part three of this review, protesters used their phones to form a giant Romanian flag as a viral protest symbol. Further, as illustrated in part two of this review, which focuses on the freedom of expression, states recognise the implicit power of new technology when they harass and detain online activists, block websites and shut down the internet and key apps during times of contestation. This happened in 2016 in [Cameroon](#), [Kazakhstan](#) and [Turkey](#), to give just three examples.

But civil society's faith in the internet and social media has surely taken a battering in recent years, as new media has become the home of endless trolling, and the propagation of vile racism, sexism and xenophobia. Any woman who is vocal on social media [risks harassment](#) simply for being a woman; politically active women experience [extraordinary levels](#) of abuse. Even the hope many in civil society once invested in [WikiLeaks](#) was challenged by the network's apparent closeness to the Russian state and the Trump election campaign. Regressive new political forces have proved themselves [adept](#) at using new media to spread hate speech, attack human rights and shape the ground for political discourse through half-truths and lies.

Rather than as innately forces for good, or indeed ill, use, we in civil society need to see the internet and social media as spaces that can be used and captured for any cause. This is not to say that new media companies are free from politics; there are numerous examples of tech companies cooperating with states to restrict or enable surveillance of content, including in [China](#), [Pakistan](#) and the [USA](#), while doing little to stop or even [actively enabling](#) the flow of hate speech.

Further, awareness has increased of the potential for social media to trap us in [echo chambers](#). Our friendship networks reinforce our biases, because we are more likely to connect with people who like the same things as us or share our views. Meanwhile powerful algorithms designed to sell tailored advertising track us, work out what we like, and try to serve us more of the same. Most people stick to a handful of social media platforms and find it convenient to get their news from them. In the USA, [a 2016 study](#) found that 62 per cent of adults get their news from social media sites, with 64 per cent of these relying on a single social media platform, usually Facebook, for news. The danger is that we are only seeing things that fit and confirm our existing world views; we are rarely confronted with a counter argument that we must take seriously and engage with. It becomes easier to block contrary views, or troll those who propound them, rather than to think about them; when we do so, our behaviour is likely to be rewarded rather than criticised by our social media peers, and in turn to harden their opinions as they receive validation of their views.

The echo chamber effect need not privilege any particular position. But the regressive political project has been remarkably successful in claiming social media space for its ideas. Breitbart news,



Fibonacci Blue

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the self-styled champion of the US 'alt-right', is now one of the [most visited](#) websites in the USA, [at times](#) reaching far more people than long-established news sites, and continues to expand into [Europe](#). It was [central](#) to the campaign that propelled President Trump to power, and its Chief Executive [Steve Bannon](#) transitioned directly into a key White House role. [Social media](#) was an essential part of the strategy: the very directness of social media communications contrasted with the remoteness of political elites.

Lately, for civil society, it seems that regressive forces have all the best memes. They have claimed the space, captured the imagination and shifted the debate in a way that civil society simply has not been able to. The speed with which this project succeeded suggests that there was a vacuum that was not being filled and latent demand that was not being served. A perhaps unpalatable truth for civil society is that there is demand for the racist, sexist and xenophobic messages that are being pedalled, however far from the truth, that speak to and give a focus to public anger.

In civil society, we must face the question of why we have not been able to use new media tools equally effectively. Is it possible to imagine civil society offering something that has the energy and vigour of Breitbart, but that advances and stays true to civil society values?

TAKING ON HATE SPEECH: A CASE STUDY FROM FINLAND

In times when racist, sexist and xenophobic political discourse is on the march, a key role of civil society is to organise and take on hate, particularly when the state fails to do so. Finnish AGNA member Kepa relates how the rise of hate speech against migrants, and particularly asylum seekers from Iraq, brought a concerted civil society response in 2016:

The biggest challenge for Finnish civil society in 2016 was the increased hate speech and racism, and the increased tolerance for it, or lack of reaction against it, by the government and authorities. Some groups consider hate speech to be justified due to the freedom of expression. Hate speech is focused especially on immigrants and asylum seekers, but also anyone who openly speaks and acts to help and defend them, including many CSOs, activists, journalists and politicians.

Another challenge linked with hate speech is that while action for human rights, peace, justice and tolerance is perhaps more important in Finland than ever before, the government has cut funding for many CSOs that do this job. There is a risk that civil society may respond to this challenge by becoming more cautious in their activities and communications. However, there have also been brave joint actions to stop this trend.

The most significant achievement of civil society in Finland was a demonstration against racism and violence held in September 2016. The demonstration, called 'Game Over', gathered some [15,000 people](#), a large number in the Finnish context, in the capital Helsinki to demand a stronger reaction from political leaders to stop racism and the violence related to it. The demonstration was organised by a group of volunteers at short notice after the death

of a man assaulted during a neo-Nazi rally earlier in September 2016. With the demonstration, people wanted to give a message that the 'silent majority' of Finns won't tolerate the situation and be silent any more.

During and immediately after the demonstration the Prime Minister and other political leaders condemned racism and violence. The [Finnish Government agreed](#) that "the activities of violent extremist movements will be tackled by means of legislative and other measures as well as by strengthening the public authorities' resources."

⁸ This is an edited extract of an interview conducted in February 2017. The full interview is available at <http://bit.ly/2okM4IM>.

'FAKE NEWS' AND 'POST-TRUTH POLITICS'

If civil society is to mount a response, it will have to contend with a battery of underhand tactics. By the end of 2016, the use of the term 'fake news' had become commonplace, as had the notion that we live in a 'post-truth' political era. [Lyndal Rowlands](#) of the Inter Press Agency sets out how fake news works with the echo chamber effect:⁸

Sometimes we may believe a fake news story because it confirms our world view. We may then not be corrected, because for most of us, our world view has become increasingly polarised because of social media bubbles, which mean that we now almost exclusively see news that confirms our pre-existing opinions and values.

But issues of '[fake news](#)' are increasingly challenging to explore and unpick, because the term has become used so widely as to be made meaningless. Originally coined to expose the fake stories that benefited far-right causes, the term became adopted and owned by those it was used against. It became possible to dismiss any inconvenient argument or piece of evidence as 'fake news'. As Lyndal Rowlands tells us:

Before most of us had even begun to wonder what exactly fake news was, the term was co-opted by the very people who arguably benefited from fake news in its original form. I think that it is important for civil society to pay attention to this later shift in how the term fake news has been employed.

US President Trump, for example, used his only [press conference](#) as President-Elect to brand sources that had run stories against him, including CNN, as 'fake news'. Such tactics have continued while in office. They have been [imitated](#) in other contexts, including Cambodia, Russia and Venezuela. Globally, far-right sites famed for running fake news now [routinely rubbish](#) stories with which they disagree as fake; even [apparent fact-checking websites](#), marketed as existing to bust fake news, were found to

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Joelle Hatem - Against Rape

be [fake](#). The result is a hall of mirrors, in which the danger is that people start to think there is no such thing as truth. Perhaps that was the intention all along.

Lyndal Rowlands offers some pointers for vigilance against fake news:

Rather than trying to define fake news, I think that it's better to focus on how we can discern which news audiences should trust and why. A few things that I would suggest would include making sure that you get your news from a wide variety of sources, finding out who owns the media companies you are getting your news from, and making sure that you double-check anything that seems unusual against a primary source.

The origins of fake news, Lyndal Rowlands goes on to suggest, were at least partly financial:

During the 2016 US presidential election 'content mill' websites created articles which mimicked the real news but were in fact entirely made up with the sole intention of going viral to make money from clicks or people visiting their websites.

Fake news is now an industry of its own: a slew of fake sites that appear to be based in the USA were traced to [Macedonia](#), where people can earn a living from pay-per-click advertising revenues generated by sensationalist, viral political news. The economics of fake news matter: if websites generate advertising revenue and advertisers feel they are reaching audiences, there may be little incentive to curb it. Social media giants that benefit from advertising revenue have been accused of being slow to act against fake news. In August 2016, Facebook laid off the editorial team that had been responsible for its trending news module, in part because of criticisms from sites such as Breitbart that it was biased towards more progressive news sources; the consequences were to remove the human filter against fake news, which [duly burgeoned](#). Google has also been [accused](#) of highlighting fake news in searches. Social media companies continue to deny their responsibility over fake content, [asserting](#) that they are technology companies rather than media companies.

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There have also been claims that many fake stories have their origins in Russia: the fear is that the Russian state is deliberately promoting fake news as part of a strategy to destabilise foreign states and help more amenable leaders gain power. Allegations include those of Russian state interference in the [US election](#), and attempts to influence the publics of [Germany](#) and [Sweden](#). In October 2016, the [Czech Republic](#) government announced it was setting up a special unit to fight pro-Russian propaganda that it claimed was being spread by networks of puppet websites.

But regardless of its origins or motivations, the impacts have been seen in the political sphere. In the [last three months](#) of the 2016 US election, the 20 top-performing fake election stories on Facebook, as measured by shares, reactions and comments, were seen and responded to by more people than the top 20 election stories from major, reputable sites. Buoyed with their US success, the vanguard of the self-styled 'alt-right' then set about [faking French](#) online identities with the aim of influencing the 2017 French election in favour of the far-right candidate. As these examples suggest, while any side in an argument could potentially exploit fake news, the greatest and most concerted use of such techniques is by regressive political forces; they have become adept at [gaming the system](#) to achieve prominence and wide reach. In a keen irony, these forces exploit the freedom of expression to mount an attack on rights.

Fake news does not stand alone; it achieves most impact when deployed as part of a broader political strategy; this is where the notion of 'post-truth politics' comes in. Although the term is often linked to the Trump campaign, perhaps the strongest example came during the UK referendum campaign, when the one claim that broke through and came to dominate the debate was that the amount it was claimed the UK spent on EU membership would instead be given to the country's health service. Immediately following the vote, the promise was [dropped](#). Politicians who had spoken against backdrops making the claim denied that they

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had ever endorsed or believed it, but they experienced no significant public backlash. Something interesting was happening: citizens showed themselves capable of practising a kind of doublethink, willing to be mobilised in support of bold claims while simultaneously knowing them probably to be untrue, and willing to forget falsehoods and cast promises aside as soon as they ceased to be useful. In the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) 2017 surveys, one in two people said that they would support politicians they trust even if they suspect them of exaggerating the truth.

Fake news and post-truth politics therefore have both a supply side and a demand side: it is not enough to offer them; people need to want them. Fake news works because it satisfies and confirms world views, but also because it's accessible and fun. In an era of short online attention spans, fake news seems to cut to the chase in a way that weighty, traditional political analysis does not. And it fills a gap because trust in the media has declined: the media, and traditional media in particular, have [never been](#) less trusted.

Fake news fits the journalism practice of the social media age: the switch to online, free content has collapsed the financing of traditional journalism. Websites rely on advertising revenue linked to virtual footfall, and so push [clickbait](#) to drive traffic. In comparison investigative journalism, which takes expense, expertise and time, is in decline. It is possible to see positives in this change: it could be claimed that journalism has become democratised, and any of us may act as citizen journalists. The challenge is that it has become increasingly hard to distinguish between reputable sources and fake news that looks real.

It could be said that while the terminology is new, fake news and post-truth politics are long-established, and the significance of 2016 was that what has long been practised in some countries was merely writ large and visible in states with global prominence. Certainly, while the best-known examples come from the global north, similar practices should be acknowledged in the global south: the charge of pursuing post-truth politics has also been levelled at the leaders of [Brazil](#), [India](#) and [South Africa](#), for example.

In India, the state made a surprise announcement in December 2016 that it was withdrawing 86 per cent of the country's currency notes from circulation to curb the grey economy, crime and corruption. The move caused [major disruption](#), with cash shortages, long queues, and even a number of deaths, attributable to issues such as an inability to pay medical fees and exhausting periods spent standing in queues. The impacts fell disproportionately on the poorest and most excluded. The complaints were many. But India's Prime Minister Modi is a famed user of Twitter, backed by an army of online supporters who vigorously troll those who disagree with him. Prime Minister Modi's Twitter vigilantes were [duly deployed](#) in defence of his assertion that the demonetisation project was patriotic, so those who opposed it must be unpatriotic or have something to hide. Allowing the project to be seen to fail was not an option; the official truth became that the policy was a success, even though people could see evidence to the contrary all around them.

The Indian example makes clear that whoever deploys tactics of post-truth politics and fake news - whether the already powerful tearing a new tactic from the post-truth playbook, the oligarch looking to add the bauble of political office to his existing economic privilege, or the humble online troll enjoying a moment in the spotlight - it is applied in the service of power; it ultimately works against the expression of genuine democratic dissent and the exercise of

accountability. It also acts as a reminder of how the use of fake news to push post-truth tactics can form just one part of the attempts made by states and political leaders to skew online space in their favour, alongside tactics discussed further in part two of this review, such as maintaining [armies of paid trolls](#) and [automated propaganda bots](#), [selectively blocking](#) social media, [internet surveillance](#), [hacking](#), [accusing](#) the media of bias and attacks on and detentions of journalists and [online activists](#).

LOOKING FORWARD: TOWARDS A CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE TO THE NEW DEMOCRATIC CRISIS

The response from established politicians to the new regressive politics has largely been one of appeasement: to give some ground, for example, to racism, sexism and xenophobia through policy changes in a hope of heading off demand. This is a risky strategy, and one that has demonstrably failed in several contexts where neo-fascist parties have made further gains. The danger of this approach is that it normalises racism, sexism and xenophobia, and attacks on human rights and internationalism, and recognises arguments based in them as valid and acceptable; this stokes, rather than dampens, demands. At the same time, simply dismissing points of view as racist, sexist or xenophobic without acknowledging the anger behind them can merely fuel the sense of grievance.

States cannot defeat the current, regressive tide; only committed and active [citizens](#) can. The question then arises of how we in civil society can respond in a different way to the current democratic crisis.

First, there is a need to understand that the current political shift is not the only trend. Wherever charismatic, right-wing leaders have mobilised support, dominated politics and won elections there have been counter currents of support for candidates who embrace human rights and internationalism, and protests, including huge mobilisations in the USA and other countries, many led by women, as detailed in part three of this review. Depending on the vagaries of electoral systems, the vote that these new leaders have built may not even reflect a majority. It is important to recall that President Duterte pursued his vigorous crackdown on human rights after taking power on 39 per cent of the vote, and that President Trump lost the popular vote in a two-horse race. Leaders do not necessarily build nor represent majorities; they are merely able to pull together blocs [big enough](#) to support them, given that those opposing them tend to be divided.

The response this suggests is to find new ways of building broad-based, progressive majority blocs. This forces us in civil society to ask how we can build a movement, by identifying and engaging with untapped participation potential and making unusual connections, including between different types of groups and different parts of civil society and beyond. For example, in many contexts it seems clear that young people are more cosmopolitan and internationalist than the population as a whole, suggesting a need to make connections that are often lacking between established CSOs and youth networks.

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There is a positive takeaway from the major populist mobilisations of 2016: they demonstrate huge participation potential, even if that potential is currently being exercised in support of regressive causes. In a way, they prove the power of democracy, in which change, whether reactionary or radical, can be won through the ballot box. The notion that voting in elections or engaging in political discourse do not matter must surely now be laid to rest. The apathy that keeps many people away from the polls in many established democracies must be challenged.

There is no reason why the anger so many people feel about their lives and livelihoods, and their sense of powerlessness and separation from elites, should serve regressive ends. Indeed, this should be civil society's firm territory; the need is to make a convincing and winning argument, and to shape the mobilisation potential that has been demonstrated. We in civil society must engage afresh in battles of ideas.

The question for civil society, and progressive forces more broadly, is how we can use similar tools and tactics to those being used by regressive forces, to capture the popular imagination and enable anger to be mobilised for progressive ends. Civil society has been offering a powerful argument about neoliberalism and economic globalisation for years, but it has not cut through. We now need to ask how we can use social media more creatively and energetically, and offer messages that take hold.

As part of this, as outgoing UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, [Maina Kiai](#), has pointed out, the struggle to realise civil society rights must be seen as a key part of the struggle for democracy. Those that want to make the world a better place, and want to uphold democracy where it is being threatened, must embrace civil society and make civic space part of their cause. Civic space must be made a mainstream issue. We also need to utilise and strengthen [protection and support mechanisms](#) for civil society when it is under threat.

Opportunities to respond will surely arise as those who have come to power by surfing the wave of public anger prove unable to deliver on their many and contradictory promises, and disappoint those who invested hope in them. Strongmen leaders who win power by lambasting elites but surround themselves with economic elites once in office risk being undone by their own contradictions: personalised and centralised rule in the interests of elites is also [rarely good](#) for the long-term health of economies. Dissent does not simply disappear, and once activated, grievances endure and can become refocused. When new leaders are seen not to have the solutions to improving peoples' lives, they will lose their lustre. People will look for yet more alternatives. We in civil society now understand the anger, and are anything but complacent. We must be primed and ready to offer alternatives and work with the disaffection as citizens lose faith in those who borrowed their votes to gain power.