




JANUARY YEAR IN REVIEW




USA: As many as two million people marched in protest in cities across the USA and around the world on 20 January, the day of President Trump's inauguration.



THE GAMBIA: President Jammeh tried to hold onto power despite losing the election, but was forced to stand down after popular and international pressure.



PAKISTAN: Five social media and blogging activists, outspoken campaigners against the Taliban and the military's human rights abuses were detained and tortured.



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Determined to challenge systematic, large-scale corruption, the Green March Movement (Movimiento Marcha Verde) saw an estimated 200,000 people march on 22 January, the largest peaceful demonstration in the country's history.

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2017 opened with some notable civil society successes: when the **Gambia's** (see below). President Yahya Jammeh tried to cling onto power after losing an election, unified civil society action was a crucial part of the pressure that forced him to accept the people's verdict. An **access to information** bill was finally approved by parliament in Lebanon, eight years after the first draft was presented, following extensive engagement by civil society. In India, Lawyers Collective, a civil society organisation (CSO) that had its registration suspended for being deemed in breach of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) - which penalises CSOs that receive international funding - **won** a crucial court case to enable it to access its frozen assets. The court ruled that the FCRA does not give the state the power to stifle the functioning of organisations. Lawyers' Collective claims it was targeted after filing a claim against Amit Shah, President of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. A small piece of history was made in Belize when **Osmany Salas**, President of the Belize Tourism Industry Association, became the country's first senator directly elected by civil society – the '13th senator'. However, the process left significant room for improvement: the electoral pool was low, with most registered CSOs deemed ineligible to vote because of incomplete documentation.

2017 would also prove a year of mass protests around the world, and few caught the imagination as much as those that greeted the inauguration of President Donald Trump in the **USA** and continued to mobilise throughout the year. An important new mass movement, the **Green March Movement**, rose up to challenge grand corruption in the Dominican Republic. Poland saw student-led **protests** in major cities, on issues such as government interference in the education curriculum and media freedom, while renewed protests for abortion reform followed in March after parliament passed a law further limiting access to emergency contraception. Côte d'Ivoire experienced major **teachers' strikes** in January, with young people joining protests in sympathy and the police using teargas to disperse them. Young people also protested, about rising unemployment and the lack of job opportunities, in **Jordan**, where the government showed the limits to its tolerance of dissent

when eight activists were arrested and charged for making allegedly anti-government statements and insulting the king on social media.

In the USA, and elsewhere, attempts were made to suppress protest energies by violence and the introduction of constraining laws. In **Chile**, water cannons were used against Mapuche indigenous protesters seeking the release of their detained spiritual leader, and many protesters were detained. In **Cuba**, the Ladies in White group, known for holding silent marches each Sunday to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners, faced multiple incidents of harassment. In January police **raided** the home of Ladies in White activist Leticia Ramos, and made numerous arrests of Ladies in White members as they travelled to the annual Mass for Peace event. Ladies in White activists continued to be targeted during the year: in respective Sundays in April, 53 and 69 demonstrators were **arrested**, and there were **reports** of some activists being beaten while in detention.

Police used pepper spray to disperse a peaceful **protest** in Panama, while in Peru many were **injured** and 72 arrested as riot police brutally broke up a protest against road tolls. This was one of several Peruvian protests met with security force violence during the year: in May, a **peaceful march** for medicinal marijuana legalisation was dispersed with teargas. In **Gabon**, four protesters were arrested and detained for a week after calling for a boycott of the Africa Cup of Nations, hosted by the country. A **peaceful protest** against the abduction of journalist Afrah Shawki in Iraq was dispersed with beatings. The following month, a **protest** ahead of local elections saw eight protesters and one police officer killed, and rubber bullets and teargas used by security forces.

Also in Iraq, Yazda, a prominent CSO, was temporarily shut down by the Kurdistan Regional Government on allegations of taking part in political activities, highlighting a prominent tactic used around the world to try to silence dissenting CSOs. Similar tactics were seen in Kazakhstan, where the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Kazakhstan was **closed down**,

while two trade union leaders, Nurbek Kushakbayev and Amin Yeleusinov, were charged with holding an illegal strike when they protested against the decision. They **received jail sentences** of two and a half years and two years respectively on a range of spurious charges. Meanwhile in Moldova a **new law** - the 'two per cent' law - came into force enabling taxpayers to allocate two per cent of their taxes to a CSO or religious organisation of their choice. While this apparently offered a positive step forward for the funding of civil society, concern arose about the potential for organisations linked to political figures and public officials to benefit from the opportunity, in a country with a long track record of corruption. The early months of 2017 also saw anti-corruption protests in Moldova similar to those in neighbouring Romania (*see February*).

An enduring theme for the year was the lack of tolerance by political leaders and governments for the expression of dissent. Tanzanian President John Magufuli **warned** newspapers that their "days are numbered" if they encourage dissent. These threats were all too real in many contexts, including Pakistan, where five activists who were active online were **abducted in January**. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), activist **Abdulkhaleq Abdulla** was arrested and held for 10 days for posting a series of tweets promoting free expression. UAE human rights defender **Ahmed Mansoor** was also arrested and detained in March for his social media usage, while reports emerged of **degrading treatment** of human rights defenders detained in prison. In the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), newspaper editor **Ghys Foruné Dombe Bemba** was arrested on charges of interfering in internal security after writing an article about senior military personnel, and his newspaper banned. Two **Italian journalists** were subsequently arrested and detained in Congo-Brazzaville in March. Overall, the **Committee to Protect Journalists** found that a record number of journalists were jailed in 2017, with 262 journalists behind bars as a result of their work.

In a number of contexts, activists paid the ultimate price for speaking out and defending human rights, a grim trend seen throughout the year: according

to **Front Line Defenders**, 312 human rights defenders were assassinated in 2017, while **Reporters Without Borders** reported that 65 journalists were killed in 2017. In separate **attacks** in Guatemala in January, environmental activist Laura Vásquez Pinenda was shot dead in an attack on her home, protester Sebastián Alonso was killed when an armed group fired on protesting farmers, and land rights activist and journalist Manuel Salvador Trujillo was killed. A radio news journalist, Vilma Gabriela Barrios, was killed the following month, and physical attacks and assassinations **continued**. The situation was no better in neighbouring Honduras, where journalist **Igor Padilla** was assassinated and another journalist, Bictor Wuilfredo Ruiz Hernandez, received death threats. The following month, almost a year to the day since the notorious murder of indigenous rights leader Berta Cáceres, another leading indigenous land rights activist, **José de los Santos Sevilla**, was killed. The attacks, and state harassment, **continued** during the year (*see November*), and impunity remained a persistent problem.

Colombian human rights defender Emilsen Manyoma and her partner Joe Javier Rodallega were **found murdered** in the city of Buenaventura in January. She was an outspoken critic of international agribusiness, mining interests and right-wing paramilitary groups. As in Guatemala and Honduras, the killings continued through the year in Colombia: by the end of March alone **it was reported** that 19 activists and community leaders had been assassinated. That most of them were active in Colombia's peace process shows how fraught the path to peace remains.

At the international level, the USA **withdrew** from the Trans-Pacific Partnership neoliberal trade agreement, casting doubt on the future of the deal. In welcome moves at the United Nations (UN), the new UN Secretary-General António Guterres appointed **three women** to top positions as part of a commitment to "gender parity and geographical diversity" while Vitit Muntarbhorn, the first-ever UN Independent Expert for Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, held a landmark first **consultation** with civil society.

USA: MILLIONS MARCH TO DEFY PRESIDENT TRUMP

As many as two million people marched in protest in cities across the **USA** and around the world on **20 January**, the day of President Trump's inauguration. Many of those marching were women, expressing their anger at the misogynist politics that characterised President Trump's campaign: an estimated 670 'sister marches' took place in the USA and further afield on inauguration day. The protest numbers in Washington DC, estimated at almost half a million, vastly exceeded those present at the inauguration itself; the incoming regime betrayed its sense of insecurity by engaging in a petty war of words to try to deny this reality.

Demonstrations continued in the weeks after, and throughout 2017, including when President Trump reversed President Obama's halt on construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, and against the **ban on travel** against people from a number of predominantly Muslim countries imposed in January, in response to which a number of demonstrations were held at airports. Protests against the Trump administration took place across multiple cities in **Mexico** in February, the March for Science in **April** saw people demonstrate on every continent against climate change denial, and in June 17 CSOs worked together to hold **March for Truth** protests in 135 US cities to demand an independent investigation into alleged close links between senior Russian figures and the Trump campaign.

The protests were colourful and creative and, while defiant, largely peaceful. While the inauguration protests saw sporadic outbreaks of violence by protesters, there were also instances of **excessive force** by security forces. Following the protests, the **American Civil Liberties Union of DC** filed a lawsuit alleging unconstitutional arrests, excessive force and illegal treatment of those in detention by security forces. There were also reports that undercover agents **infiltrated** a protest group ahead of inauguration protests.

Arrests were evidently a common tactic. Around 230 people were arrested following the inauguration day protests. Among them were nine journalists, arrested on charges of felony rioting, an offence that carries a jail sentence of up to 10 years. Although charges were dropped against seven of the journalists, at the time of writing two still face trial, with one **freelance journalist** potentially risking a 75-year sentence.

As **Nick Robinson** of the **International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL)** points out, one of the disturbing aspects of prosecutions against several of those arrested was that they sought to apply the concept of collective liability, in which anyone involved in a protest risked being held responsible for offences committed by others. This was something that civil society worked to expose and resist:¹

The use of collective liability is on the rise against protesters. This is deeply disturbing. The prosecutors never claimed they had evidence that the specific individuals who were charged had damaged property or assaulted anyone; instead, they were trying to hold liable anyone who was present at the protest under a theory of collective liability.

The protesters in the first batch were found innocent on all charges by a jury in December, but it took 11 months to get a verdict. The other protesters charged are still awaiting trial. Keep in mind: this was a prosecution brought not by an obscure local prosecutor, but by the federal government - the Department of Justice.

*Along with CIVICUS and the Charity and Security Network, ICNL was able to bring our concerns about the freedoms of association, assembly and expression to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). We brought one of the charged protesters, **Elizabeth Lagesse**, to give her **testimony** at an IACHR hearing.*

¹ All interviews cited in this report have been edited for reasons of length and clarity. Full versions of interviews are available on our website.

The signs were clear that protesting would bring increased risks. As 2017 went on, President Trump reinstated a programme to militarise the police by transferring surplus defence equipment to them, and many **US states** introduced or debated laws to make it harder to protest. Then-UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai, **found** that protesters faced an “**increasingly hostile**” environment in the USA, and suggested that police responses to protests varied according to the race, ethnicity, culture and class of protesters.

Nick reports that most of the USA’s 50 states made some movement towards increasing criminal sanctions for protest since the 2016 presidential election, something that served to further chill the climate for protest:

*In the **US Protest Law Tracker**, and related freedom of assembly work, we analyse and advocate against anti-protest laws and overly **aggressive prosecution of demonstrators**. ICNL created it when we realised there was an increase in the number of anti-protest bills being introduced in states across the country. As of the beginning of 2018, 28 states had considered 50 bills that restrict the right to protest since November 2016. Eight of these bills have been enacted, while a number of others are still pending.*

We’ve seen not only an uptick in these laws, but a proliferation in the ways that the right to protest can be chilled. Perhaps most disturbing has been the number of bills that apply theories of collective liability or that increase the penalties for relatively minor offences frequently related to demonstrations, such as blocking traffic or trespassing. We’ve also been troubled by governors declaring states of emergency in response to protests. Even in situations where this might make sense, like the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville ([see August](#)), these powers aren’t being tailored sufficiently. And we are concerned that these powers are beginning to be used whenever there is the mere threat of violence at a protest. This can chill participation in protests.



Protesters hold a Trump/Pence Regime Must Go rally in New York, November

Credit: Getty Images

CSOs were affected by the changed US political climate in a range of ways. One challenge came from an apparently increasing use of SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public litigation) against CSOs. Greenpeace and other groups were **targeted** by a SLAPP suit brought by President Trump's favoured law firm, Kasowitz Benson Torres, in response to their role in standing up to the Dakota Access Pipeline being built by Energy Transfer Partners. The lawsuit, filed on behalf of Energy Transfer Partners, could potentially cost the defendants US\$900 million. SLAPPs have the aim of intimidating and silencing critics by burdening them with the high costs of undergoing legal procedures, which can cause them to abandon their criticism. In many other jurisdictions, SLAPPs have been outlawed for seriously impeding the freedom of speech.

Nick describes some other specific ways in which the political climate created new difficulties for US CSOs in 2017:

*We've seen discriminatory or aggressive actions taken against civil society groups. For example, in September, Representative DeSantis introduced a bill that would have banned Islamic Relief Worldwide from receiving federal funds based on unsubstantiated claims that they had ties to terrorist organisations. ICNL participated in a coalition that spoke out against this bill, which was ultimately **withdrawn**. This is part of a larger pattern of trying to target some groups by claiming they have ties to terrorist groups.*

We've also seen a number of impacts on civil society because of the administration's new immigration policies. Employees or volunteers of many groups are facing deadlines by which they have to leave the USA or are facing the threat of deportation. The visa bans of targeted countries have made it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for civil society groups to do something as simple as bring a speaker for a conference from one of these countries. Organisations have mobilised to fight some of these policies because of the effect they will have on the country and people's lives, but they also affect the functioning of organisations.

These impacts go beyond US CSOs. Because of the USA's global power and profile, domestic restrictions can offer inspiration to repressive forces elsewhere. For that reason, proposals to strengthen the **Foreign Agents Registration Act**, which governments of other countries have referenced when they have made it harder for CSOs to receive international funding, are particularly troubling. But at the same time, Nick suggests, it is important to locate the recent experience of the USA within broader global political tides, and to look at how international civil society can act in response:

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*Other governments are picking up on US rhetoric and actions. For example, in **Hungary** (see **June**), Prime Minister Viktor Orbán started using rhetoric around “Hungary comes first”, modelled on President Trump’s slogan “America First,” to justify the passage of a **restrictive bill** targeting international funding of civil society. President Trump’s practice of labelling certain stories “fake news” has been picked up and used by governments in countries like Cambodia, China, Russia and Syria against media reports documenting their human rights violations. It’s an easy way to delegitimise critics.*

We see these challenges across several developed democracies too. Australia has seen proposals to ban foreign funding to CSOs and limit the amount of advocacy they are allowed to engage in. France has seen the repeated extension of national states of emergency and the use of other national security measures that can undercut a free and open civic space. It’s a bigger challenge than just the USA.

As the US government takes a step back from taking a lead on protecting civil space globally, international civil society needs to push governments of other democracies to step up and take on more of a leadership role. There is a vacuum that needs to be filled.

In times like these it’s understandable that many of the responses of civil society are defensive. We need to defend the gains we’ve made over the years. Yet I think it’s also really important that we continue to pursue a vision of the independent pluralistic civil society that we want to create in the world. Even in difficult times we want to be proactive, and set the agenda we want to set – not just react to the latest crisis or concern. It’s difficult to do, but it is a vital task.

In sum, in 2017, the USA moved further away from realising in practice the First Amendment to its famed Constitution, which enshrines the freedom of speech and the press, and the right to assemble peaceably. It is after a

contested and polarising election when dissent is at its highest that people most need to be able to come together and make their voices heard peacefully. The ability of people to mobilise and protest should be seen as an intrinsic part of democracy, and an essential accompaniment to voting in periodic elections. In 2017, the USA showed the best and worst in contemporary trends in democracy: of dissent being made harder, but people mobilising bravely to make their voices heard regardless.

THE GAMBIA: CIVIL SOCIETY HELPS WIN DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

In the **Gambia**, President Jammeh must have expected to rule for as long as he wished. He had held power since leading a coup in 1994, maintaining his grip by ruthlessly suppressing dissent and holding increasingly unfair elections, which served to add a legitimising veneer to his continuing reign. But in December 2016 something unexpected happened: despite **pre-election intimidation** and repression, including the beating and arrest of peaceful protesters and the detention of political prisoners, previously fragmented opposition groups united behind a consensus candidate, Adama Barrow. He won the election on a platform of promises to reverse human rights setbacks, promote good governance and restore the Gambia’s international reputation. President Jammeh quickly u-turned on his commitment to respect the vote, vowing to stay in power. As he struggled to hold onto office, a number of people were detained simply for wearing **t-shirts** bearing the slogan #Gambiahadecided, **four private radio stations** were shut down and a number of **international journalists** were deported or denied entry.

International pressure, notably joint action by the Gambia’s neighbouring states, was one of the factors that saw President Jammeh finally head into exile on **21 January**. The Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) committed to military intervention, and mobilised an estimated 7,000 troops



Supporters of the Gambia's incoming president Adama Barrow greet his return to the country

Credit: Getty Images

on the Gambia's borders, while the head of the Gambia's army pledged allegiance to the incoming President Barrow. But it is important to recognise the role that civil society played in taking a stand against President Jammeh. Key **civil society institutions**, including unions, as well as students, academia and the Islamic and Christian Councils, came out to voice their recognition of the new President and called for boycotts if President Jammeh stayed in power. Social media, on which the Barrow campaign relied, given the state's dominance of traditional media, also offered important platforms for dissent.

The incoming President took immediate steps to clean up Jammeh's toxic legacy, including by committing to rejoining the Commonwealth and remaining in the International Criminal Court (ICC), **releasing** some long-detained political prisoners and committing to **media reform** and the establishment of a **truth and reconciliation commission**. Speaking to us shortly after President Barrow came to power, **Sohna Sallah** of the **Democratic Union of Gambian Activists** described the potential of a newly-democratic Gambia, while adding a necessary note of caution:

The opening of democratic space in the Gambia will create opportunities for citizens to become more informed and involved in a true participatory democracy. Journalists can operate freely without hindrance and citizens will have unfettered access to information. There will be a stronger and more permanent civil society footprint in the country that will serve as both partner and watchdog to the new administration. Business opportunities will grow for thousands of Gambians as former President Jammeh had monopolised much of the business in the Gambia, even putting small-time vendors out of business. Finally, the Gambia will be welcomed back to the family of nations around the world where democratic norms and procedures are respected. Gambian civil society and activists and journalists can continue to highlight issues that plague the Gambia.

We must be realistic that even though the future is bright for the tiny nation, the removal of former President Jammeh is not a magic

bullet that will rid the country of all its problems. This is going to be a long road and the country needs all hands on deck to ensure that it continues on the trajectory of a sustainable democracy and prosperity.

Indeed, the change of government was not a cure-all for the Gambia's embattled civil society, and restrictions still occurred. **Kebba Jeffang**, a journalist, was assaulted by President Barrow supporters during a press conference in March; **Bubacarr Badjie**, a State Intelligence Services employee, was detained after speaking out about the service's practices in June; and that same month, one person was killed when a **protest** by Jammeh loyalists was suppressed by Gambian and ECOWAS forces. The continued existence of criminal defamation laws was also identified as an **enduring constraint** on the freedom of expression. But the example of **Burkina Faso**, where popular protest first evicted a long-established dictator in 2014 and then resisted a military coup in 2015 to ensure the return of democracy, shows that long-term work to build democracy can be sustained after the first flush of protest; there too the process has not been easy, fundamental freedoms remain contested and continuous civil society commitment is needed. Gambian civil society, in all its diversity, needs to be supported to play its essential role in advocating for democratic reform, and holding the country's new leadership to account.

PAKISTAN: ACTIVISTS' DISAPPEARANCE AN OMINOUS WARNING

Five anti-Taliban activists, who were active on social media and blogging platforms, went missing in **Pakistan** in January. The five were outspoken campaigners against the Taliban, and were also critical of the government's lack of action against extremism, and the military's human rights abuses. Their websites and blogs also 'disappeared', being taken offline. That same month, in a further indication of the level of the threat to the freedom of expression,

Jan Muhammad Shahbaz Samalani, Press Secretary of the Pakistan Media Association of Kalat, was shot and killed.

The disappearance of the five, in a country where incidents of enforced disappearances by security forces run into huge numbers, sparked street protests and online calls for their safe return. The abductions were condemned by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and David Kaye, UN special rapporteur on the freedom of expression. But in response, the five and their supporters were smeared and threatened by extremists on social media. In addition to going missing, the five were the subject of a complaint about blasphemy for their postings, highlighting how Pakistan's Blasphemy Law is used to curb dissent and can enable violence by both extremist groups and the state. In March, for example, three more bloggers were charged with blasphemy in an anti-terrorism court, and in April, prominent activist **Riaz Ahmed** was arrested and detained while travelling to a press conference to demand the release of another detained activist. It seems clear that he was detained because of his support for people accused of blasphemy. In April, the government gave further encouragement to extremist forces when it announced it was **investigating CSOs** for allegations of spreading blasphemy and pornography on social media.

The five resurfaced in equally shadowy circumstances in late January. They headed abroad for their safety, and none of the five was initially prepared to speak out. However, in March, one of the activists, Waqas Goraya, now relocated in the Netherlands, stated that he had been abducted and had been so shaken that he had not been able to resume his online activities. Security forces were suspected of being behind the abductions: Waqas **said** he was detained and tortured by a government institution with links to the military.

The abduction of the five highlighted an ongoing tension around the use of social media for activism in Pakistan, where social media has created both opportunities and threats. For example, **Zoya Rehman**, formerly of the **Digital**

Rights Foundation, highlights how online space has provided opportunities for feminist groups to coordinate, organise, campaign and connect with other movements in the face of conservative social practices:

The growing presence of feminist collectives online proves that online spaces have become important, and sometimes challenging, sites of political resistance themselves. They lend support to communities and causes that not only receive little traction in offline spaces but which are actively being restricted. Such online spaces have the potential to produce and celebrate a range of politics and identities, and for individuals to become more visible to shun the marginality they experience offline.

But at the same time, Zoya continues, online activity has opened civil society up to new forms of attack, from both the state and extremist groups, that reinforce offline rights violations:

Feminists with an online presence have become increasingly vulnerable to online attacks and worse - disappearance or death. The monitoring and policing that used to take place in offline spaces is now happening online, with the government shaping the narrative of who the public should rally against and call anti-state. This rhetoric often results in feminists being stalked online, receiving threatening messages or having their mobile phone numbers culled from their profiles. They are then re-victimised when they challenge their online abusers.

Even after the five activists were freed, civil society was concerned about the lack of government action to investigate their abduction, which pointed to the broader culture of impunity that surrounds attacks on human rights defenders and activists in Pakistan. **Front Line Defenders**, for example, has highlighted that in all cases of killings of human rights defenders it has documented in Pakistan, no perpetrators have been brought to justice,

while the UN Human Rights Committee **expressed concern** about impunity for crimes against journalists, and noted that the state had been unable to provide statistics about investigations of crimes against journalists. With the Committee Against Torture expressing **serious concern** about cases of torture in 2017 and Amnesty International **reporting** almost 300 cases of disappearances between August and October alone, it seems sadly clear that the disappearances, and impunity for them, are set to continue.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: MASS MOBILISATION CHANGES THE GAME ON CORRUPTION

In December 2016, a US court found **Brazil**-based corporate giant Odebrecht guilty of corruption. Odebrecht was involved in many of Latin America's biggest construction projects, and in 2015 was implicated in Brazil's seemingly all-embracing Lava Jato (Car Wash) corruption scandal, which exposed a vast web of corruption between state oil company Petrobras, senior politicians and major political parties. As the Brazilian investigation broadened its scope, **Odebrecht** was found to have paid US\$3.3 billion in bribes, including large donations to the political campaign of Michel Temer, who benefited from the corruption scandal to replace Dilma Rousseff as Brazilian president (*see April*). Odebrecht was revealed to have an entire department dedicated to paying bribes.

The US case exposed the international reach of Odebrecht's corruption: the company admitted that it had paid bribes in 12 African and Latin American countries, and had contributed funds to the campaigns of **six** Latin American presidents. In total, it admitted to paying bribes of US\$788 million to win 100 contracts generating profits of US\$3.3 billion, and agreed to pay corporate fines of US\$3.5 billion.

In the **Dominican Republic**, Odebrecht admitted to paying US\$92 million in bribes, with the systemic nature of corruption indicated by the fact that

bribes were paid under three successive presidents from two different parties. The Dominican Republic, ranked at 120 out of 176 countries in the 2016 **Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index**, clearly has a corruption problem. Public anger focused particularly on Odebrecht's biggest project in the country, the construction of the **Punta Catalina** power plant. Even before the awarding of the contract to Odebrecht was exposed as corrupt, the power plant was heavily criticised by civil society on the grounds of its environmental and financial costs. For **Enrique de León** of the National Committee to Combat Climate Change, the Punta Catalina project makes explicit the connections between corruption, the maintenance of political power and the failure to make progress in addressing climate change:

Ours is a rogue government, which, in a way that is illegal and corrupt to a degree never before seen in our history, has since 2013 been building two 770 megawatt coal plants in Punta Catalina. At the same time, in November 2015 our president travelled to Paris in order to lead the most threatened island states in raising the demand for reducing the carbon footprint, and to promise a 25 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030. This will be impossible to accomplish with the new coal plants generating 6.34 million tons of carbon dioxide per year, an increase of more than 20 per cent in the country's total emissions.

The government resisted ratification of the Paris Agreement because they knew that the new coal plants would make it impossible for them to meet the goals. Our country has great need for electricity because, even under a model of great inequality and exclusion, our economy is growing. We currently have an energy deficit, with expensive and inefficient energy production, which is why we have major blackouts. So we do need to produce more and better energy, but what we do not need is for that energy to come from coal, given that we are not even coal producers.



Thousands of Dominicans wearing green as a symbol of hope march through the streets of the capital, Santo Domingo, on 22 January

Credit: Getty Images

The option for coal, as well as the choice of the Odebrecht Corporation to head the consortium that is building Punta Catalina, was a political financing decision. President Danilo Medina wanted to be re-elected in 2016, and re-election was prohibited, so the government had to fund electoral reform, followed by a re-election campaign. Funding was provided by the Punta Catalina project. It is fully documented that the tender was rigged: Odebrecht bought the contract, as it confessed in New York in December 2016. As a form of corrupt political financing, the works included an overpriced amount of US\$1 billion from the very beginning. Out of the US\$2.95 billion that the works were going to cost, US\$1 billion were overcharges. We denounced this, but there was no way a serious investigative process could be opened, because our judiciary is extremely dependent on the executive.

Such is the scale of corruption, Enrique continues, that even while civil society is lobbying for the Dominican Republic to benefit from the Green Fund to help address climate change, it is concerned that without major governance changes, any new funds will be stolen by corruption:

We face a very tough dilemma: at the same time that we demand support from the international community to mitigate the consequences and fight the causes of climate change, we are subjected to the rapacity of our own government. Only a genuinely democratic government that represents the interests of the majority of citizens, instead of those of businessmen and politicians brought together by corruption, will be able to tackle the problem of climate change.

Given this context and the entrenched nature of the problem, activists were determined to see the Odebrecht verdict as a starting point for concerted action to clean up governance and challenge impunity. The Green March Movement (Movimiento Marcha Verde) was born. **Manuel Robles**, a member of the movement, describes how it came into being, and became a focal point for public hunger for change:

In the Dominican Republic, impunity is almost as old as the republic itself. There have barely ever been any exemplary sanctions against administrative corruption, and over time this has caused great frustration. Historically, when polls asked about the country's major problems, corruption always came among the first few. But people believed, and many still do, that nothing could be done about it.

In this case, though, an important different element was that the information was coming from abroad, from the USA and Brazil, and once it began to pour in, the flow of data did not stop. Information about what was happening in other countries, including Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela, also disseminated rapidly. In those countries, investigations were opened and hundreds of businesspeople and public officials were charged, including former ministers and even former presidents. In that context, many people thought that this time the government would not be able to manipulate the case, unlike so many times in the past, and that they would have no choice but to do something about it, even if unwillingly.

The Odebrecht affair generated outrage in the Dominican Republic. At this point, along with some civil society partners that had already worked jointly in activities against corruption and impunity, we decided to get together to see what could be done. At the same time, a radio programme called Gobierno de la Tarde (Afternoon Government) had begun to spread the idea of marching to demand justice in the Odebrecht case. So on 4 January a small civil society group got together and decided to hold a mobilisation later in the month.

Our first demand was that a commission of independent prosecutors be formed to carry out the investigation and prosecution of the Odebrecht case. We do not believe in the Public Prosecutor's Office, since the Prosecutor is a member of the ruling party who worked for

the president's electoral campaign, so we did not think he could ensure an impartial investigation. We asked that the commission be formed under the auspices of the UN, within the framework of the Convention against Corruption, to which our country is a signatory. We knew that this was unlikely to happen, but we needed to highlight the high levels of government complicity involved. We also demanded that all officials who received bribes and all Odebrecht executives who paid them be identified and judicially charged, that all current Odebrecht contracts be cancelled, that all public works done by the company be audited, and that all the money in bribes and overpricing be recovered. We also requested an investigation on illicit funding of electoral campaigns.

Having identified its agenda, the movement, Manuel relates, placed great emphasis on forging a non-partisan consensus between different parts of civil society, building on elements of past successes, and consciously choosing to look forward:

First of all, the green colour was chosen to represent hope: we did not want to remain in the indignation phase but wanted instead to convey the feeling that this time we could win. This made a difference with previous protests, which had opted for the colour black as a symbol of mourning for the death of justice. We chose green as the unifying element of the diversity of our movement, which included a wide variety of organisations with multiple flags and colours. The choice of colour was linked to our decision to state our claim in positive terms. The idea was that the Odebrecht affair would signal the beginning of the end of impunity in our country.

In those early moments all the leading organisations of recent processes were present, including Poder Ciudadano (Citizen Power), a group that in 2015 was very active in holding human chains, a relatively successful precedent for an anti-corruption mobilisation; Participación Ciudadana (Citizen Participation), Transparency International's local chapter, which has produced important research on impunity; Somos Pueblo (We Are People), a youth organisation born in social media; and the branch of the Dominican Teachers' Association led by María Teresa Cabrera. Cabrera also spearheaded the 4% Movement, which demanded an increase in public spending on education as required by law, and was one of the main precedents of successful social mobilisation in the country. In our first meeting we set the date for the first mobilisation: 22 January.

We only had a couple of weeks to organise this. We got in touch with all the civil society groups we had links with, and also with partisan groups. With the latter we held meetings and set the rules

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straight: we would keep a single colour, there would not be partisan leadership, and this would remain a citizen expression, so political activists would be allowed to participate as long as they did so in their individual capacity as citizens. They all accepted the rules, and therefore from the outset we worked with a vast network of social and political organisations, and we did so in an atmosphere of relative harmony, which is quite uncommon. This was indeed an impressive achievement, given the very broad spectrum encompassed by our coalition, which, for instance, included both LGBTI organisations and evangelical groups. These are groups that strongly oppose one another around other issues, but for this cause they agreed to sit at the same table.

We spread our call in as many ways as we could. While social media played an important role, radio and TV were vital: they not only spread the word but some journalists also led the process with an activist attitude and a discourse along the same lines as ours. The issue was powered by the journalists of El Gobierno de la Tarde, transmitted by the radio station that has by far the largest audience. Its anchors are well respected and the programme, which reaches all social sectors alike, became an activist voice on behalf of this process. This allowed for rapid dissemination of our calls for mobilisation. The same happened with several TV programmes; as a result, the process had authentic media leadership.

When we mobilised on 22 January we did not yet have a name, but people soon started calling us Marcha Verde. What happened was unprecedented: never before had so many people mobilised for a nonpartisan cause in our country. We ourselves were amazed at every march as we saw how we had been able to connect with people... At first we thought this would be a modest event. The first goal we set for ourselves was to gather around 6,000 people.

In fact, an estimated **200,000 people** marched on 22 January, in what was considered the largest peaceful march in the history of the Dominican Republic. People's anger about endemic corruption and support for the aims of Marcha Verde were therefore amply demonstrated. As Manuel describes, the protest momentum continued from there:

Once started, the process fed on itself. The first mobilisation success definitely raised the mood. In addition to the usual activists, many people who had never marched in their lives, particularly middle class citizens, marched. And when they arrived at the gathering points they realised they were many. The reality of seeing so many people together fuelled participation. After the first mobilisation the willingness of people to cooperate was overwhelming.

A few weeks later Gallup conducted a survey according to which 92 per cent of the population supported Marcha Verde. At the same time, the government's approval ratings, which were quite high when the process started, began to decrease. Unlike it used to do, the government has not published any poll results lately. With the political opposition still in disarray, Marcha Verde has become the true opposition, despite the fact that we keep insisting that we want all corrupt officials to be punished, whether they served in this administration or in previous ones. Of course, although we do not have favourites, we are putting pressure mostly on the incumbent government because they are basically the ones in a position to respond to our demands.

Protests continued throughout the year, including mass protests outside the National Palace in June, but the movement, Manuel sets out, went beyond this to mobilise people in a range of ways:

We launched a 'Green Book' that people could sign on street corners and town squares throughout the country. We got a massive response:

within a few weeks we collected more than **300,000 signatures**. It was an empowerment process; people committed to keep fighting until we achieved our goals. On 22 February we handed the president a notarised document certifying that 312,415 signatures had been collected, and so we made our request official, and instructed the president to respond no later than his annual accountability address to the nation on 27 February.

And the president did pick up the topic in **his speech**. He assured that he supported the fight against corruption and that all those involved would fall - he literally said that there would be no “sacred cows.” But he insisted that the process would be carried out by the Public Prosecutor’s Office. That is why we rejected the speech and denounced what we viewed as a contradiction between what the president said and what he did.

The petition process was successful because it helped to grow the organisation, which expanded through the establishment of ‘green nodes’ in various municipalities. Thus the movement grew out of the capital city and gained roots in every locality. Regional and sub-regional marches started taking place. Each of these marches became the biggest mobilisation event to have taken place in these localities’ history.

We then focused on an action called ‘**Green Neighbourhoods**’, aimed at bringing the struggle for the end of impunity to the poorest sections of the population, which are the most affected by the appropriation of public funds, the payment of bribes and the overpricing of public works. This is an educational and mobilisation campaign that we run in the poorest neighbourhoods, in the course of which we distribute flyers and talk to residents in order to show them what the relationship is between corruption and the lack of services that they experience.



Mobilisations continued in the Dominican Republic throughout the year

Credit: Getty Images

The pressure could be seen to have resulted in some successes, although the movement continues to demand more, as Manuel indicates:

*In mid-May the Attorney General's Office received documentation from Brazil regarding the bribes paid by Odebrecht in our country, and shortly afterwards **arrest warrants** were issued and executed against 14 high-profile politicians, officials and former officials.*

However, although the investigations showed that the largest amounts in bribes had been paid after 2012, when the present administration came to power, most of the offenders arrested were former officials who had served under previous administrations. The Punta Catalina power plant was left out of the investigation. Also excluded from the investigation were the crimes of illegal funding of political campaigns, and public works overpricing. So the government is obviously hiding part of the truth. They are excluding from the investigation the most controversial projects, the most compromising issues, and the people with the closest ties to the president; instead, they are only investigating those they find it impossible to exonerate because of the amount of evidence against them.

As a result, our position was to treat the arrests as a victory brought about by citizen pressure, but also as not good enough. An additional demand has been added to our list: we want a clean-up of the judiciary. We have specifically singled out judges who have shown to be complicit with impunity and demanded that they do not intervene in the Odebrecht case. In the course of the process, in combination with our main tactic - street mobilisation - we have also filed a number of lawsuits. For now they have not progressed much, but we think that we will eventually see some gains in the judicial terrain as well. Not all those who are guilty will be punished, but still many more will fall.

While the vision is therefore one of hope that the Dominican Republic can see a decisive break with its history of corruption and impunity, many challenges remain. In **June**, Hero Pérez, a community leader closely associated with Marcha Verde, reported that his car was attacked and forced off the road. That same month, transgender activist Jessica Rubi Mori was murdered. The following month, **Vladimir Lantigua Baldera**, a leader of the Frente Amplio de Lucha Popular movement, was shot dead while participating in an anti-corruption strike; the group blamed the police. But in the face of profound challenges, Manuel concludes, there is pride and optimism to be derived from the historic mobilisation the country has seen:

An unprecedented citizen reaction has taken place. The Dominican Republic usually lags behind in this respect, but this time we are taking the lead. This fills us with pride and satisfaction.