


APRIL

YEAR IN REVIEW



GUINEA-BISSAU: Thousands protested against political deadlock that led to crumbling public services.



BRAZIL: Millions of workers joined protests or stayed at home in a one-day strike against corruption and proposed changes to labour and pension laws.



CAMEROON: After 93 days, internet access was finally restored to Cameroon's Anglophone regions, but the marginalisation of Anglophone voices continued.

TURKEY: In a repressive political climate with many dissenting voices jailed, President Erdoğan gained vastly increased powers in a narrow referendum win.

ARMENIA: Elections were marred by allegations of fraud, include vote-buying and misuse of state resources to support ruling party candidates.

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A four-month **internet blockade** in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions came to an end in April, much to the relief of people who were cut off from the outside world, although major restrictions on fundamental freedoms remained. Meanwhile Mongolian media put on a united front against proposed **legal changes** that would make it easier for the authorities to impose fines on them. On 27 April, over a dozen TV stations went dark and at least seven newspapers printed black front pages to draw attention to the chilling effect the changes would have on the freedom of expression. Increasing concern about civic space in Mongolia was seen ahead of the June elections, which were marked by corruption allegations.

Upcoming elections also brought increasing contestation of civic space and corresponding mobilisation in Senegal, where thousands **protested** in the capital, Dakar, against a crackdown on political opposition. The protest was organised by the Y’en a marre (we’ve had enough) youth movement, which played a key role in mobilising voters to oust former President Abdoulaye Wade when he ran for a controversial third term in 2012. The concern behind the protests was that opposition voices were being silenced ahead of the July elections. This was an all too real fear in Turkey as well, where under a state of emergency and with thousands of dissenting voices silenced by imprisonment and tight media control, an April **referendum** conferred vastly inflated powers on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. **Elections in Armenia** were also marred by accusations of corruption and violence against journalists.

As well as in Senegal, the month saw several mobilisations led by young people, with state violence often the response. Continuing **political deadlock in Guinea-Bissau** brought young people to the streets to demand political change, in April and throughout the year. In Niger, when an estimated 23,000 students protested for better living conditions in the capital, Niamey, police responded with teargas and beatings, and one protester, Malah Bagalé, was killed. Onlookers reported that he was hit by a teargas canister. Thousands marched for his funeral, and public outrage was further fuelled by the

circulation of videos of police beatings, leading to the arrest of three police officers. However, the **following month** a planned anti-corruption protest organised by a CSO coalition was banned, and two prominent activists were detained for speaking out against the ban.

Over a dozen youth activists were **arrested** during a march in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). They were protesting about the lack of cleanliness of their city and calling on local authorities and citizens to do more to clean it up, but it appears they were targeted for wearing LUCHA (Lutte pour le changement – Fight for change) t-shirts. LUCHA is a youth movement that found itself at odds with the government for campaigning for President Joseph Kabila to adhere to the constitution’s limit of two presidential terms; four LUCHA activists were **detained** for over 75 days later in the year. In Nouakchott, Mauritania’s capital, police also broke up a **march** organised by around 100 young activists shortly after it began. Police beat participants in the Peaceful March of Mauritanian Youth with batons and arrested and detained 10 of them. Among those attacked were members of the Je m’engage (I commit myself) youth movement, which promotes social change.

Angolan activists mobilised in the cities of Benguela and Luanda, the capital, to mark **National Reconciliation Day**, commemorating the many who were killed during the 1975-2002 civil war, although some people were deterred by a heavy police presence. The month before, hundreds of Angolan women protested for the decriminalisation of abortion. With many people in Brazil still angered by grand corruption and the unaccountable actions of an unelected president, a **general one-day strike** was held in April, one of many protests throughout the year. The kidnapping and forced marriage of a 17-year-old woman in Georgia sparked **protests** in the capital, Tbilisi, calling on the government to end practices of early and forced marriage. A silent anti-war protest was also held in New Zealand on **ANZAC Day**, the day of commemoration for Australian and New Zealand military forces, sparking debate about whether the day was an appropriate one on which to stage a

protest. Meanwhile, organisers of Kuwait's '**Walking for Her**' demonstration, a peaceful solidarity march in support of women in Saudi Arabia, reported experiencing relentless media smears, including from Kuwaiti and Saudi media, as well as threats by phone and on social media. And after internally displaced persons in a West Darfur refugee camp in Sudan **protested** against the relocation of a market, police set fire to market stalls and used live ammunition, killing two women and a child.

Trade union action was singled out for restrictive measures in several contexts during April. Oilfield Workers Trade Union members **protested** over working conditions in Trinidad and Tobago, but the company won an injunction preventing them from protesting at their workplace, and armed police were sent to remove them forcibly. In Argentina, police used teargas and batons to **evict** a group of striking teachers as they tried to set up a school in a tent outside the country's Congress. The teachers were striking as part of an ongoing pay dispute. Following widespread public anger at the violence, the teachers were subsequently allowed to demonstrate outside Congress. Violence was also used against a general strike that same month. These were among a growing number of labour and social protests in Argentina, with **984** such protests reported between January and March alone. Meanwhile a **draft bill** in Burkina Faso aimed to exclude large groups of public sector workers from being able to take strike action and enable state agencies to recruit strike-breaking workers. Civil society condemned the bill as violating the freedoms of association and peaceful assembly.

April was a sobering month for media freedom: the launch of the 2017 Reporters Without Borders **World Press Freedom Index** saw the worst ever media freedom conditions recorded in the measure's history, while Freedom House's 2017 **Freedom of the Press** launch found conditions to be at their worst in 13 years, with only 13 per cent of the world's population deemed to have a free press. One of the ways in which media freedom was attacked in 2017 was through the assassination of high-profile journalists. **Yameen Rashad**, a prominent journalist and human rights defender in Maldives,

was stabbed to death in April. He had campaigned for accountability over the disappearance of another journalist and human rights defender, Ahmed Rilwan, who went missing in 2014. Days after Yameen Rashad's murder, Maldives President Abdulla Yameen appeared to say that the freedom of expression could not be protected if it was deemed to mock Islam. There was a setback for the **right to privacy** as well in Australia in April, when new data retention laws came into effect, requiring telecoms companies to retain metadata until 2019 and share it with security agencies.

Elsewhere, the picture was once again one of threats to human rights defenders, from demonising language, to detention and death threats. In Equatorial Guinea, two activists, Enrique Asumu and Alfredo Okenve, were **arbitrarily detained** and interrogated by the country's deputy prime minister. They were the senior leaders of the Centro de Estudios e Iniciativas para el Desarrollo (Centre for Development Studies and Initiatives), a CSO that promotes human rights and good governance, including in relation to natural resources. An order was issued for their organisation to suspend operations in 2016.

In a speech in April, then-President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev **accused** CSOs and human rights defenders of using foreign funding to impose "alien values" on people and stated that there was a need to defend the country from human rights activists. This was consistent with a pattern of smearing civil society in political speeches; the month before, he accused independent journalists of seeking to destabilise the country, and later in the year he **blamed** human rights defenders for stoking ethnic tensions.

Meanwhile, there were chilling scenes under conditions of continuing dictatorship in Burundi, when around **2,500 members** of the Imbonerakure, the pro-government youth militia, marched in the north of the country demanding that violence, including sexual violence, be used against opponents. Similar marches were held in other parts of Burundi, and the President of the Senate also urged action against "rebels." Violence is more

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than a threat in Burundi: since April 2015, when protests against President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to seek a third term were violently repressed, a reported **1,200 people** were killed, along with hundreds of cases of enforced disappearances.

Humanitarian workers continued to face danger in Somalia: a UAE **aid convoy** carrying water to drought-hit areas was attacked by a bomb, while four Somali aid workers were reported kidnapped by the Al Shabab terrorist group.

More positively, outgoing UN Special Rapporteur Maina Kiai, whose term ended in April, **launched** FOAA Online!, an accessible collection of ready-made legal arguments, based on international law, to help civil society and the legal profession win their arguments to realise the rights of assembly and association.

GUINEA-BISSAU: THOUSANDS PROTEST AGAINST POLITICAL DEADLOCK

Protests used to be rare in **Guinea-Bissau**, but political crisis brought people to the streets. In 2015, President José Mário Vaz – commonly known as Jomav – dismissed the prime minister, even though he enjoyed a clear parliamentary majority, and appointed a replacement from the opposition party. The move was quickly ruled illegal by the country's constitutional court, in an unusual show of judicial independence **welcomed** by many in civil society. However, the result was a long-term political stalemate: since the crisis, parliament stopped passing budgets and laws, and even ceased to meet. This meant that the basics of government started to **crumble**, with hospitals, schools, police and courts starved of funding and public sector wages unpaid. What began as elite-level manoeuvring between political rivals over leadership succession therefore had a direct impact on the lives of Guinea-Bissau's people, who were denied the most basic services.

In response, in **March**, hundreds gathered on the streets of the capital, Bissau, to protest about the situation and call for President Jomav to stand down, and **thousands more protested** in April, with young people at the forefront of protests. Although the demonstrations were peaceful, they were met with heavy-handed police response, including the use of teargas. Seven members of the **Movimento dos Cidadãos Conscientes e Inconformados** (Movement of Conscience and Non-conforming Citizens), a CSO that campaigns for democracy and the rule of law, were detained and held for several hours, in a move condemned by the **Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos** (Guinean Human Rights League). Hundreds protested again in **July** and **October**, with organisers claiming that a heavy security force presence deterred some people from joining protests.

Although President Jomav appointed another new prime minister, from the ruling party, in **November 2016**, the ruling party remains split, and the president missed ECOWAS deadlines to form a consensus government acceptable to parliament. Democracy remains shaky in a country with a past record of multiple military coups, in which no elected president has served a full term. The current holders of the reins of power are urged by civil society to treat democracy with more respect, and listen to the demand its people have articulated through protests for democratic principles to be upheld, and for their access to essential services not to be impeded by political squabbling.

BRAZIL: GENERAL STRIKE SHOWS SCALE OF DISSATISFACTION

Brazil has been home to numerous protests in recent years, sparked by revelations of widespread, institutionalised corruption that stretches across the political spectrum (*see January*), as well as anger about unemployment and failures in essential services. In 2017, many protests took issue with the

government of President Michel Temer, who benefited from the corruption scandal to replace Dilma Rousseff as president, and then used the power of his office and patronage to **evade prosecution** on several corruption charges. Protests focused on the ruling party's role in corruption, and the neoliberal and austerity policies being applied by President Temer's government.

April saw a protest landmark, when a one-day **general strike**, the first in over a decade, was called by Brazil's unions. The strike affected **every one** of Brazil's states and put the country into **partial shutdown** as millions of workers joined protests or stayed at home. **Jose Henrique Bortoluci** of the Centre of Research and Documentation of Brazil's Contemporary History at the **Getúlio Vargas Foundation** gives the background to the strike:

*April's strike, which virtually paralysed the country for a whole day, resulted from a combination of two factors. The first was the crisis that overcame the Temer administration as evidence was released of the involvement of Temer himself, as well as several ministers and politicians very close to him, in major corruption scandals. The other factor was the government's attempts to impose two reforms that will have a harsh impact on workers: a **new labour law**, signed by the president in July, and a **pension reform**, still pending in Congress. Other social movements opposed to the government, as well as student, feminist, LGBTI and urban activist movements, joined the protests.*

The one-day strike saw violent clashes in several locations, with security forces using **teargas** against roadblocks set up by protesters. Since President Temer claimed office, violence against human rights defenders has **grown** and a number of laws have been proposed to criminalise demonstrations. This means, Jose Henrique continues, that security force violence is no longer surprising in modern-day Brazil:

It is usual in our country for the government to react quite violently when there are confrontations with demonstrators. This is what



Activists from the Homeless Workers Movement protest against budget cuts affecting low-income housing programmes

Credit: Getty Images

happened during the April strike. Many activists point out that since 2013, and as a legacy of the World Cup and the Olympics, police forces have become more efficient in repressing protests and using maximum force, thereby making it difficult for major protests to materialise. This has been the case in particular in cities where there have been large numbers of movements with national impact in recent years, notably Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Another form of government reaction has often been deliberately to disregard public opinion and strengthen even further its alliance with the Congress and some sectors of the economy and the press. Throughout 2017, Temer had the lowest approval rates of any president in Brazilian history, and certainly one of the lowest in the world, which did not prevent him from staying in power, albeit without any legitimacy.

The general strike was one of many occasions in Brazil during 2017 where large protest numbers were met with violence. Several protests were held in March and April ahead of the strike, with student protester **Edvaldo de Silva** killed after being hit by a rubber bullet. Tens of thousands of Brazilians continued to **protest** in May and June, with many calling for President Temer's resignation and the holding of fresh elections. Again, riot police were deployed and used teargas, stun grenades and rubber bullets to stop a protest heading towards Congress. Another **wave** of protests was seen in October, where a demonstration by social movements, artists and political parties in Rio de Janeiro was repressed with teargas and pepper spray. October also saw an occupation of Brazil's Ministry of Planning, organised by the Movement of Landless Workers in a call for agrarian reform, and a mass march demanding the right to housing organised by the Homeless Workers' Movement. However, a series of police attacks against leftist organisations caused concern that the ground was being prepared to expand the scope of the definition of terrorism to repress political movements.

On the plus side, Jose Henrique sees a new dynamism that brought young people in particular into activism, offering something that Brazil's civil society can build on:

In 2017 Brazilian civil society grew increasingly dynamic, with the emergence of social movements advocating for the renewal of politics, which were especially popular among younger sections of the population, who generally feel quite excluded by the political system as it is currently organised.

However, while the diversity of the movements that took part in protests indicated widespread anger, Jose Henrique draws attention to a disconnect between different movements, which can hinder impact:

2017 was a very contradictory and uneven year in terms of the performance of civil society in Brazil. Social movements were not able to sustain a national movement in opposition to the Temer government, which many consider to be illegitimate. The president continues ruling the country, despite having reached power as a result of a highly contentious impeachment process – a parliamentary coup, according to a section of public opinion – and pushing forward reforms that are in almost every aspect the opposite of the government programme chosen in the 2014 elections.

In spite of its enormous importance, the big movement seen in the April strike did not gain momentum throughout the year, at least not as a unified national anti-government and anti-neoliberal movement... The current scenario is characterised by both deep politicisation among various sectors of society, and a lack of connection, either because of lack of strength or because of political or strategic disagreements among these movements at the national level.

With presidential elections due in 2018, more mass mobilisations are bound to be seen. The challenge for Brazil's various protest movements and other

civil society groups will be to make stronger connections that offer a more coherent stand against corruption and poor governance, and to continue to offer meaningful participation platforms for those newly mobilised.

CAMEROON: INTERNET SHUTDOWN REVEALS STATE'S REFUSAL TO LISTEN

April saw a small moment of respite in **Cameroon's** Anglophone Southwest and Northwest regions, when internet access was **restored** after a 93-day shutdown. The lengthy blackout came in response to protests, which flared into life in November 2016, about the long-running sense of marginalisation Anglophone communities experience in the predominantly Francophone country.

Cameroon's mammoth ban was a direct denial of rights, with internet access recognised as a human right in a June 2016 **UN resolution**, and had a profound impact both on the freedom of expression and the economy, costing an estimated **US\$38.8 million**. The ban hit the region particularly hard because much of Cameroon's tech industry is **based** in its Southwest region. The same research that estimated the cost, by the **Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa**, also indicated a wider regional trend of internet restriction that Cameroon's government followed so enthusiastically: at least 12 governments disrupted internet services in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2015, including Togo in 2017 (*see August*). A 2017 **UNESCO report** found that globally there were as many as 56 internet shutdowns during the year, raising the fear that internet restriction has become **the new normal**. Cameroon claimed the unenviable record of having the longest shutdown.

Maximilienne Ngo Mbe of the **Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC)** describes the broader attack on the freedom of expression, and the impact these restrictions had on CSOs:

Restrictions on the freedom of expression have become the rule in Cameroon. Tactics include censorship, threats, arbitrary arrests and detentions, intimidation, burglaries of CSO premises, media closures, high taxes on private TV outlets and house arrest. Since November 2016, when the crisis began in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, additional restrictions were imposed, in the form of the shutdown and disruptions and interruptions of outgoing communications for CSOs in the two regions.

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As a result, civil society was deprived of access to information, of the means to disseminate and share information and to organise effectively, and of the ability to receive reports allowing them to pursue their activities. This in turn led to a slowdown in the execution of their activities and delays in fulfilling their obligations to donors. Civil society was affected by discontinuities in financial support from partners as a result of the delays.

Civil society, Maximilienne continues, did what it could to resist the ban:

Civil society mobilised all its forces and energies to urge the government to restore the internet connection. Several CSOs around the world, including Cameroonian civil society, put out multiple statements condemning the government's decision. The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Central Africa and head of the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), François Louncény Fall, described the government's decision as a "deplorable situation." As a result of enormous efforts and several battles fought by CSOs, the internet connection was re-established three months later.

But even while internet access was restored, the urgency of the issue remained. Protests continued, as did state repression. Continuing action included 'ghost town' stay-at-home protests held each Monday and Tuesday, which saw whole towns close down. Protest leaders also called for businesses in the region to withhold taxes.

State repression was at its most deadly around protests timed for 1 October, the day that commemorates the union of Cameroon's Anglophone and Francophone regions. In 2017, that day saw a symbolic declaration of independence by the Anglophone regions, under the banner of the Federal Republic of **Ambazonia**. With the state provoked, protests were met with lethal force. Military forces used live ammunition and teargas. At least **eight deaths** resulted, although **credible reports** estimated that security forces

killed at least 30 people in the protests and their aftermath. In the run-up to the October protests, the government also **introduced** strict new rules on public gatherings and the movement of people, closed its border with Nigeria – across which people experiencing persecution were fleeing – and once again disrupted messaging apps and social media.

The government pursued a policy of arrest and detention of its critics, with well **over 100 arrests** made since protests began. Some of those arrested were detained on terrorism charges, for which the death penalty can be given. There were reports of disappearances and torture. The trial of **three protest leaders** began in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital, in February. The three were arrested in January after calling for demonstrations, and while detained were kept in solitary confinement, with trials subjected to numerous delays. Two of them, Fontem Neba and Felix Agbor-Balla, leaders of the banned Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, were part of a group of detainees eventually **released** in August. However, the third person, activist and journalist **Mancho Bibixy**, who held a one-man protest while carrying a coffin in November 2016, remains in detention at the time of writing, and was reported to be in poor health. Others **remained** in jail.

Faith leaders were not immune from prosecution: a number of **Christian leaders** who backed peaceful protest and dissent were summoned for trial in April. In November, **Aboubakary Siddiki**, leader of the main northern Cameroon opposition party and prominent critic of the president, was handed a 25-year sentence following a flawed military trial. The same month, the government issued **arrest warrants** for 15 leaders of Anglophone separatist party the Southern Cameroon National Council. **Patrice Nganang**, a US-based Cameroonian writer, was arrested in December as he tried to leave the country and held for three weeks. He had written an article **criticising** the government. Numerous journalists were arrested and detained, and radio stations **closed down**. In September, 30 journalists were **suspended** by the National Communication Council of Cameroon on the grounds of "biased reporting."

The heavy hand of the state continued to punish Ahmed Abba, a Radio France Internationale correspondent, who was detained in July 2015 for reporting on refugees and the Boko Haram terrorist group. After a trial characterised by multiple delays, a failure to call key witnesses and the withholding of documents from defence lawyers, Ahmed was convicted in April of terrorism-related offences by a military court and sentenced to 10 years in jail. In July, the injustice of his treatment was highlighted by the Committee to Protect Journalists, which recognised him with an **International Press Freedom Award**.

While Cameroon undoubtedly has a problem with Boko Haram terrorism in its Far North region, this is far from the Anglophone area. The protests were not terrorism, but at every turn the state was prepared to conflate legitimate dissent with terrorism, and **use anti-terrorism laws** to silence its critics. This can only be because the strength of the protests, and the threat of Anglophone secession, were seen as posing a danger to the otherwise seemingly perpetual rule of President Paul Biya, who after 42 years in power, 35 of them as president, is now the world's longest-running political leader. Maximilienne highlights the recent deterioration of democracy as President Biya has hung onto power:

A decade ago it was observed that democratic practices were taking root, with the understanding that this was an ongoing process. But the experience was short-lived, as in 2013 the president declared war on Boko Haram, which is spreading terror in the Far North region. As a result, democracy has taken a hard blow, in the form of an electoral law that does not promote transparency and genuine political competition, is not neutral and limits participation through the imposition of exorbitant costs. Additionally, restrictive laws have been imposed on fundamental freedoms. A state of un-rule of law has been established.

The state of Cameroon remains repressive. Every day we witness the violation of fundamental freedoms. The dominance of executive

power over the legislative and judicial branches remains constant. The practice of democracy has not really changed in recent years, because we have had the same president for 35 years. In addition to this, there is a complete absence of a real opposition party, because the government represses any expression or demonstration by a party other than the ruling party.

Given the difficult conditions repression brings for civil society, we asked Maximilienne to conclude by identifying civil society's key support needs:

We need several forms of support. We need medium and long-term financial support with some flexibility, as well as permanent emergency funds that can reduce the vulnerabilities of at-risk defenders. We need technical support, such as the supply of sophisticated security equipment. There is also a need for continuous training to build civil society capacity in the areas of digital security, physical security and the management of computerised data; the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law, and involvement in the electoral process and good governance issues; monitoring and reporting of human rights, particularly in contexts of conflict or terrorism; and advocacy in national, regional and international forums.

TURKEY: REFERENDUM A FAR FROM HAPPY DAY FOR DEMOCRACY

Civic space in **Turkey** has been locked in a downward spiral since the failed coup attempt of July 2016. President Erdoğan has reaffirmed his grip on power through mass arrests and sackings. According to the **Turkey Purge** website, at the time of writing a staggering 146,713 people – mostly public officials, teachers and academics – have been sacked, often on flimsy evidence of

being associated with critics of the regime, while 128,998 people have been detained and 3,003 educational institutions have been shut down. Thirteen members of parliament of the opposition pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party were stripped of their immunity and **detained** on terrorism charges.

On 16 April, President Erdoğan further shored up his power by winning a constitutional change referendum, narrowly, by 51 to 49 per cent. Key changes were the abolition of the office of prime minister and the switch from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The changes endorsed by the referendum could on the surface be packaged as democratic advances, because, for example, they allow the public to elect the president directly. But the reality is that they came in a context where the ability to express dissent and participate in a variety of political arenas – essential hallmarks of a functioning democracy – have been ruthlessly suppressed. The changes had the effect of consolidating and centralising President Erdoğan's power, including over the judicial system, and will enable him to stay in office longer. An executive presidency was long President Erdoğan's ambition; it is hard to escape the suspicion that public rejection of the coup attempt and people's understandable fears of terrorism were seized on and manipulated to engineer this.

The referendum should be seen not as a celebration and extension of democracy, but as something consistent with a broader pattern, seen in countries around the world, in which the machinery of democracy is borrowed and gamed to confer legitimacy on power. Once a vote has been taken, power is interpreted as residing in the head of government, with little further consultation necessary. The narrowness of the vote in Turkey did not lead to any apparent acknowledgement of the need to reconsider the plans or to build greater consensus.

With the referendum held under a state of emergency that **continues** at the time of writing, and with so many dissenting voices jailed or pushed into self-censorship, it is hard to see how any vote could truly be said to reflect the popular will. Even with these advantages, the ruling regime worked to

skew the vote in its favour. President Erdoğan **denounced** 'no' campaigners as supporters of terrorism and backers of the failed coup. Several 'no' campaigners were arrested on charges such as spreading hatred. And with many independent media outlets **closed down** or embattled, and much of the remaining media owned by government **supporters**, it was hard to hear dissenting views: it was **estimated** that 90 per cent of airtime was given to 'yes' supporters.

It was therefore not surprising that election observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) **found** that the referendum had a "significant imbalance" towards 'yes' supporters, with problems including intimidation, the role of state agencies in the campaign and a late decision to accept unstamped ballots. A member of the Council of Europe observer mission **suggested** that as many as 2.5 million votes, a decisive number, could have been manipulated, and **characterised** the referendum as "unfair and unfree." The decision to accept unstamped ballots led to protests, which were suppressed, with several detentions. Refusing to engage with these criticisms, the regime celebrated its victory with another **arrest spree**: over 1,000 people were reported arrested in a coordinated offensive on 26 April.

Yet as **Huseyin Hurmali** of the **Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF)** reflects, while the referendum outcome was predictable and is likely to further worsen the conditions for civil society, some hope can be taken from the energy of the campaign against it and the narrowness of the vote, indicating that there is still democratic resistance and a demand for alternatives:

The constitutional referendum unfortunately nailed the coffin of democracy and the separation of powers, allowing President Erdoğan to combine executive, legislative and judiciary powers. While this was already the de facto system in Turkey for the last couple of years as Erdoğan captured more and more elements of the state, the changed Constitution will make it permanent as the de jure system.

Yet there is still hope, as we saw that even in an unfair and possibly

rigged election, half of the voters stood against this proposal, and denied Erdoğan a decisive victory. The ‘no’ campaign can be seen as a very creative expression of democratic dissent. Young people’s creative political activism against the referendum shows that free expression will be hard to stamp out in Turkey.

Without a doubt, speaking out against Erdoğan comes with risks: ‘no’ campaigners faced alleged government-backed coercion and suppression. In March, the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) unveiled a 78-point report on irregularities and suppression of ‘no’ campaigners. But still, protesters plastered photos of jailed artists and politicians at transport hubs. Videos of police questioning women who spoke out against the referendum went viral on social media. Officials banned a Kurdish song encouraging a ‘no’ vote. (The subtitle to this song read, “Playing this song in Turkey will land you in jail.”) Young women in colourful masks shouting “No!” and university students beating drums and singing songs about freedom were among the thousands who marched on Istiklal Street, a popular thoroughfare in Istanbul, to campaign against boosting President Erdoğan’s powers. Erdoğan’s crackdown on dissent is nothing new, but the creativity of the young people especially is still giving hope.

The regime’s determination to quell dissent put the media on the frontline of attack: Turkey Purge reported that 308 journalists were arrested and 187 media outlets closed down since the coup attempt. The **Turkey Blocks** project tracked numerous restrictions on internet freedom, notably the blocking of Wikipedia in April on the **accusation** that its writers “support terror,” and the removal of LGBTI communities from Reddit on government orders. Even to use encryption technology was to invite suspicion: in September it was reported that **75,000 people** had been arrested merely for downloading an encrypted messaging app, while **12 people** were arrested for participating in a digital security workshop in July. Dissent routinely became branded as terrorism, and dissenting voices smeared as associated with the Hizmet



Demonstrators in Istanbul call for the Turkish referendum to be cancelled

Credit: Getty Images

movement of Fethullah Gülen, the US-based one-time ally and latterly opponent of President Erdoğan, alleged by the government to be the backer of the coup attempt.

The targeting of educators and their institutions came with alarmingly totalitarian overtones: it suggested that the regime aimed to control not only what could be said, but also what its citizens could learn and, ultimately, think. Huseyin further sets out how dissent was suppressed:

President Erdoğan and the Turkish government are waging a war against dissent under the disguise of a war on terror, using the coup attempt as a tool.

The coup attempt gave the government the pretext to declare the Hizmet movement as an “armed terror organisation” by blaming Gülen and his followers for the putsch, and to round up anyone who is even remotely connected to the network as a “coup supporter” and “member of an armed terror organisation.” This is a serious offence in Turkish criminal law, and entails harsh imprisonment conditions. The state of emergency decrees are immune to parliamentary or judicial control.

More than half the journalists who are in prison around the world are in Turkey. Turkey has the highest number of journalists in jail worldwide... Journalists have faced various charges, among them espionage, membership of a terrorist organisation, spreading terrorist propaganda and attempting to overthrow the current government. The practices of silencing journalists through the abuse of the criminal justice system and expanding the scope of the definition of terrorism are among the human rights violations frequently cited in human rights reports, as well as in documents from the UN, EU, Council of Europe and OSCE.

In addition to the jailed journalists and writers, there is a significant number of those for whom detention warrants were issued who were forced to flee Turkey due to the fear of an unfair trial. These journalists and writers have to live in exile, enduring financial hardships, intimidation of their families in Turkey, denial of consular services at Turkish embassies and consulates, uncertain legal status in their respective countries, and having to hide their identities in their countries of asylum due to continuous death threats on social media from supporters of President Erdoğan. The state uses its embassies and consulates around the world to harass opponents by denying them regular services, cancelling their passports, and threatening to revoke their citizenship status if they are charged with a crime in Turkey and fail to return to the country after three months’ notice. Some of the journalists and writers who

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AGAINST THE
REFERENDUM
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TO STAMP OUT
IN TURKEY

are in jail or in exile have lost all their assets by seizure orders from non-independent courts: the victimisation of journalists and writers in Turkey reaches out to their close and extended families, inside and outside Turkey.

There are a few remaining independent and critical media organisations in Turkey, and their staff work under constant threat of arrest, violence, hate speech, discrimination, profiling, censorship and death. The seizure and closure of media organisations by the government means not only that media freedom is lost, but also that a huge number of staff have to face unemployment. More than 30 per cent of journalists have lost their jobs and are denied the right of carrying out their profession in any other institution, due to being blacklisted by the government.

In seeking to shore up its socially conservative core support, the regime also increasingly made morality a political battleground. In November President Erdoğan **accused** the CHP of abandoning moral values after it was revealed to have encouraged LGBTI candidates to stand for a local election. This was quickly followed by authorities in the capital, Ankara, imposing an **indefinite ban** on the holding of LGBTI public events. The scheduled June Pride march was also banned at short notice, and when some people attempted to march regardless, it was broken up with teargas and rubber bullets, with 25 people arrested. Seven people were **arrested** after a trans protest was banned the following month. It seems clear that part of the price of the regime's continuing survival is that the lives of socially excluded people must become harder.

The regime sought to internationalise its war on dissent: in May, protesters outside the Turkish ambassador's US residence in Washington DC were **violently attacked** by Turkish security forces, causing 11 injuries. Close ally Turkmenistan also continued to **crack down** on alleged Hizmet activities in its territory through arrests and detentions. In an indication of the regime's

sensitivity to international exposure, humanitarian workers on Turkey's border with Syria were targeted several times in 2017. In **March** the state revoked the licence of the US-based humanitarian outfit Mercy Corps, which had been working with Syrian refugees. The **following month**, 15 workers with International Medical Corps, another US-based humanitarian organisation working near the border, were detained, and in **May**, four Syrian Dan Church Aid workers were **expelled**.

Huseyin Hurmali knows well how the regime carried its domestic war on dissent into the international arena. The government de-registered CSOs that were accredited to the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and then **argued successfully** that, because the CSOs no longer formally existed, their accreditation should be withdrawn. In doing this, it sought to take advantage of the state-centric nature of the international system to deprive CSOs of a key platform to share their views and connect with international civil society. Huseyin's organisation received this treatment:

JWF's general consultative status with ECOSOC was revoked on 19 April during the ECOSOC meeting. The Turkish government's motivation for the withdrawal of JWF's consultative status was based on the fact that JWF's operations were ended in Turkey by a post-coup emergency decree on 22 July 2016, which was issued due to our alleged associations with a fictitious terror organisation. We must point out that JWF is a 501(c) non-governmental organisation that has had its headquarters in New York since 2014... JWF was neither informed in writing about this arbitrary action, nor given a platform to defend our 23 years of dedication to peace and the protection of human rights.

The decision is clearly politically driven and secured by the privileged position of member states against CSOs in the ECOSOC system... There is also growing concern about the intimidation of and reprisals

against individuals and organisations that cooperate with the UN system.

Looking forward, the situation may appear bleak, but there is a need, suggests Huseyin, to focus on what should and can be done, and how international help can still be extended to Turkish civil society:

First and foremost, the State of Emergency must end as soon as possible, and the Turkish government has to stop the repression of its people and establish the fundamental rights of individuals.

As civil society and free and independent media in Turkey have been greatly impaired by the ongoing purge, international delegations of civil society and media organisations visiting Turkey must show solidarity with all victims of state oppression and be their voice. The wide range of civil servants, professionals, journalists and intellectuals who had to flee Turkey after the attempted coup must be supported in their struggle to find safety and legal protection. The exiled journalists who launched initiatives to report on human rights abuses in Turkey need the help of international civil society in carrying out this high-risk and high-cost task.

The remaining voices of dissent, which have most recently surfaced with the 49 per cent, and possibly more, of referendum voters can only be kept alive as long as they feel the support of international civil society through social media campaigns, as social media is the major platform where alternative voices can be heard. Where Turkish citizens are silenced with fear, the international community must speak for them.

ARMENIA: MEDIA ATTACKED FOR EXPOSING ELECTION CORRUPTION

April and May elections in **Armenia** resulted in the ruling party holding onto power, but were marred by allegations of fraud, including vote-buying and misuse of state resources to support ruling party candidates. **Artur Sakunts** of **Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor Office** describes the major election abuses:

Since 2013, human rights and democracy have considerably regressed in Armenia. The constitutional referendum, held in 2015, and elections to the National Assembly and Yerevan City Council in 2017, were marked by fraud and procedural violations.

During the National Assembly elections of 2 April and the Yerevan City Council elections of 14 May, widespread abuses were identified that took the form of fake observation. The Central Electoral Commission accredited around 28,000 observers from 49 organisations to observe the National Assembly elections. The overwhelming majority of those observers acted at polling stations as proxies representing the interests of the ruling Republican Party or the Tsarukyan Bloc, which came second in the election.

For Artur, the weaknesses seen around the elections were no accident; they were effectively enabled by recent changes:

The Electoral Code adopted in May 2016 imposed significant restrictions on observers and media representatives. In particular, the Code gave precinct electoral commissions the right to set a maximum number of observers and media representatives allowed

at a polling station. The Code set a requirement for election observation organisations to have had a provision on human rights and democracy in their statutory goals for at least a year and imposed an accreditation requirement for media, allowing only a limited number of representatives. As a result, a media outlet may have a maximum of 50 representatives throughout the country. The new Electoral Code also stipulates that commission members may remove observers, media representatives and proxies from a polling station by a vote.

It is noteworthy that the Electoral Code considers CSOs as the main entities engaged in civic oversight and particularly electoral observation, but it gives them no right to appeal against the actions of electoral commissions, or election results, or to file any other complaints.

As a result of amendments passed a few months later, the Electoral Code also provided for the publication of signed voter lists, something that the opposition and civil society had demanded for years. Citizens were given the right to file an application for voter impersonation cases, although the Criminal Code included an article on false statements regarding such applications. According to the Central Electoral Commission's report, only one person filed an application on voter impersonation in the context of the April National Assembly elections. Among other reasons, this might have been due to the Criminal Code's article on false statements, though it is widely held that the number of cases of multiple voting or voter impersonation during the elections was not considerable, and the authorities mostly distorted the election through the abuse of administrative resources and vote-buying.

To try to expose corruption was to incur risks, as several journalists found. Reporter **Sisak Gabrielan** was attacked while filming a case of vote-buying



Voters mobilise around Armenian elections

Credit: Getty Images

at a polling station during the April elections, and threatened while trying to do so during the May elections. Journalist **Anna Zakharyan** was also attacked while trying to film the distribution of pre-marked ballots and bribes, and had her phone confiscated. In all, around 10 journalists were **reported** to have been attacked or obstructed during the April elections.

Artur suggests that the elections formed part of a pattern in which power in Armenia is being concentrated in the ruling party's hands:

As a result of the 2015 constitutional referendum, Armenia changed from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary republic, and the changes began to be implemented during the 2017 elections. The new parliamentary system strengthened the dominant position of the Republican Party, and the power of its leader.

*A number of opposition figures have suffered persecution. Any demonstration of civic activism has faced a harsh reaction and pressure by law enforcement agencies, and the space for CSOs and civil society initiatives has further shrunk. The **Four Day War** with Azerbaijan in April 2016 led to a large loss of lives and exposed the country's vulnerability to external threats. All these processes have occurred in an atmosphere of impunity.*

As well as the freedom of expression, access to information remained a contested topic, with existing freedom of information legislation **criticised** for being flawed, having excessive limitations and concentrating power over information in the hands of public officials. According to a **report** by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, an Armenian CSO, the post-election period saw a sharp rise in the number of violations of the right to receive and disseminate information. A draft new law, circulated in the second half of 2017, was criticised by civil society and the media, but with drafting being conducted without consultation with civil society, there were no channels for making recommendations to improve the law.

In August, the Helsinki Association in Armenia **warned** about increasing threats towards human rights defenders and human rights lawyers. Another unresolved issue was the continuing lack of accountability for police violence in response to 2016 protests, while around 40 protesters remained in detention. Civil society also drew attention to **corruption** in the use of EU grants. For Artur, one of the needs these challenges point to is a renewed focus on the separation of powers:

For the quality of democracy to improve, an important issue is judicial independence from executive power. Control of the judiciary is the main tool that the government uses to reinforce impunity, and this is an obstacle to the effective protection of citizens and civil society groups.