

# DECEMBER YEAR IN REVIEW



**IRAN:** Anti-government protests erupted, focused on issues of jobs, income and high prices, as well as demands for democracy.



**MALI:** Following extensive civil society advocacy, parliament approved a law on the promotion and protection of human rights defenders.



**NIGERIA:** CSOs mobilised against a proposed NGO bill that would vastly extend the state's powers over civil society.



**ARGENTINA:** 65 activists were prevented from attending a World Trade Organization meeting hosted by Argentina, sending worrying signals about the state's willingness to tolerate dissenting voices.



**UN:** Serious cuts to the UN's budget raised civil society concern about the UN's ability to deliver, and about states' international priorities.

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Over **700 people** from more than 100 countries came together in Fiji in December for **International Civil Society Week (ICSW)**, convened by CIVICUS and the Pacific Island Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (**PIANGO**). On the theme of 'Our Planet. Our Struggles. Our Future' and held in the Oceania region for the first time, ICSW put the global spotlight on critical issues in the region, not least the daily reality of climate change in small island states. Other key issues on the agenda were the ongoing attack on civic space, the current crisis of democracy in many countries and rising economic inequality. The gathering also focused on developing and sharing community and youth-led responses to these major challenges, and the forging of stronger solidarity and connections amongst a diverse and wide-ranging civil society. ICSW saw the launch of the **Declaration on Climate-Induced Displacement**, as part of a campaign to include the issue of climate-induced displacement in the **Global Compact for Migration** to be adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018. The next ICSW will be convened in mid-2019.

In the UAE, human rights defender **Obaid Al-Zaabi** was finally released after four years in detention. He had been found innocent three years before, but state security agencies had previously refused to release him. He was targeted for sharing information about state repression online. Elsewhere, the year's end saw renewed **anti-government protests on the streets of Iran**, with dissent at its most vocal since 2009's Green Movement mobilisation was brutally crushed. In Peru, a **series of protests** saw thousands of people mobilised against corruption, angered by a pardon granted to former president Alberto Fujimori, convicted of human rights abuses as well as corruption. At least seven people were detained following a protest in the capital, Lima. Student protests in Indonesia brought repression: activist Yohanes Ndawa was hospitalised after being beaten by the police following a protest on medical waste management in East Nusa Tenggara province, and 15 students opposing the development of the New Yogyakarta airport were arrested. Two trade union leaders were also arrested after criticising the Danamon Bank.

In Greece, the authorities detained at least 25 protesters for **occupying** a central square in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, which hosts a migrant detention centre. The protest was led by North African refugees, demanding that state agencies process their asylum applications. Some of those detained were minors, who were later released. Environmental **protesters** in Canada blocked access to a pipeline expansion site in the city of Burnaby, and protested about oil spills in the city of Hamilton. In Sweden cuts to welfare provision for people with disabilities brought **thousands out** in protest, while in Ukraine **thousands rallied** for the release of detained opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili. Argentina also saw **protests**, against proposed pension changes, with crowds gathered outside congress. Protesters were dispersed with teargas and rubber bullets, and at least 40 people were detained. The Argentine government further showed a suspicion of civil society in December when it **withdrew accreditation** from 65 civil society activists who planned to attend a World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting hosted by Argentina.

The government of Bahrain continued to respond to dissent with deadly force. On 25 December, a military court **sentenced** six men to death and revoked their citizenship after convicting them of forming a terrorist cell and plotting to kill a military officer. Seven others involved in the case received seven-year jail sentences and also had their citizenship revoked. Supporters of those sentenced insisted that the men were being punished for seeking democratic reform. The verdict brought the number of death sentences passed in Bahrain in 2017 to **14**, a dramatic increase, with sentences resulting from military trials **notorious** for their unfairness and use of torture to extract confessions on flimsy evidence. Earlier in December, three-year prison sentences were **upheld** against three family members of Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, director of the Bahrain Institute for Human Rights and Democracy. These decisions came after Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad ([see May](#)) travelled to the USA in November to meet President Trump. No apparent discussion of human rights took place during the visit, which **resulted** in a renewal of the Bahrain-US Defense Cooperation Agreement. President Trump praised

Bahrain for doing US\$9 billion worth of business on the visit, including the purchase of fighter planes. Bahrain's ruling regime can only have been emboldened by the apparent success of the visit and the lack of criticism of its human rights record. It was also hard to escape the suspicion that the death sentences were passed on Christmas Day to dampen the prospects of international scrutiny.

An Afghanistan **bomb attack**, apparently targeted at the offices of the Afghan Voice news agency, had devastating consequences, killing at least 40 people. It was not the first time that Afghan media was the focus of terrorism: the month before, Shamshad TV was attacked by gunmen. In the Central African Republic, a further humanitarian worker, **Hubert Benjamin Degalleat**, was killed, while in another indication of the dangers, MSF announced it was suspending its activities in the city of Bangassou and evacuating its staff following a violent raid. Meanwhile two Danish journalists were **stabbed** in Gabon by a man claiming to be acting in revenge for US attacks on Muslims.

In Uganda the crackdown on LGBTI rights continued, as police **raided and closed** the Queer Kampala International Film Festival. But the year ended on a more positive note for LGBTI rights when Australia became the latest and 26th country to **legalise** same-sex marriage. Parliament approved the change a month after a **postal vote** showed that 62 per cent of Australian people were in favour of marriage equality. Namibia also held its first **lesbian festival**.

However, December brought further evidence of a regressive tilt in Europe's politics. Austria's far-right Freedom Party joined the coalition government **agreed** in December, making Austria the only Western European country with a far-right party in government. The Freedom Party came third in the October elections with 26 per cent of the vote. Around **5,000 people** took part in protests in the capital, Vienna, but compared to the previous time the Freedom Party joined the government in 2000, there was a relative lack of domestic and international outrage, suggesting that far-right ideas have become seen as more acceptable and part of the mainstream.

In the Czech Republic, oligarch Andrej Babis was **sworn in** as Prime Minister. Prime Minister Babis, the country's second-richest man, was sacked from his role as finance minister in the previous government in May following a month-long crisis provoked by allegations of corporate tax avoidance. He formed a minority government after most established parties refused to enter a coalition arrangement, citing corruption allegations against him. His Action for Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) party took a hard line on immigration in an election dominated by issues of migration and the country's relations with the EU. He vowed to resist the EU's quota system for hosting refugees, allying with the leaders of Hungary and Poland (*see June*). Prague, the capital, subsequently **hosted** a meeting of European anti-immigration parties, which was met by protests. Civil society also lobbied the new regime to retain the post of Human Rights Minister.

But far-right politics received a small setback in the UK, when Twitter **suspended** the accounts of leaders of fringe group Britain First. The extremist group came to international prominence in November when President Trump **shared** some of their misleading, Islamophobic posts. The move came as part of a promised stricter enforcement of anti-abuse rules by the social media giant, although President Trump himself remained seemingly immune.

December saw **protests**, online and on the streets, against the **decision** by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to repeal the 2015 Open Internet Order, which protected net neutrality – the principle that internet service providers treat all data equally – in the USA. With the five-person FCC led by a Trump appointee and dividing three to two on party lines, the decision showed how what was until recently a consensus issue was successfully reversed by vested interests, even though polls showed that the US public overwhelmingly **supports** net neutrality **regardless** of political affiliation. Concern centred on implications of the change for the freedom of expression and media pluralism, as well as the way it symbolised how political leaders will advance the interests of big business, which are best-placed to take advantage of changed rules, at the expense of rights and equality.

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Before and after the decision, protests were held in multiple cities, with many **young people** mobilised into action, and **over 150** organisations, including artist, civil liberties, consumer, media and technology organisations, worked together to write to congressional leaders asking them to defend and protect net neutrality. At the time of writing, court action is being taken to challenge the decision.

There were some worrying **changes** to the law in Georgia: a constitutional amendment introduced new constraints on the information that can be requested under freedom of information rules, and reported changes to the public broadcast law threatened to give the government more control over public media. In Nigeria, civil society mobilised against a **proposed new NGO Bill** that threatened to vastly extend the state's control over CSOs. More positively, in Mali parliament approved a **new law to protect human rights defenders**, following years of civil society advocacy.

In France, Secours Populaire, a CSO working on issues of poverty and discrimination, won a **court case** to restore its power supply after a local mayor cut it off to try to force the organisation to leave its office. Switzerland-based CSO **Public Eye** took action in December when it announced it had filed a criminal complaint about the activities in the DRC of Glencore, a Swiss-headquartered commodity trading and mining multinational. Based on information **unearthed** in the Paradise Papers leaks, the lawsuit alleged illegal payments to the DRC government for the acquisition of mines. However, in the UK, offshore law firm Appleby, the company at the heart of the Paradise Papers scandal, announced it was **suing** the BBC and the Guardian newspaper for breach of confidence, potentially creating a chilling effect for investigative journalism.

Denmark's government was criticised for **withdrawing** most of its support to Palestinian CSOs, and accused by civil society of giving in to Israeli government pressure. The same month, the US government controversially announced it would relocate its Israel embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem,

recognising Israel's claim to Jerusalem as its capital. The decision defied a long-standing international agreement that the status of Jerusalem, claimed by both Israel and Palestine, can only be settled as part of a peace agreement negotiated between the two sides, and stood in opposition to numerous UN Security Council resolutions that recognise Israel's control of East Jerusalem as an illegal occupation. A UN Security Council **vote** on the issue saw the US government entirely isolated, and forced to use its veto as all 14 other members lined up to condemn the decision. The issue was subsequently brought to a **debate** at the UN General Assembly, before which the US government threatened to penalise states that opposed it by withdrawing aid. States were mostly unbowed, with 128 voting to uphold international consensus, among them many major recipients of US aid. However, some votes in support of the US and Israel as well as abstentions and absences suggested that the threat had some impact, while in what seemed an act of sycophancy, the government of Guatemala announced that it too would move its embassy to Jerusalem. The sorry episode gave further indication of how little store the Trump administration sets by international agreements and diplomacy. The announcement brought **protests** in the USA, and international civil society, including **ICSW** participants, was quick to condemn the move as a **reckless** and provocative unilateral breach of international law, which can only be expected to fuel **tension**; a **rise** in attacks on media freedoms in Palestine following the announcement seemed to offer one indication of this. In another sign of the Trump administration's withdrawal from international commitments, in December it **announced** an end to its support for the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the negotiations to develop the Global Compact for Migration.

In further news that signalled how contested human rights have become at the international level, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, **announced** in December that he would not be seeking a renewal of his mandate and would step down at the end of his term in mid-2018. He expressed concern that to win a second term, he might have to tone down

his criticism of human rights violations and risk damaging the independence of his office. The move called into question the UN's willingness to stand up to powerful states that abuse human rights and that are also increasingly chipping away at international institutions, including by using their role in bodies such as the UNHRC to undermine them from the inside. The ability of the UN to uphold rights and respond to the major challenges of the day was also called into doubt at the year's end when a **package of funding cuts** was agreed by member states.

## IRAN: RENEWED PROTESTS BRING REPRESSIVE RESPONSE

As 2017 ended, renewed **anti-government protests** erupted in Iran, with protests at their most extensive since 2009's Green Movement post-election mobilisation. In a new development, protests focused on issues of jobs, income and high prices, as well as demands for democracy. As the protests spread and continued into January 2018, there were reports of multiple killings by security forces and over a thousand arrests, including of citizen journalists trying to cover protests. In January 2018 we spoke to an **Iranian woman human rights defender**, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, and gave her background to the events:

*The protests that began on 28 December were triggered by price increases in a context of massive unemployment and widespread corruption. They started in Mashhad, the second biggest city, and quickly spread throughout Iran. As they spread, they widened their focus and started encompassing political grievances as well as economic ones. This made a lot of sense given that the current economic crisis is in great measure the result of the irresponsible actions of people and groups linked to the Supreme Leader that*

*are completely unaccountable and immune from justice, including Ayatollahs and leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the branch of the armed forces charged with protecting the country's Islamic Republic system. So it was only natural for protesters to target Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and all these organisations as well.*

*These protests seem different from previous ones in that they were not concentrated in Tehran, the capital, and they represented a more direct challenge to the rule of the Supreme Leader. They are the biggest internal challenge that the government has faced since the Green Movement protests.*

The government response was predictably repressive. As well as killings and detentions, the authorities **shut down** mobile internet access and blocked several apps, including Instagram and Telegram, a widely-used messaging service in Iran, as our interviewee outlines:

*The protests were met with harsh **repression**, with more than 20 deaths and hundreds to thousands of arrests over the first few days.*

*It is not surprising that protests elicited such a strong government reaction, not only through force but also through other tactics meant to hinder organisation and mobilisation, such as blocking the internet and restricting access to social media apps. The government also made a show of force by staging pro-government rallies in a number of cities across the country.*

*Among the few things that helped us live under a dictatorship and survive were the internet and VPN. Telegram, with 40 million Iranian users, was the main chat app in the country, and many people used it to run their business. Instagram was also very popular. But suddenly nothing worked, not even with VPN. This means that people in civil*



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*society who use social media and the internet to raise awareness and do their work lost their main tool. Just recently the situation got a little better, as VPNs seem to be working again and the filter on Instagram has been removed. But Telegram is still being filtered.*

This was not the first time in 2017 that the state cracked down on the freedom of expression at a sensitive moment. The run-up to **Iran's** May presidential election, which saw a contest between pro-reform and harder-line factions, left journalists caught in the crossfire. In **March**, journalist Hengameh Shahidi was arbitrarily detained and charged with unspecified security crimes, and Ehsan Mazandarani, a reporter with the Etemad newspaper, was rearrested, one month after being released from jail after serving 15 months of a two-year sentence on charges of propaganda against the state and "collusion against national security." The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that security officers assaulted journalist Issa Saharkhiz, a founder member of the Iranian Association for the Defence of Freedom of the Press, while he was in hospital. He had previously been arrested in November 2015, three months before parliamentary elections, and sentenced to 21 months in prison in September 2016 for "insulting the Supreme Leader." **Ahead** of the election, the government blocked key social media platforms, notably Instagram's live video feature and Telegram's voice call feature. Several editors and managers of pro-reform newspapers that use Telegram were arrested.

As the events of December indicated, the electoral triumph of ostensible reformer President Hassan Rouhani, who secured a decisive re-election in May, did not see a notable upturn in the freedom of expression. More journalists were arrested and detained in **August**, and the assets of BBC staff and contributors were frozen by court order. At the year's end, British-Iranian media worker **Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe** remained in jail, having been found guilty in September 2016 of training journalists, a charge she continued to deny.

Iran protests were met with a major police response

Credit: wikipedia.org

As our interviewee relates, the many acts of repression have had a debilitating and demoralising effect on people who would otherwise be active in trying to improve their society:

*The government knows how to crack down on people, and people have gone through enough repression for a lifetime: the bloody Islamic Revolution and war, the executions of the 1980s and the crackdown on the student movement and the Green Movement. As a result, most people are not as selfless or brave as to be able to stand in front of a huge gun machine of the IRGC anymore.*

*The violent crackdown discouraged many people from mobilising. In Iran, the minimum government reaction against a peaceful protest involves teargas and massive arrests, and situations easily escalate to much worse. The pain of 2009 is still fresh for us. It's not easy to forget how many young people lost their lives, suffered torture or were thrown in jail for a long time. All those lives wasted and nothing changed – so why would people choose to sacrifice themselves for nothing? Most people felt they had no choice but to move on.*

*It is clear why many educated people living in Iran these days think that an uprising will not take us anywhere, and could cause more damage than good. We are living under a powerful dictatorship that controls everything. How do you fight such big evil? None of us ordinary people have ever been in power. How could any of the multiple oppositions in exile, who are each other's enemies, run the country? It really feels sometimes like we are doomed to live under this dictatorship.*

As this suggests, in the face of such a powerful state, the challenges can seem overwhelming. But the need, concludes our interviewee, is to focus on what practical support and solidarity can be offered:

*First of all, any group that has technical capacity could help by providing Iranians with servers for VPN connections.*

*Thinking more in the long term, it is important to understand that this uprising has complex underlying causes. Unemployment is a particularly acute problem for women. Most educated women are unemployed due to employment rules, and most women human rights activists are unemployed women fighting for a better society, because we all know that even when a regime change takes place women's rights tend to get lost along the way. So it's important for international civil society to find ways to help Iranian women human rights defenders stay out of jail and keep going.*

*Finally, as I have learned from my experience in the 2009 Green Movement, it is vital for the world to keep watching and not forget us. The Green Movement was initially a very civil and calm protest of people who believed that the government had cheated in the election, but the IRGC crackdown was brutal. As soon as the government reacted with violence against demonstrators, the internet was shut down, and there was no way to report out of Iran. As a result, the world quickly started to forget about us. Nowadays, with or without the internet working and reports going out, we are aware that there are so many problems in the world that ours won't be in other countries' people's minds for a long time.*

*Still, I believe we should at least try to create a strong grassroots movement and be ready for when our country finds itself in a better place. We, the Iranian people, should be very careful not to lose the very small windows of freedom that we can find under this dictatorship.*

## MALI: NEW PROTECTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Mali took a positive step forward in December when parliament **approved** a bill on the promotion and protection of human rights defenders, which was **signed** into law by the president the following month. The law, initially **adopted** by the Council of Ministers in January, was the fruition of years of civil society advocacy. Civil society first proposed a law in 2010, and convened subsequently to develop a draft bill and raise awareness of the need for such protection. The law protects the right of human rights defenders to engage with international bodies and receive funding, recognises their homes and offices as inviolable and makes special provisions for women human rights defenders and human rights defenders with disabilities. With the bill passed into law, Mali's civil society can be proud of its part in making their country only the third African state, after Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, to have made explicit legal provision to protect human rights defenders.

This is not to say that the challenges Malian civil society faces will be solved overnight; clearly the passing of the law is one small but significant step towards guaranteeing civil society rights. The month after the Council of Ministers approved the law, the problems that exist were made clear when journalist **Ammy Baba Cissé** was kidnapped and detained for several hours after writing a story about a scandal involving a senior politician. In July, online activist **Madou Kanté** was shot and injured in an apparent assassination attempt, and other activists were assaulted and received death threats. Further instances such as these will offer hard tests of the new law.

But the hunger for reform, accountability and the challenging of impunity was also made clear, in June and July, when thousands mobilised in the capital, Bamako, under the banner '**Don't Touch My Constitution**', opposing a constitutional referendum which, protesters feared, would significantly expand the powers of the president. With the protest movement encompassing civil society groups, social movements and trade unions, the government backed down, and agreed to postpone the referendum. Once again, Malian civil society had demonstrated its power and proved it was not to be overlooked.

Civil society, in Mali and internationally, will now work to scrutinise how the new law is applied in practice, advocate to ensure that human rights defenders are protected as the law demands, and encourage international learning from Mali's experience.

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## **NIGERIA:** CIVIL SOCIETY MOBILISES AGAINST REGRESSIVE NEW LAW

In **Nigeria**, a proposed new law, the **NGO Bill**, sparked civil society concern. The bill, which would establish a federal agency to supervise, coordinate and monitor CSOs, was heavily criticised, including by Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission, for threatening to violate fundamental freedoms and give the state new **powers** to control CSO registration and activities. With the bill pending in the National Assembly at the time of writing, Nigerian civil society continued to mobilise to highlight the bill's problems and push for it to be withdrawn. A public hearing held in December saw civil society universally reject the bill.

**Oluseyi Babatunde Oyeibisi** of the **Nigeria Network of NGOs** describes civil society's main problems with the bill, and its likely impact on civil society:

*If passed into law, this bill will be a democratic regression. Despite the significant progress made in the advancement of democracy and the development of civil society, the freedoms of association, assembly and expression are still restricted regularly in Nigeria, and this bill will greatly add to the restrictions.*

*If passed, the bill will give the government sweeping powers over civil society, to the point of threatening our very existence. The bill would make it compulsory for all CSOs operating in Nigeria to register with the government every two years and require them to include details such as the location and duration of proposed activities and information on all sources of funding. The requirement of frequent re-registration would increase the administrative burden on CSOs; it will also be possible for the registration of CSOs that are critical of*



Oluseyi Babatunde Oyeibisi of the Nigeria Network of NGOs speaks out against the NGO Bill

Credit: CIVICUS

*the government to be denied or delayed if the government wants to restrict their activities in reprisal.*

*According to the proposed law, projects identified by CSOs for implementation will require prior government approval. The implication is that the government will be able to decide arbitrarily whether to approve or reject projects depending on whether they focus on issues they consider harmless or sensitive. In addition, the text of the proposed legislation states that CSOs will be required to provide “additional information” as requested by the Board during registration, but does not clarify what this “additional information” would be; it could potentially be any kind of documentation, including some that CSOs may not possess at the time of registration.*

*Finally, the bill does not place a ceiling on registration fees but leaves this to the Commission’s discretion. Individuals who violate the provisions of the law will face up to 18 months in prison or a huge fine, and those convicted of such violations will be prohibited from holding office in a CSO for a period of 10 years.*

*If the NGO Bill is passed into law, the contributions of civil society risk being diminished drastically. The restrictive provisions of the bill give the authorities powers to decide which organisations can register and what kinds of activities they are allowed to carry out. This means human rights groups and CSOs critical of the government will easily be targeted every time they need to register or re-register. This will no doubt reduce the ability of CSOs to serve as watchdogs, hold the government accountable and ensure that human rights are respected. The bill will likely reduce the participation of citizens in the democratic process. It will reduce the contributions of civil society to the SDGs and silence those that speak out against corruption.*

As can be expected, civil society fought back. In November, a group of 23 CSOs, working together as the **Human Rights Agenda Network**, filed a

**lawsuit** calling for the bill to be declared unlawful and unconstitutional. Other responses include research, analysis, lobbying and public protests, as Oluseyi relates:

*We and other CSOs have advocated for the bill to be withdrawn and have organised and participated in meetings to produce a common perspective on the bill and decide on collective actions to take. We carried out advocacy work with the leadership of the National Assembly and the House Committee on CSOs. We did an in-depth analysis of the bill and its implications for civil society and shared briefs with the sponsor of the bill and the House Committee. We jointly organised peaceful marches in Abuja and Lagos, and we asked the Lagos state government to make a request to the National Assembly to not consider the bill.*

*We created a platform through our annual conference for engaging with regulators in Nigeria to strengthen existing laws. We did a review of the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) – the law guiding civil society registration in Nigeria – and made recommendations to the Corporate Affairs Commission and Senate Technical Committee on the Review of CAMA. We continue to mobilise civil society against the bill through both mainstream and social media.*

*A **public hearing** was hastily scheduled by the Nigerian authorities for 14 and 15 December to seek feedback from CSOs on the bill. Despite the short notice, over 180 CSOs attended with around 30 memoranda submitted and adopted. While the hearings were taking place in the National Assembly, hundreds of people demonstrated outside, wearing t-shirts and bearing banners with the slogan #NoToNGOBill.*

*None of the attendees supported the bill, and all the organisations that made presentations explicitly rejected it. A report of the public hearing is expected to be presented by the House Committee soon. We hope it will have some influence in stopping the passage of the law.*

## ARGENTINA: CIVIL SOCIETY DENIED ACCESS TO TRADE TALKS

December offered an indication of how contested space for civil society at the national level can carry through to the international level. A WTO meeting took place in **Buenos Aires**, but many from civil society who expected to attend and take part in advocacy around the meeting had their accreditation withdrawn a few days before it began. The ban, imposed by the government of Argentina, affected 65 activists from 20 different groups from a range of countries, including Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Finland and Indonesia. Most of those affected were part of the global **Our World Is Not for Sale** network, which promotes sustainability, social justice and a democratic multilateral trade system.

It was an unprecedented move, with no restrictions on such a scale applied to previous WTO meetings. As well as undermining the credibility of WTO processes, the bans sent worrying signals about the government of Argentina's willingness to tolerate dissenting voices, both domestically and ahead of the G20 meeting that Argentina hosts in 2018. It forced civil society to confront bigger questions about the extent to which they are able to access international processes and be considered as equal partners worth listening to.

**Gastón Chillier** of the **Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS)**, an Argentinean CSO, describes what happened:

*Sixty-five people whose organisations had been accredited to participate in the WTO Ministerial Conference received emails from the WTO stating that the security authorities of Argentina had rejected their accreditations "for unspecified reasons." Some of these people decided to travel to Argentina regardless, to participate in other activities. Many of them were held for hours at Ezeiza International Airport before being allowed to enter the country. Two people – the British-Ecuadorean journalist **Sally Burch**, who was due to participate in the Ministerial Conference as an expert on internet regulation, and **Petter Titland**, a Norwegian activist from ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizens' Action) – were denied entry and deported.*

*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release **explaining** that accreditations had been rejected because people or their organisations "had made explicit calls via social media for violent*

SIXTY-FIVE PEOPLE WHOSE ORGANISATIONS HAD BEEN ACCREDITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE RECEIVED EMAILS FROM THE WTO STATING THAT THE SECURITY AUTHORITIES OF ARGENTINA HAD REJECTED THEIR ACCREDITATIONS "FOR UNSPECIFIED REASONS"

*demonstrations, expressing their intent to generate intimidation and chaos.” It became clear that the government had gathered intelligence, very possibly on the basis of people’s organisational affiliation or political opinions, something that is explicitly prohibited under Argentine law.*

Argentina’s civil society was quick to respond to offer support to those affected by the bans, and to challenge the government’s decision. Gastón relates how civil society took on the government and won a partial reversal:

*Argentine CSOs, and my organisation in particular, worked to defend the blacklisted activists’ right to participation and freedom of movement, and to ensure their entry into Argentina. We collected and shared information locally and with their organisations back home. We alerted embassy and justice officials as people were being held at the airport. We took legal and administrative action.*

*CELS filed habeas data petitions – a request for public information and a collective habeas corpus – while also dealing with the cases of Burch and Titland, and provided advice and support to some other people directly affected. In addition, we helped get the word out to journalists, via social media, press interviews and media releases.*

*Through our **legal and administrative petitions**, we requested that the government specify the security restrictions established for participating in the WTO event and explain the links between that evaluation and the prohibition or restriction of activists’ entry into Argentina.*

*At a court hearing on the collective habeas corpus petition, the government presented a list with the names of the 65 people whose accreditations had been rejected, but insisted that this did not impede entry into Argentina and that it had no bearing on Burch’s and Titland’s*

*deportations. They did acknowledge, however, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had forwarded this list to the National Migrations Office, as an “alert.” Both Burch’s and Titland’s names appeared on the list.*

*In response to our other petitions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that they could not provide details on which information had been gathered on the 65 people or how it had been gathered, and forwarded our queries to the Ministry of Security and the Federal Intelligence Agency. We still await their response.*

*Thanks to civil society’s legal, diplomatic and media pressure, the Argentine government was forced to backtrack in some cases. After Burch and Titland were deported, no one else was prohibited from entering Argentina. Also, on 10 December the Argentine government announced that it was re-accrediting a handful of people who were on the list, including Titland, who eventually returned to Argentina and participated in the conference.*

*However, many other people and CSOs remained unaccredited, including the Argentine CSO Fundación Grupo Efecto Positivo, the Chilean CSO Derechos Digitales and the British CSO Global Justice Now. Some activists whose names were on the list told us they refrained from travelling to Argentina out of fear, and others had their visas rejected. Some of them worry that these rejections and alerts will remain on their migration records.*

Considering what these developments might say about civil society’s ability to participate in international processes, Gastón suggests a need for greater tracking of and action on restrictions in global-level civic space:

*The Argentine government’s decision caused tension with the WTO as well as with other governments, notably Norway. Regardless of*

*the meeting's outcomes, this undoubtedly had an impact on the legitimacy of the talks.*

*This was the first time that activists have been turned away on this scale, and it sets a very negative precedent for civil society participation. The Argentine government's actions sent a chilling message regarding the country's commitment to civil society participation. This is a new dimension of closing civic space that should be monitored in global discussions. And it should sound the alarm for global civil society to ensure that other governments do not turn this precedent into routine practice.*

## UN: FUNDING CUTS UNDERLINE DECLINING RESPECT FOR MULTILATERALISM

December saw **serious cuts** to the UN's budget. This raised concern among many in civil society who look to the UN system to set, uphold and monitor compliance with human rights commitments at a time when civic space is under attack in many countries, and called into question the ability of UN institutions to ensure that the SDGs and the Paris Agreement will be implemented adequately. It also sent a further worrying signal about the declining value many states place on multilateralism.

The UN operating budget **approved** by the UN General Assembly in December was five per cent lower than the budget approved for 2016 and 2017, and US\$193 million lower than the budget the UN Secretary-General requested. This means that at a time of growing need, the UN is shrinking, as the budget cuts mean that fewer people are working in UN bodies than before. The cuts will have a direct impact on the UN's ability to uphold human

rights standards: analysis by ISHR was that only **about half** of new positions that the UN Secretary-General had identified as being essential for meeting treaty body commitments were approved; the decision to approve five of the 11 requested human rights-related posts was a compromise that at least avoided the worst-case scenario put forward by the Government of China, of approving no funding for the posts. The funding for an audit of the UN's work to support human rights defenders was also only half approved.

While the headline figures may sound large, the UN operating budget of approximately US\$5.4 billion for two years is pitifully small compared to, for example, the City of New York's one-year budget of **US\$85.2 billion** or even the Mayor of London's annual budget of roughly **US\$21.4 billion**. The UN is being asked to solve complex, global problems, but on a budget that will never enable it to do so well.

While the UN has a separate budget for its peacekeeping operations, a similar picture can be seen there: at approximately **US\$7.3 billion** in the budget approved in June, the amounts available are low given the growing need for peacekeeping work in response to the complex and entrenched nature of conflicts around the world today. The annual peacekeeping budget is estimated to equate to under half of one per cent of global military spending, calling into question the extent to which our leaders value peace rather than conflict. The June figure also represented a cutback.

One of the key sources of pressure on UN budgets is the Trump administration, which seeks to drive down its financial contributions as part of its assertion of narrow self-interest and its attack on international spaces that may be used to monitor and critique the administration. Following the agreement of the budget in December and in the wake of its **anger** over opposition to its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the US government **boasted** of cutting US\$285 million from its UN budget, and pledged to do more in future to assert its interests. The downward pressure on the peacekeeping budget also came from the US government's determination to reduce its

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contributions; the US cut US\$600 million from its peacekeeping commitments in June, after **initially** proposing a cut of around US\$1 billion. These gestures are hardly in keeping with the USA's status as host of the UN's headquarters, as well as its central role on the pivotal UN Security Council. One of the dangers is that, in response, UN officials will self-censor and exercise excessive caution to try to keep the US administration from cutting back even more.

With its core funding in decline, the risk is that the UN will become still more reliant on voluntary funding, often from large corporations, exacerbating an already clearly visible trend. For civil society, this raises the challenge that voluntary-funded projects may be less accountable and more pro-business than those funded by state contributions. **Thea Gelbspan** of **ESCR-Net** (*see September*) discusses how the funding gap left by states is a key driver of private sector partnerships:

*The UN Charter establishes that its member states are fiscally responsible for UN activity expenses. Yet, as many UN member states fail to fulfil their obligations in terms of member dues and the overall financing of agreed-upon priority activities, a worrying gap has emerged that the private sector is now seeking to fill. Similarly, in the face of a substantial crisis in terms of public development financing, we have witnessed the whole-hearted embrace of public-private partnerships across the UN system, with a notable deficit in terms of critical assessments of this model.*

**Barbara Adams** of the **Global Policy Forum** also describes the UN's growing reliance on voluntary funding, and the risks this brings:

*Inadequate quantity and quality financing of the UN and its mandates by UN member states has prompted different patterns of finance, including through philanthropists and big business. Core resources have plummeted from nearly half of all resources in 1997 to less than a quarter today. According to a December **report** by the UN Secretary-General, some 91 per cent of all UN development system activities in 2015 were funded with non-core or project-based resources. A **report** we published in 2015 showed that between 1999 and 2014, total non-core resources for UN-related activities increased by 182 per cent in real terms, while core resources increased by only 14 per cent. Much of this increase has gone through a proliferating number of UN trust funds.*

*The growing use of trust funds – where contributions have jumped by 300 per cent over the last decade – allow donor governments and corporate interests to direct UN funding choices outside the 'one*

WITH ITS CORE FUNDING IN DECLINE, THE RISK IS THAT THE UN WILL BECOME STILL MORE RELIANT ON VOLUNTARY FUNDING, OFTEN FROM LARGE CORPORATIONS, EXACERBATING AN ALREADY CLEARLY VISIBLE TREND

*country, one vote' UN policy processes. This represents a substantial change in the funding architecture of the UN development system.*

*At a global level, the embrace of partnerships with the business sector brings with it a number of risks, side-effects and spill-over effects that have not received careful consideration regarding compatibility with UN mandates; and their extra-budgetary funding lines remove global partnerships from regular review and impact assessment.*

Barbara considers what needs to change to address these challenges, including in relation to civil society:

*More needs to be done to recognise the expertise and experience of civil society and its contribution in enriching substance in the context for policy decisions as well as in implementation strategies and monitoring. It is essential to differentiate the classifications of non-state stakeholders, rather than lumping them together as partners, and to recognise their different mandates and commitments to the public good.*

*It is important for civil society to undertake monitoring and mobilise to prevent UN system activities, practices and appointments that undermine UN values-based mandates and that contradict the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.*

Few in civil society would take the view that there are no improvements that can be made in UN bureaucracy and institutional efficiency. Indeed, civil society is actively working to create the political space to facilitate major UN reform, as epitomised in the **UN2020** campaign, which seeks to use the UN's approaching 75th anniversary as an opportunity to pursue an agenda that encompasses such key points as making more space for civil society and other peoples' representatives in UN decision-making, emphasising a joined-up approach to ensuring peace and security, and putting the UN's funding on

an adequate basis. The UN2020 campaign is currently calling on civil society to **endorse it**.

But few in civil society believe that the current attack on UN funding is driven by a concern for achieving greater efficiency or value for money. The pressure on UN funding is coming most strongly from global north states, notably the USA but also EU members, even though the UN funding burden, as a proportion of GNI, is greater for global south states, suggesting again that the drivers of the pressure on funding are political rather than financial. A strategic reform agenda to make the UN fit for purpose in a changing world, which many states say they want as well as civil society, cannot be pursued by an underfunded UN.

Put simply, if states saw multilateralism as an important priority and took the UN seriously, they would fund it adequately, and engage constructively in conversations about UN reform. But if states saw multilateralism as a nuisance and the UN as an institution that could cause them embarrassment and international exposure, they would do as they are doing now, and starve it of resources.

In response, civil society needs to find new ways of making the case for the UN, as part of an urgently needed counter narrative to the current growing assertion of narrow nationalism, the strengthening of walls and borders, and the rejection of multilateralism. Civil society needs to seek out democratic governments that share our outrage at what powerful states such as the USA are doing to UN institutions and encourage them to step up to fill the vacuum. But civil society cannot be put in the position of defending an unchanging UN; progress on making UN institutions more people-centric must form part of a shared vision for the UN to survive and flourish.