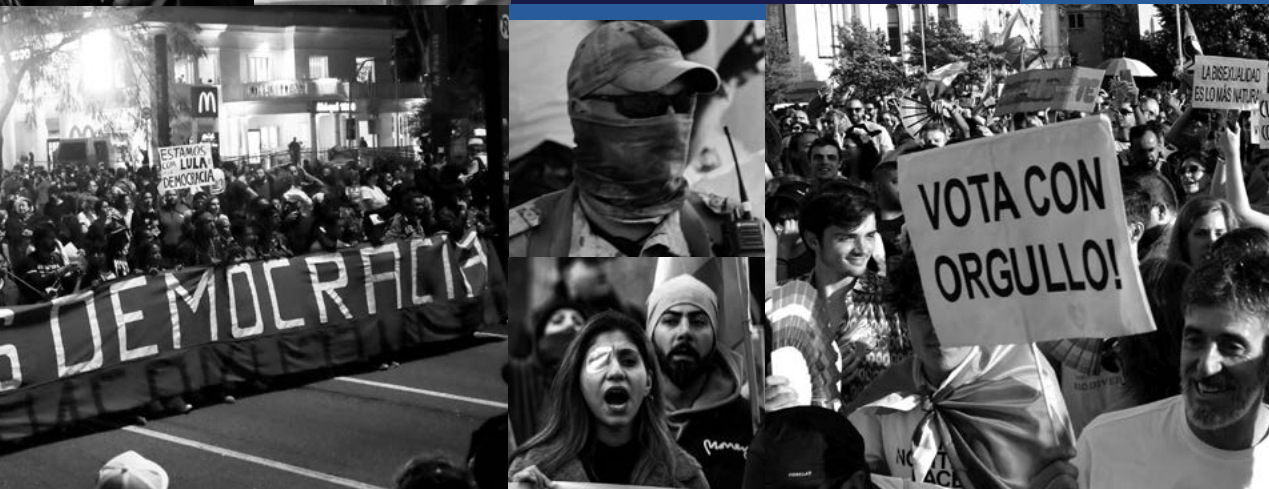


## DEMOCRACY: CONTESTED TERRITORY





People taking part in the Pride march in Madrid, Spain on 1 July call on voters to 'vote with pride' to protect their rights from the far right.

Photo by Juan Carlos Rojas/picture alliance via Getty Images

Democracy is in decline, with the year's multiple conflicts and crises exacerbating a multi-year regressive trend. In several countries in Africa, Europe and the Middle East, conflicts made prospects of democratic change more distant ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

In war-torn Sudan, hopes for democracy, repeatedly denied since the 2019 overthrow of dictator Omar al-Bashir, receded further as elections announced for July 2023 were made impossible by the civil war between the military and militia that erupted last April.

Russia's sustained assault on Ukraine has brought intensified repression of domestic dissent, and a non-competitive election will approve another term for Vladimir Putin in March 2024. In Ukraine in contrast, civil society is playing vital humanitarian and accountability roles, but elections due in 2024 are likely to be deemed impossible under martial law, amid security concerns and with many people displaced or in occupied territory.

The ineffectiveness of civilian governments in dealing with jihadist insurgencies was the justification used by military leaders to take or retain power in Central and West Africa. As a consequence, coups are in danger of becoming normalised in some regions, after decades in which they appeared a thing of the past. A 'coup belt' now stretches coast to coast in Africa. None of the states that fell victim to military rule in recent years returned to civilian government in 2023, and two more – Gabon and Niger – joined their ranks. People continue to live with violence and instability in these countries.

A security threat of a different kind – gang violence – has prompted El Salvador's slide towards populist authoritarianism. Violence linked to drug trafficking could lead Ecuador down a similar path.

Global advances in democratisation achieved over more than three decades have been **wiped out** in recent years. In 2023, no authoritarian state became a democracy, and while some



ALMOST 3 OUT OF 4 PEOPLE LIVE IN  
AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES



ONLY 2.1% OF PEOPLE LIVE IN  
COUNTRIES WITH OPEN CIVIC SPACE



2 FURTHER COUNTRIES HAD MILITARY  
COUPS



10 AUTHORITARIAN STATES ACCOUNT  
FOR 80% OF TRANSNATIONAL  
REPRESSION OF ACTIVISM



MORE THAN 50% OF THE WORLD'S  
POPULATION CAN VOTE IN 2024

countries made marginal improvements in the quality of their democracies – by improving civic space, making inroads on corruption or strengthening institutions – many more experienced declines, often with serious setbacks. Regressive trends are coming in every global region, but declines are particularly marked in Central and West Africa, Central America and the Middle East. Success stories are scarce.

Authoritarian regimes that experienced mass protest movements in recent years, including Iran, Nicaragua and Venezuela, regained their footing and hardened their grip. In states long characterised by autocratic rule, many civil society activists, journalists and

political dissidents have sought safety in exile to continue their work. But they often didn't find it, as regressive states – with China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Egypt and Russia the worst five abusers – increasingly using transnational repression against them.

Too many of the numerous elections that took place in 2023 – a preview of 2024's bumper election year, when roughly half the world's population has a chance to vote – were nowhere close to being reasonably free and fair.

Several non-democratic states of various kinds – including Cambodia, the Central African Republic, Cuba, Eswatini, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe – held elections in which the autocratic power was never in question. Voting was ceremonial, its purpose to add a veneer of legitimacy.

Many more countries with systems that combine democratic and authoritarian traits were home to elections with less predetermined results, where there was at least some chance of the ruling party being defeated. But incumbent advantage reflected in the fact that change rarely materialised, as seen in Nigeria, Paraguay, Sierra Leone and Turkey. The outlier was Maldives, where voters have a history of rejecting sitting presidents.

Some such regimes, notably El Salvador, experienced further **democratic backsliding** through the erosion of freedoms and institutional checks and balances – a road typically travelled by populist authoritarians who claim to speak in the name of the people and insist they need to concentrate power to deal with crises.

In contexts where democratically elected leaders disregarded constitutional rules and sought to override checks and balances, on top of its usual roles of educating voters and watching over



the integrity of elections, civil society took to the streets in protest. This was seen **throughout 2023** in Mexico.

“ Civil society’s reaction to defend against institutional erosion and the deterioration of the separation of powers was recently seen on the streets when many people mobilised in Mexico City and other cities in the ‘March for Democracy’. People mobilised against the government’s attacks on the National Electoral Institute, in defence of the independence of the judiciary and autonomous bodies and against the president’s undue influence on the electoral competition and his polarising attitudes.



CARLOS G GUERRERO OROZCO  
Human Rights and Strategic Litigation-Mexico

In Europe and the Americas, troubling results came from several free and fair elections, including in countries where democratic principles and fundamental civic freedoms are historically strongly respected. When given a real choice, voters often rejected incumbents and an array of mainstream parties and politicians. They expressed disappointment with what democracy has offered them so far. At a time of high inflation, they were willing to embrace ideas that packaged themselves as new, radical and anti-elite.

Far-right political entrepreneurs have proved adept at manipulating anxieties and vulnerabilities. In 2023, they intensified their scapegoating of migrants and backlash to the increased visibility of demands for women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights. Right-wing populists took control of Argentina, came first in elections in the Netherlands and Switzerland and entered government in Finland. But the regressive threat failed to make a breakthrough in Spain, while in Poland, the desire of many voters to turf out incumbents saw the right-wing nationalist ruling party replaced by a broad progressive coalition.

But in many cases, the far right was able to win even when it lost, its ideas increasingly embraced by mainstream parties, ostensibly to keep it at bay. It’s expected to make big gains in the European Parliament elections in June 2024.

The biggest election cycle in decades has begun. 2024’s elections are already showing themselves to be testing grounds for evolving AI-enabled tactics offering unprecedented levels of manipulation. The year’s first vote, in Bangladesh on 7 January, offered a troubling beginning. An election packed with incumbency biases and lacking real competition, and rife with **AI-generated disinformation**, turned Bangladesh into a de facto one-party state.

But the other side of the coin was on display soon after, when in the face of China’s concerted attempts to derail the vote, including through cyberattacks, **Taiwan** held a free and fair election characterised by a vibrant, highly active campaign. In troubling times for democracy, Taiwan continued to show the region – and the world – that democratic elections and open civic space are possible.

## MILITARY RULE NORMALISED

Military rule risks increasingly becoming the regional norm in Central and West Africa, with two countries – Gabon and Niger – joining the ranks of military dictatorships in 2023, and unsuccessful coup attempts in two more, **Guinea-Bissau** and **Sierra Leone**.

On 26 August, Gabon went through the motions of a general election. Official results were announced four days later, in the middle of the night, with the country under curfew and amid an internet shutdown. Incumbent President Ali Bongo, in power



People celebrate the end of Ali Bongo's dictatorship in Libreville, Gabon on 30 August 2023

since the death of his father and predecessor in 2009, was duly handed a third term. Fraud allegations were rife, as in previous elections. But this time something unprecedented happened: under an hour later the military had taken over, and the Bongo family's 56-year reign was history.

People took to the streets to celebrate the end of over half a century of dynastic rule. Gabonese civil society, long the victim of repression, expressed its **relief**. But the enthusiasm can't last: overturning an oppressive regime isn't the same as achieving democratic freedom. It's rare for a military takeover to be followed by the rapid establishment of free institutions. Most often new authoritarian regimes emerge, bringing even higher levels of state-sanctioned violence and human rights abuses.

Niger's and Gabon's were the seventh and eighth successful military coups in Central and West Africa over the past five years, and the seventh in Francophone Africa. Two took place in **Mali** in 2020 and 2021, and two in **Burkina Faso** in 2022. Coups also were staged in **Chad, Guinea** and **Sudan** in 2021.

In Niger, as previously in Burkina Faso and Mali, the ostensible motivation of coup leaders was the failure of civilian governments to tackle jihadist insurgency. They capitalised on the despair of people forced to live with violence and angry at the ineffectual military presence of the former colonial power, France. Many supported coups in the hope the military, already shifting its international alliances towards Russia, would do a better job of combatting insurgency – although there's little evidence to back that ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

In none of these countries have the military retreated to the barracks after implementing the supposedly temporary measures they promised. Sudan's junta is the most notorious for backtracking on agreement after agreement to bring about a democratic transition before the outbreak of war, but it's no exception: it's common for the military to set themselves long-term goals that flatly contradict promises of short-term transition.

■ In Niger, the junta has set itself a number of long-term objectives and, although it hasn't yet given any indication of how long it intends to stay in power, it doesn't appear to be planning to leave in the near future.



CLÉMENT KOCOUE GBEDEY  
West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

In all the army-controlled countries, juntas have deepened repression. Military authorities have targeted independent media and critical journalists with threats, intimidation and arrests,

and shut down some media outlets and banned broadcasts by others. They've shut down the internet and limited access to websites and social media platforms. In Burkina Faso, the junta has increasingly **abducted** activists, including Rasmané Zinaba and Bassirou Badjo of the grassroots civil society group Balai Citoyen. In February 2024, several armed assailants in civilian clothes took Zinaba from his home in Ouagadougou, the capital. Men in plainclothes claiming to be government security officers abducted Badjo from a government office the next day.

Following the 2021 military coup, conditions for the media and journalists have deteriorated sharply. Several journalists and commentators have been imprisoned for expressing opinions considered to be offences against the state. The High Authority for Communications suspended numerous media outlets. At a time when the media and journalists most need to organise and work together to protect themselves, it's becoming increasingly difficult for them to do so. Pressure on dissenting voices and threats of repression limit their ability to come together and act collectively to defend their rights.



NAFISSATOU MAIGA  
Women and Initiatives for Development, Mali

Rule by junta has entered its fourth year in Myanmar, and it's proved a particularly bloody experience. People rejected the takeover by taking to the streets in protest and embracing civil disobedience, while longstanding ethnic militia groups joined the ousted government to mount armed resistance.

In the face of an underwhelming regional and international response to the army's many atrocities, Myanmar's civil society joined together to develop a **five-point agenda** that includes calls for a strategy to end military violence through sanctions, an arms

embargo and a referral of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court. The plan also urges the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the key regional body, to consult beyond the junta, and particularly with civil society and other democratic forces including the continuing democratic government in exile. But so far the international community and states in the region don't seem to want to listen to civil society.



#### READ MORE

- NIGER COUP: A FURTHER BLOW FOR DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA
- GABON: THE END OF A DICTATORSHIP... AND THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER?
- SUDAN: THERE'S NO DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CIVIL SOCIETY
- MYANMAR: MILITARY JUNTA GETS A FREE PASS

## AUTHORITARIANISM CONSOLIDATED

Several authoritarian regimes strengthened their grip in 2023, regaining their control following protests or other forms of activism challenging their power. This could be seen with Iran's theocracy, Bahrain's monarchy and Nicaragua's and Venezuela's left-wing dictatorships.

But no matter how bloody the regime or how closed the civic space, civil society kept resisting, even if in subdued and covert ways or by moving operations abroad.

In Iran, 16 September marked a year since the start of a wave of mass protests against the theocratic regime, triggered by the morality police's killing of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, due to

alleged infractions of the strict dress code women are forced to adopt ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. The widespread protests represented an existential threat to the regime, reflected in the brutality of its repressive response.

Iranians are less scared of the consequences of their activism. They dare to take action against the regime. The voice of protest is louder and the severity of the crackdown only shows how scared of the protest movement the regime is. The regime understands it won't be easy to shut down this protest movement, which threatens the legitimacy and therefore the existence of the regime.



**SOHRAB RAZAGHI**  
Volunteer Activists

The regime killed hundreds, injured thousands and arrested tens of thousands. It subjected many in detention to torture, sexual abuse and denial of medical treatment. It weaponised the criminal justice system against them, holding express trials behind closed doors in '**revolutionary courts**' presided over by clerics, with zero procedural guarantees. It sentenced hundreds of activists, protesters and journalists to years in jail and handed out several death sentences, with at least **seven executions** carried out by May 2023. According to the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Iran, Javād Rehmān, some of the regime's human rights violations could constitute crimes against humanity under international law.

Protest has had to become subtler, but hasn't gone away, focusing on small daily acts of disobedience, including subtle defiance of hair, dress and behaviour codes. Rejection of the regime was also communicated through a **record low turnout** in a February 2024 election engineered to keep the hardliners in control. Open activism, however, can only continue in exile.

Repression by the regime of the Islamic Republic has escalated with executions of protesters, aimed at creating fear to suppress any attempt at new mobilisations. But the struggle continues under the surface. Although the Islamic Republic and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps severely suppress any attempt at a protest, people continue embracing civil resistance despite potentially serious costs.



**ASAL ABASIAN**  
Iranian journalist and queer feminist activist in exile

In Bahrain, a Gulf monarchy home to mass democracy protests in 2011, the consequences of the severe **crackdown** that followed are visible to this day. Many of those arrested in the aftermath of the protests remain behind bars. According to **estimates** from the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, over the past decade the government has arrested almost 15,000 people for their political views, and between 1,200 and 1,400 are currently behind bars.

Just as petrostates such as the United Arab Emirates and Azerbaijan have sought to launder their reputations by hosting global climate summits, Bahrain, a country with a rubber stamp parliament and no semblance of democracy, was home to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global assembly in March 2023. Its autocratic government tried to boost its international standing by projecting a false image of a democratic moderniser. But civil society took advantage too, shining the international spotlight on Bahrain's systematic violations of civic freedoms and human rights and calling for it to release political prisoners. Visiting parliamentary delegations from several democratic states loudly **echoed** these demands, derailing the regime's plan to project a positive image.

A few months later, Bahrain's biggest protest in years emerged from the catacombs of its repressive system, when hundreds





A girl holds up a sign with a photo of jailed human rights defender Abdulhadi al-Khawaja at a protest in the village of Jannusan, Bahrain on 5 September 2014.

Photo by Mohammed Al-Shaikh/AFP via Getty Images.

of political prisoners started a hunger strike to demand improvements in inhumane prison conditions. As many times before, their families **took to the streets** to call for their release, and international civil society backed their demands.

But not for the first time, ostensibly pro-democratic states have continued to put their stability and security concerns first. Bahrain is a strategic ally of the USA. It hosts the headquarters of the US Naval Forces Central Command and its navy’s Fifth Fleet. This means the US government chooses not to see in Bahrain the human rights violations it condemns when they happen in non-allied states.

Still against the odds, activists in Bahrain and in exile continue to work together to open cracks in the system to push for democratisation.

■ Bahrain has closed civic space. We can’t exercise our right to peaceful assembly, let alone openly campaign for freedoms of association and expression, the release of prisoners unfairly tried and imprisoned or a moratorium on the death penalty. Yet engaging in civic activism isn’t totally impossible. We engage with allies and like-minded activists as well as the few civil society organisations that openly but cautiously raise human rights concerns so that the wider Bahraini society hears our message. We’re a catalyst: we help Bahraini activists access platforms to reach domestic and international audiences.



JAWAD FAIROOZ  
Salam for Democracy and Human Rights

In both Nicaragua and Venezuela, democratic regression and the repression of civic space accelerated when governments faced a spike in dissent.

In Nicaragua, this happened in April 2018, when President Daniel Ortega announced changes to the social security system that triggered a wave of protests. The plan was soon withdrawn, but multiple discontents converged on the streets and weren’t deterred by state forces and armed pro-government groups offering their usual show of power. As images of repression spread on social media, more people joined protests. In response, the state stepped up its violence, killing **hundreds**. It imprisoned many more on terrorism and organised crime charges, among other serious offences. Over 150,000 Nicaraguans fled to exile, mainly to neighbouring Costa Rica.



In the years since, the increasingly authoritarian regime has dismantled civic space, reinforced the legal architecture of repression, criminalised any expression of dissent, jailed its critics and eliminated all traces of political competition. In a show of power, in February 2023 Ortega unexpectedly **ordered the release** of 222 political prisoners, putting them on a charter flight to the USA and stripping them of their citizenship and civil and political rights under accusations of anti-national mercenaryism and treason.

In Venezuela, too, the turning point towards autocracy was a street challenge to government power. The wave of protests began in March 2017, in rejection of the government-controlled Supreme Court's decision to strip the opposition-majority National Assembly of its powers. Demonstrations demanding the restoration of constitutional order went on for two months, intensifying in the face of a presidential decree calling for a National Constituent Assembly as an alternative to the elected parliament.

State forces caused dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries in repressing protests, and arrested close to 2,000, detaining hundreds for long afterwards. In jail, authorities reportedly tortured and ill-treated people, and the state committed numerous violations of due process guarantees, including prosecuting civilians under military jurisdiction. It also unleashed numerous attacks and arbitrary arrests of journalists, along with media censorship. Ongoing repression and economic collapse have caused people to leave Venezuela in unprecedented numbers ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

As presidential elections scheduled for 2024 have approached, the government further restricted rights and freedoms. A frontal attack on civic space came in early 2023 in the form of a draft

**NGO law** aimed at further controlling, restricting and potentially shutting down noncompliant civil society organisations (CSOs) and prosecuting their leaders and staff. Domestic and international CSOs emphatically **rejected** the bill, pointing out the government's aim of subordinating civil society to its interests.

Although the draft law may appear to target only human rights organisations, its impacts will be much broader, as it aims to take control of the entire associational fabric. All organisational forms, including political parties and education and academic organisations, are potential targets. Victims of human rights violations could lose all legal support. People affected by Venezuela's humanitarian emergency could lose access to civil society humanitarian programmes, which could be replaced by government programmes with restrictive access conditions.



**RIGOBERTO LOBO PUENTES**  
Promotion, Education and Defence of Human Rights (PROMEDEHUM), Venezuela

Then in response to the opposition's strategy to promote a joint candidacy to face President Nicolás Maduro in the election, the government's puppet judiciary **disqualified** opposition leader María Corina Machado and **declared** the primaries that chose her null and void. Faced with pressure to hold free elections he'd likely lose, Maduro also sought to **capitalise on nationalist fervour** by reigniting a territorial dispute with neighbouring Guyana.

As a result of the growing restrictions, the CIVICUS Monitor **downgraded** Venezuela's civic space rating from repressed to closed in December 2023.

Civil society has good reason to fear the 2024 elections will be a simulation – but one the international community may be willing

to take at face value, consequently reducing its solidarity with Venezuela's beleaguered civil society.

Venezuela's ruling movement is forced to hold elections, not least because it needs a certain degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. But Maduro is unwilling to organise an election he might lose, so he'll go to great lengths to divide and discourage the opposition vote. A negative message we're receiving is that the 2024 elections, regardless of how they are organised, will be a milestone for normalising relations with Venezuela.



RAFAEL UZCÁTEGUI  
Venezuelan Programme for Human Rights Education Action



#### READ MORE

- IRAN: ONE YEAR ON, WHAT'S CHANGED?
- IRAN, BACK TO THE GRIM NORMAL
- BAHRAIN: A BOTCHED WHITEWASHING ATTEMPT
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- VENEZUELA: THE END OF CIVIL SOCIETY AS WE KNOW IT?

## Exiled activism and transnational repression

In the face of longstanding authoritarian regimes, civil society activists, journalists and political dissidents are often forced to leave to continue their work. Most interviewees from

autocratic countries with highly restricted civic space, including **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burundi, Egypt and Iran**, were in exile, pushing for democracy and human rights from afar. They do so by supporting those who remain, mostly underground, documenting human rights violations and amplifying their voices in international forums.

In the extreme case of **North Korea**, a hermetically closed totalitarian state, CSOs, mostly based in South Korea, dedicate much of their work to supporting North Korean escapees. Exiled activists often face enormous difficulties in working with people back home. In many cases, as in **Hong Kong**, the challenge is that those they're in contact with will likely be arrested if discovered. In some, such as **Eritrea**, there's also the problem of internet restrictions. But even in the most difficult of circumstances, exiled activists persevere.

Members of CSOs who've remained in Belarus are being persecuted. All human rights organisations have already been deprived of registration, so it's impossible for them to work legally inside Belarus. To keep functioning, most human rights CSOs, Viasna included, have been forced to leave Belarus and continue their work from abroad. Almost all meetings and legal consultations with people who've been subjected to repression are now taking place online. The regional branches of our organisation have also only been able to continue working from abroad, collecting information on repression in their regions through local volunteers who put themselves in harm's way every day, as well as through open-source investigation techniques.



ANASTASIYA VASILCHUK  
Viasna, Belarus

Recent exiles have tried to seamlessly continue the work they were doing in Iran, aided by virtual tools. And many more have joined the struggles from a distance, staging protests in cities from Berlin and Paris to Sydney and Toronto.

Others have helped activists in Iran challenge online surveillance and the filtering of online content by the Iranian regime by setting up and paying for virtual private networks (VPNs). These allow users to bypass controls by connecting to a remote server owned by a VPN provider outside the country. They also create secure channels for activists by masking the user's IP address and encrypting personal data.



**ASAL ABASIAN**  
Iranian journalist and queer feminist activist

Being an exile is extremely frustrating because it makes our work less effective. Connecting with people inside Eritrea is very hard as internet penetration in Eritrea is only two per cent. The government basically controls all media: all independent media ceased to exist in 2001. This is why most information is brought to us by people who've recently left the country. But while the work is challenging, it's still possible to get information. And when the government reacts to our work, we know what we do is making an impact.



**HELEN KIDAN**  
Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights



Members of the Iranian diaspora gather in front of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, Germany on 27 January 2024 to protest against executions in Iran.

Photo by Echo Iran/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images.



But activists don't always find safety in exile. Authoritarian states are increasingly guilty of transnational repression. Hong Kong offers a case in point. China's reaction to democracy protests that mobilised in 2019 effectively ended the 'one country, two systems' promise that had enabled people in Hong Kong to access vital civic freedoms long suppressed in mainland China. In the prolonged crackdown that followed, the authorities arrested hundreds under the **National Security Law**, with most denied bail. Several democracy activists were subjected to multiple trials and handed long sentences. Exile was the only way others avoided this fate.

But Hong Kong's police then started issuing international arrest warrants against high-profile exiled activists. Among them was Nathan Law, the former student leader active in the 2014 Umbrella Movement who founded a pro-democracy party and became his country's youngest-ever legislator. The targeted exiles are in Australia, the UK and the USA, all countries that suspended their extradition agreements with Hong Kong in the wake of the National Security Law, meaning China can't use channels it traditionally abuses, such as **Interpol's red notice system**.

Hong Kong has placed bounties on their heads, and chillingly, Hong Kong's leader, John Lee, **said** the activists would be pursued for life, under accusations of colluding with foreign governments, including by calling for sanctions, and other charges under the National Security Law. The state is exerting additional pressure by intimidating their families at home.

This is far from the only way China internationalises its repression. In 2022 it was revealed that China maintained a network of over 100 secret '**police stations**' in 53 countries – including those where Hong Kong's targeted activists live – that are used to intimidate exiles and in some cases capture and

return them to China. In April 2023, US authorities **charged** over 40 Chinese operatives with 'transnational repression' against US-based Chinese nationals, including for operating a secret police station in New York.

It's important to keep speaking up for people in Hong Kong and human rights defenders in exile. For example, recently the Hong Kong national security police issued five arrest warrants offering HK\$1 million (approx. US\$ 128,000) bounties for exiled pro-democracy Hong Kong activists based in the UK and USA. We strongly condemn this illegal attack against our friends and colleagues. We urge governments to take a stand and protect Hong Kong human rights defenders within their jurisdictions.



ANOUK WEAR  
Hong Kong Watch

China is also using its economic influence in Southeast Asia to get local authorities to arrest and deport dissidents, activists, journalists and human rights lawyers. A recent target was human rights lawyer **Lu Siwei**, arrested in Laos on his way to Thailand, where he meant to take a flight to the USA to reunite with his wife and daughter.

Where it has less direct influence, as in the USA, the Chinese state still has means to harass its citizens. Recently a **Chinese student** in Washington DC was harassed by China's state security police for his democracy activism while his family members in China were hauled in for police questioning and released with a warning. Chinese students abroad are also pressured to self-censor for fear of being reported by fellow students from their country, with Chinese students' associations encouraging them to keep an eye on each other.

China is far from the only transnational repressor. According to a **Freedom House** report analysing eight years of data from 2014 to 2022, the top five perpetrators are China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Egypt and Russia, followed by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Belarus and Rwanda. These 10 account for 80 per cent of recorded cases.

Exiled activists based in Europe or Canada are relatively safe, whereas those in Rwanda may encounter additional pressure. The Burundian government has taken advantage of recently improved relations with Rwanda and pressured the host country to silence exiled Burundian journalists or hand them over. The Rwandan government gave some of these journalists an ultimatum to either remain silent or leave, forcing some to halt operations from Rwanda and relocate again. Some of these journalists were among a broader group, including other human rights defenders, who were tried and sentenced in absentia.



**CARINA TERTSAKIAN**  
Burundi Human Rights Initiative

Activists who work from abroad are being targeted through their families. For example, the Egyptian-American human rights advocate Mohamed Soltan, who filed a case against former prime minister Hazem el-Beblawi, saw his five family members harassed and arrested as a result of his activism. The father of Belgium-based journalist and human rights advocate Ahmed Gamal Ziada has recently been detained and accused of misuse of communication, spreading false news and joining a banned group. This strategy aims to silence activists and impose an even higher personal cost for doing their work.



**AHMED ATTALLA**  
Egyptian Front for Human Rights



Exiled Belarusians march in Warsaw, Poland on 9 August 2023, the day of the third anniversary of presidential election stolen by dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

When you continue working in exile, you sacrifice a lot as a person and as a family. There've been many cases of activists who've had members of their extended family arbitrarily detained. They've been harassed and thrown in jail. For example, a mother of an exiled journalist receives regular visits by security forces at midnight or in early morning, inquiring about her son's journalistic activities. The family has no part in the person's professional work, yet they're harassed because of it. My family shouldn't be punished even if I've committed a crime. Activists pay a high price to continue their work.



**ZAMAN ASHRAF**  
Bangladeshi human rights defender

**Exiled Iranian activists** in multiple European countries have experienced hacking, cyberattacks and online harassment, death threats, surveillance and intimidation, with Iranian security agents apparently behind these. Two activists in different countries reported having car tyres slashed, and several described being followed home from meetings by suspicious men.

**Belarus** authorities recently found a new weapon to use against exiles, barring them from renewing their passports and other essential documents outside Belarus. The aim is to force them home to face certain detention. **Myanmar's** junta has started voiding the passports of nationals living in Singapore, making it impossible for them to travel internationally.

Some don't shy away from murder. **Bounsuan Kitiyano**, a member of Thailand-based Free Lao, a network of migrant workers and activists from Laos, was found dead in a Thailand border town in May. He'd participated in human rights meetings and peaceful protests at the Laos Embassy in Bangkok. In August, Algerian journalist and opposition activist **Abdou Semmar** survived an assassination attempt in Paris, where he's lived in exile since 2019.

**Thailand**, home to thousands of exiled Burmese, Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese activists, is no longer a safe haven. Its authorities are increasingly collaborating with their counterparts in the region or allowing their intelligence agencies to operate on their soil.

**Duong Van Thai**, a prominent Vietnamese blogger and YouTuber seeking asylum, was abducted by Vietnamese intelligence agents in Thailand and forcibly returned home last April. Cambodian activist **Thol Samnang** of the banned Candlelight Party was arrested by Thai authorities as he arrived in the country seeking

asylum in July. In December, Thai police also arrested Vietnamese human rights activist **Lù A Da**, two weeks after he publicly denounced the Vietnamese government's systematic repression of Indigenous Hmong people.

Freelance Pakistani journalist **Syed Fawad Ali Shah** also had his exile cut short. In March 2023, he was found to have been jailed in Pakistan several months after going missing in Malaysia, where he'd lived for 13 years. He reported being abducted by Malaysian immigration officials in a joint operation with Pakistani intelligence services and deported before spending six months in clandestine detention. Syed was eventually handed over to the Federal Investigation Agency's cybercrime wing, which slapped him with several bogus charges before granting him temporary bail, keeping him constantly afraid of being returned to jail.

■ I'm unable to sleep due to fear. Every time there is a knock at the door I panic. I urge organisations working for the rights of refugees and journalists around the world, as well as the heads of all states that have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, to provide me with protection and immediately relocate me to a safe country under special circumstances. I also urge the leaders of democratic states to put pressure on the Pakistani government regarding my situation and provide me with a way to leave the country safely.



**SYED FAWAD ALI SHAH**  
Pakistani writer and journalist

Against attempts by their repressive governments to infiltrate them, exiled activists and organisations form tight networks of support and equip themselves to respond to threats. They adopt digital security measures and self-protection strategies and work to report violations when the UN Human Rights Council examines their countries' human rights records.



But they need much more **support** from host governments and the broader international community, including credible warnings against those operating illegally on foreign soil, greater respect for the right to seek asylum, enhanced protections for activists at risk and a more nuanced approach to extradition requests and Interpol notices issued by states known to engage in transnational repression.



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- HONG KONG'S LIGHTS OF FREEDOM EXTINGUISHED
- HONG KONG GOES AFTER ITS EXILES

## Authoritarian elections

In 2023, several authoritarian governments held elections in which their power was never in question. These elections served a legitimising purpose, domestically and internationally, for repressive regimes seeking to pretend they're democracies. In some cases, they also enabled dictators to co-opt and mobilise supporters and demoralise opposition.

In these contexts states invariably denied civil society its proper roles, such as voter education and monitoring electoral conduct and vote counting. In some cases the authorities banned all forms of observation, including by international missions, while in others, they allowed limited access, expecting enhanced credibility to result. Civil society continued to denounce fake elections and demanded the international community stop lending authoritarian regimes legitimacy and instead support embattled civil society activists and journalists.

The uncertainty of a democratic election was absent in Cuba last March, when people were summoned to appoint members of the National Assembly of People's Power. Cuba is a one-party regime in which the Communist Party of Cuba is indistinguishable from the state, so people weren't able to choose their representatives. Their only option was to **ratify** the people the party selected to stand.

People could abstain, but at their peril. In this communist republic where the government claims to represent the interests of the people, citizens are expected not just to acquiesce but to show active support, preferably accompanied by public displays of enthusiasm. Political opposition and democracy activists promoted abstention, with social media campaigns mobilising around hashtags such as #YoNoVoto (#IDoNotVote) and #EnDictaduraNoSeVota (#NoVotinginDictatorship). The government spared no propaganda effort to prevent a repeat of high abstention rates seen in 2022 municipal elections: it made heavy use of social media, stuck posters with its own counter-hashtags on city walls, sent its candidates on tour, distributed merchandising and organised cultural and sporting events and commercial fairs.

In July, Cambodia held parliamentary elections without competition, led by one of the world's **longest-ruling** autocrats, Prime Minister Hun Sen. This former military commander had ruled since 1985, presiding over a de facto one-party system – which has now become a dynasty.

With the only credible opposition party banned on a technicality, the ruling party claimed over 80 per cent of the vote and almost all parliamentary seats. One of these was taken by Hun Sen's eldest son, Hun Manet, who was quickly announced as the next prime minister. The electoral farce, held amid a years-long crackdown on dissent, served the purpose of engineering family succession.

In August, Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa of the ZANU-PF party, in power since independence, had another term confirmed through an election in which he used every trick in the book to ensure a favourable result. The authorities banned opposition rallies, jailed key opposition politicians and detained opposition activists, while ZANU-PF supporters unleashed threats, intimidation and political violence.

Ahead of the election, the government introduced new laws that further restricted civic space. The Patriotic Act, which came into force in July, created a new crime of 'wilfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe'. Intentionally broad and vague, the government could use this to criminalise pretty much anyone who disagrees with it.

Another law, the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill, sailed through the ZANU-PF-dominated parliament in February. Under **the guise** of complying with international anti-money laundering standards, it **extended** the state's powers over civil society groups, enabling it to place them under surveillance, take them over and close them down.

“ We were expecting both a democratic and an economic breakthrough after years of dictatorship and economic stagnation. But we were disappointed. Civil society tried to engage with the electoral process and play a monitoring role but was criminalised. In the run-up to the election we also did a lot of voter education. We managed to generate excitement among voters, but on voting day they were frustrated. This was a sham, not an election. It was a circus and a waste of resources that subverted the will of the people and illegally kept the incumbent in power.



OBERT MASARAURE  
Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition



In September it was the turn of Eswatini, ruled by Africa's last absolute monarch, King Mswati III. An election without parties was held for the House of Assembly, the country's parliament, which has a mostly advisory role. The king continues to pull all the strings, and his promises to hold a dialogue following mass democracy protests in 2021 remain unfulfilled. Nobody has been held to account for lethal security force violence, and politicians who broke ranks to call for reform were found guilty on absurd charges by a judiciary the king controls. In the clearest indication nothing was to be expected of the election, human rights lawyer **Thulani Maseko**, a leader of Eswatini's democracy movement and a public thorn in Mswati's side, was shot dead in January 2023.

As the year neared its end, **deeply flawed elections** were held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, amid a surge of rebel violence and as UN peacekeeping forces began to withdraw after more than two decades in the country, on the request of President Félix Tshisekedi. Following a vote marred

with irregularities, Tshisekedi was recorded as winning an unprecedented 73.5 per cent support, contrasting sharply with pre-election polls. The electoral commission found numerous irregularities in parliamentary and municipal elections held at the same time and with the same ballot papers, but claimed to uncover none with the presidential vote. Civil society mobilised to try to ensure a fair vote – but to no avail.

“ The presidential election was held to show the world that the government conducted it within the constitutional deadline, but it was marred by fraud and irregularities. In the run-up to the election, we launched awareness campaigns to promote a peaceful vote. We trained civil society groups and journalists in election observation and media coverage. We observed the polls and contributed to the resulting civil society report. However, this report wasn’t taken into account by the relevant bodies.



**JONATHAN MAGOMA**  
Congolese human rights activist

As well as ceremonial or fraudulent elections, some presidents held staged referendums to prolong their stay in power, as, seen in the solidly authoritarian Central African Republic (CAR) and Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, an April 2023 referendum approved a package of constitutional changes, extending presidential terms and resetting the two-term limit to allow President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to hold office until 2040. There was never any question about the vote’s outcome: with dissent tightly controlled in closed civic space conditions, there was no prospect of genuine debate, a campaign against, or a no vote. The referendum’s reported turnout and voting totals were at around the same levels as for non-competitive presidential elections held two years before: according to official figures, 90-plus per cent endorsed the changes on a turnout of almost 85 per cent.

Given the state’s total control, voting figures can’t be trusted. Despite lack of access for independent civil society and media observers, forced voting was reported. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers **pointed out** that conditions lacked competition, with an entirely one-sided campaign that mobilised all the state’s power in support and provided no opportunity to express dissent.

Similar constitutional changes were introduced through a referendum in the CAR, allowing President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, about to finish what should have been his second and final term, to stay in power for as long as he wishes. The new constitution was developed with minimal consultation and opposition protests were banned during a campaign that offered few opportunities for debate.

President Touadéra knew he could pull this off because he has very powerful friends. The CAR is ground zero for the extensive African involvement of **Russian mercenaries**, believed to be playing some kind of role in at least **18 African countries**

► **GO TO CHAPTER.** Touadéra reached out to Russia shortly after taking power, and received its military instructors and weapons. Mercenaries soon followed, helping keep Touadéra in power in a country where civil war has lasted over a decade.



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## HYBRID REGIMES OFFER A MIXED PICTURE

In much of the world in 2023, elections had a less straightforward meaning than in either fully democratic states, where results are fair and respected, or outright authoritarian regimes, where winners are picked beforehand and people's choices don't matter. In many countries around the world, 2023's elections sat somewhere in between.

Generally speaking, elections in hybrid regimes – which combine democratic and authoritarian characteristics – tend to have substantial irregularities that prevent them being free and fair, but they're not facades.

They may offer some windows of opportunity for political change, but those who seek renewal often struggle to pry those windows open because of heavy restrictions on civic space and the pressures incumbent governments can exert on opposition. Hybrid regimes are often characterised by power imbalances, with disproportionately powerful executives and subordinate judiciaries. As a result, corruption is usually widespread and the rule of law is weak. Civil society faces the struggle of checking the government's power and ensuring elections reflect public opinions.

2023 offered examples from every continent of elections in such contexts failing to live up to democratic standards, dashing hopes for change and preserving status quos. Two Central American countries showed the challenges and opportunities involved. One, El Salvador, is rapidly sliding towards authoritarianism as a result of the hollowing out of democracy by an elected leader. But in the other, Guatemala's civil society helped ensure an unprecedented change that brings hope for the future of the country's democracy.

## Hopes for change dashed

Hopes of change came to nothing in Turkey, where strongarm President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a narrow but decisive runoff in May, defeating a united opposition that aimed to restore democratic standards. The result came after a deeply polarising campaign in which Erdoğan mobilised anti-LGBTQI+ culture war politics and both sides appealed to nationalist, anti-migrant sentiment.

Erdoğan uses language that is completely against human rights and his Justice and Development Party has retained its parliamentary majority by coalescing with an extremist party. The situation will now become dangerous, particularly for women, LGBTQI+ people and Kurdish people.



EREN KESKIN  
Human Rights Association, Turkey

A severely unequal media landscape greatly contributed to Erdoğan's victory. State media and private media owned by business leaders closely connected to the government dominate, and they focused coverage almost entirely on Erdoğan, starving the opposition of airtime. OSCE observers **concluded** that while the election was competitive, the playing field wasn't level, with freedom of expression restrictions and media bias advantaging Erdoğan. Some opposition supporters also experienced harassment and intimidation, with instances of violence, such as rocks thrown, against opposition rallies.



Protesters call on Thailand's senators to respect the result of the 14 May general election in Bangkok, Thailand on 29 July 2023.

The new press law, which was recently introduced by the government under the pretext of 'combatting disinformation', has led to a new period of repression of anyone who expresses a critical stance towards the regime. Lawsuits are filed against us for news and articles published in our print newspaper and on our website. Our website is frequently subjected to access-blocking orders.



**FATIH POLAT**  
Evrensel newspaper, Turkey

It was a similar story in Paraguay. Polls predicted change, but the ruling Colorado Party, which has dominated Paraguayan politics for decades, comfortably won April 2023 elections and even increased its parliamentary representation and share of **provincial governorships**.

The vote was seemingly clean, although the electoral court **rejected** applications for national observer status by two

domestic civil society groups, Alma Cívica and Decidamos. But the campaign saw personal attacks, corruption allegations and anti-rights narratives prevail over informed debate about alternatives. It was also plagued by **disinformation**, including fake opinion polls, conspiracy theories and narratives of electoral fraud, which forced civil society and digital media to undertake intensive fact-checking and disinformation-debunking **efforts**.

The election winners are anti-rights: they define themselves as 'pro-life', they're against equal marriage and sexual and reproductive rights and they attack all issues related to gender rights. I think civil society is in for a very tough few years. Organisations working on rights issues are going to have to make big efforts to join together and take collective action.



**MARTA FERRARA**  
Seeds for Democracy, Paraguay

Incumbent parties also retained power in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In Nigeria, popular dissatisfaction, particularly among young people, resulted in a credible third-party candidate emerging for the first time. However, the ruling All Progressives Congress party saw the threat off in an election with the lowest turnout in the country's democratic history and marred by numerous irregularities. The two main defeated candidates rejected the results. With only 37 per cent of the votes cast, winner Bola Tinubu received a weak mandate.

In Sierra Leone, by comparison, elections produced a clear win for the incumbent president and ruling party. The runner-up **claimed fraud**, as is customary for defeated candidates, but international and civil society observers pointed to inconsistencies in the count and lack of transparency in the election commission's functioning.

Irregularities may however not have been so marked as to affect the outcome, and civil society highlighted significant progress in improving the integrity of elections. But the attempted coup carried out by dissident military officers in November showed that democracy's foundations may still be shaky. The government should expand rather than restrict democratic practices and principles as the safeguard.

Sierra Leone welcomed international election observers who provided an impartial assessment and promoted transparency. Civil society played a crucial role in promoting voter education, monitoring the electoral process and advocating for electoral reforms.



JOHN CAULKER  
Fambul Tok, Sierra Leone

Change was more blatantly thwarted in Thailand, where the party that won the vote was excluded from government. The progressive, youth-led Move Forward party campaigned on a change agenda, promising to limit royal and military power and introduce economic and social reforms. Many found this an appealing package, but military-appointed senators stopped it forming a government. Instead, they backed an uneasy coalition of a party twice deposed by military coups with military-aligned parties. Many who invested in the election process were disappointed at what transpired – but the election revealed an appetite to participate actively to seek renewal that offers some hope.

People not only cast their votes but also participated in the observation process. People understood their participation was important and didn't let public officials report the results all by themselves, without any checks and balances.

A new political culture has emerged and there's no way back – it will remain regardless of the results.



YINGCHEEP ATCHANONT  
Internet Law Reform Dialogue, Thailand

**Maldives** was the outlier in 2023. Its September presidential runoff saw incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed defeated by challenger Mohamed Muizzu. Ahead of the vote, civil society drew attention to an uneven playing field. The Elections Commission lacked independence and the government placed judicial obstacles in the way of opposition parties. Media coverage **resembled** government propaganda and the government made attempts to buy off voters with promises of land.

But still the incumbent lost, the fourth time in a row this has happened. Change at the top signalled a shift in the country's international relations, with the new president closer to China than his pro-India predecessor. The campaign focused on this issue, but too little attention was paid to the fact that neither candidate offered any plan to improve civic space and the quality of democracy or work meaningfully with civil society.



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- MALDIVES ELECTION: WHAT NOW FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?



## Democracy eroded from within

El Salvador offers the clearest Latin American example of the erosion from within that causes the slow death of democracy. The danger signs come when democratically elected, often populist leaders concentrate power by co-opting institutions, curtailing civic freedoms and human rights guarantees and attacking civil society, independent media and political opposition.

El Salvador tilted dangerously towards authoritarianism as its highly popular president, Nayib Bukele, stepped up attacks on democratic checks and balances ahead of a general election held in February 2024.

Bukele won re-election by a landslide, but he shouldn't have been a candidate in the first place. Salvadoran presidents have a one-term limit, but he was able to run for a second term thanks to judicial manoeuvres that violated the constitution. And the vote was far from fair. It was held under an extended state of emergency entailing suspension of freedoms of association and peaceful assembly and due process guarantees.

Under the state of emergency, attacks against journalists have risen and many have been driven into exile. In April, investigative outlet El Faro moved its operations to Costa Rica. The potential for reprisals has driven widespread self-censorship. Senior public officials and social media trolls have systematically vilified critical voices, something that also discourages companies from advertising in independent media, further challenging the financial sustainability of the few remaining sources. President Bukele, in contrast, was able to abuse state media and resources at will during the campaign.

Some CSOs continue to denounce the lack of a free environment for the expression of opinions, but their complaints have had little effect. Freedom of expression has continued to erode. And a country without freedom of expression, where human rights are violated and human rights defenders are persecuted, is nothing short of a dictatorship.



CAROLINA AMAYA  
Salvadoran freelance journalist

Ruling party supporters have spread accusations of gang links against civil society activists, who've also been increasingly criminalised. In November, Salvadoran civil society groups **stated** that this was one of the worst situations since the end of the 1980 to 1992 civil war, due to police harassment, censorship and the closure of channels for dialogue with the government.

But there was no election fraud: most people chose to reward Bukele's seemingly successful 'war on gangs' in the polls because it made them safer, despite its steep human rights costs.

Following the vote, we're officially entering a dictatorship. These days dictatorships are not like those of the 1970s and 1980s. In many cases, such as this, they're not the result of military coups, but of power grabbing by leaders who are initially democratically elected. Tactics have also changed, becoming much more subtle. Our democracy is dying because of the deterioration of civic space.



CÉSAR ARTIGA  
Global Call to Action Against Poverty, El Salvador

Popular authoritarians pose a monumental challenge to democracy. When they're riding high, savouring their policies' success, people may be willing to reward them with overwhelming power. But at some point people want change,

and they'll find it hard to get because the autocratic leader they once supported will have dismantled democratic institutions and put them at the service of perpetuating their power.

Another Latin American country plagued by security problems, Ecuador, held a presidential election in 2023. Ecuador's government institutions are riddled with corruption and have proved ineffective in the face of **organised crime** and the resulting violence.

The reasonably free and fair election took place in a context of rising violence that saw several candidates **assassinated**, including anti-corruption presidential hopeful Fernando Villavicencio. The runoff winner, Daniel Noboa, was elected for a short 18-month term, aimed at completing his predecessor's, which he'd cut short by dissolving congress to avoid impeachment. Insecurity was one of the campaign's key issues, with Noboa offering a strong security focus, emphasising police and military response and the imposition of penalties and punishments.

One and a half years is very little time to tackle violence and insecurity along with other complex problems and Noboa lacks a legislative majority, just like his predecessor. But he's used other tools to assert power. Soon after taking office, Noboa decreed a 'state of internal armed conflict' to allow armed forces to combat drug trafficking gangs by treating them as terrorist targets, and imposed a 60-day curfew. He signed several agreements with the USA, including to grant immunity to US military. He proposed building additional prisons and called a **constitutional referendum**, to be held in April, on issues including extradition, specialised courts and the role of the military in combatting organised crime, along with a popular consultation on amending laws to increase penalties for a variety of serious crimes.



Presidential candidate Christian Zurita of Construye party votes under heavy security in Quito, Ecuador on 20 August 2023.

Photo by Martin Bernetti/AFP via Getty Images.

**A hundred days** into his term, Noboa continued to enjoy approval ratings above 80 per cent.

It's too early to say whether Noboa will go down Bukele's path, but the 'Bukele model' is popular in Ecuador and several of Noboa's early measures resembled Bukele's despite the differences in context. There may be a large degree of electoral calculation in Noboa's decisions so far.

With people increasingly concerned about insecurity, the president responded to the violence triggered by prison riots by declaring a state of emergency and imposing a 60-day curfew. These measures were also possibly intended to boost his popularity and improve his government's rating in view of next year's elections, in which he's expressed his intention to run. The government's position has been echoed by the mainstream media and apparently endorsed by broad segments of public opinion. In the face of this, the political opposition has remained virtually silent.



MAURO CERBINO  
FLACSO Ecuador

## A reason for hope from Guatemala

Guatemala, a hybrid regime whose faint democratic features were all but gone, offered a reason for hope when it went in the opposite direction to its neighbour El Salvador. It was a major civil society victory.

A state co-opted by corrupt self-serving elites, Guatemala held elections on 25 June in a context of great public scepticism. But the unexpected happened: Bernardo Arévalo, a presidential candidate not part of the political class, made the runoff vote as leader of Movimiento Semilla ('Seed Movement'), a new party born out of mass 2015 **anti-corruption protests**. Entrenched elites, which Guatemalans call 'the corrupt pact', orchestrated multiple judicial manoeuvres to try to overturn the results and exclude him from the runoff.

Sustained public protests piled pressure on key institutions to ensure Arévalo could stand in the 20 August runoff, which he won by a landslide. During the protracted hiatus between election and inauguration days, elites continued to try to stop Arévalo being sworn in by any means possible – but people kept up their protests for months and didn't lower their guard until they saw him take office.



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- › EL SALVADOR: A VICTORY FOR POPULAR AUTHORITARIANISM
- › ECUADOR: STAKES HIGH AHEAD OF PRESIDENTIAL RUNOFF
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- › GUATEMALA CLINGS TO DEMOCRATIC PROMISE
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The mere fact that the election took place was a milestone. That the winning candidate had clear democratic and progressive views made it all the more remarkable. Bernardo Arévalo's victory represents society's repudiation of the corrupt political elite. We were at a historic crossroads, between an authoritarian past and a possible future in which we could build a democratic state.

The new government will have to confront one of the continent's most conservative and backward oligarchies, responsible for the crime of genocide. Stripping these groups of their privileges will be no easy task. Continued support and vigilance by the international community will be extremely necessary.



JORGE SANTOS

Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (UDEFEQUA)



People celebrate Bernardo Arévalo's victory in the presidential runoff in Guatemala City on 20 August 2023.

Photo by Luis Acosta/AFP via Getty Images.

## FAR RIGHT'S RISE DRIVES POLARISATION

In 2023, Europe was the epicentre of opportunistic politicians using culture war strategies to profit from polarisation

► **GO TO CHAPTER.** Nationalist and populist forces promoted multiple forms of denial – of climate change, science, systemic racism, gender diversity and the realities of migration – to boost their standing in election after election.

Right-wing nationalists have long been in power in Hungary and, until recently, Poland, and 2022 saw victory for the Brothers of Italy, a party that sprang from the neofascist movement, with its leader Giorgia Meloni becoming **Italy's** prime minister. The Sweden Democrats, once on the political fringes, came second in **Sweden's** 2022 election and the government that resulted depends on its support.

The trend continued in 2023, with far-right parties speaking to and stoking people's anxieties in the face of economic strife and social change, making electoral advances as a result. Everywhere they rose, they brought bad news for excluded groups – migrants and refugees, women, LGBTQI+ people, religious minorities – and the civil society that defends their rights, along with further setbacks for climate action.

Following Finland's April election, the Finns Party took control of seven ministries and placed its anti-migrant rhetoric at the heart of the new government's pledges to slash social welfare funding as part of a package of spending cuts. The change in government was also expected to bring international repercussions due to drastic changes in international development funding priorities– which, as Finland's national civil society platform Fingo **noted**, immediately excluded reproductive rights.



People protest in reaction to the election victory of far-right leader Geert Wilders in Utrecht, the Netherlands on 23 November 2023.

The far-right and Eurosceptic Swiss People's Party (SVP) also dominated the campaign in Switzerland's October election with its anti-immigrant rhetoric. It was rewarded with **28.6 per cent** of the vote and 62 of 200 seats in the National Council, Switzerland's lower parliamentary chamber. Having learned from the experience of others, Swiss civil society sought to convey the need for non-extremist parties to work together and limit the far right's influence on government.



Right-wing populists pose a true threat when other parties meet their demands, a trend already observed in countries such as Germany. It would be a great mistake for conservative parties to respond to the election results by aligning even more closely with the SVP. The SVP must be treated as a radical outsider so it remains a minority – albeit a large one that received 28 per cent of the vote. Swiss liberals must distance themselves from the SVP, which often conceals its populist and extremist nature behind a conservative facade.



LEA SCHLENKER  
Operation Libero, Switzerland

In the Netherlands, maverick far-right populist Geert Wilders came first in the November election. While the long process of government formation is **ongoing**, he could become his country's next prime minister. Any role in government could only mean further attacks on the rights of migrants and religious minorities.

Wilders' key issue, the one that has made him most popular, concerns migrants and asylum seekers. Wilders wants to shut down the asylum system and not let any new asylum seekers into the Netherlands. By doing this, the Netherlands would breach its obligations under international law to provide safe haven for refugees. We're calling of potential coalition partners to stand up for the Netherlands' international reputation.



NIELS HOOGERHEIJDE  
Partos, The Netherlands

A similar kind of regression came in Slovakia, where the September election saw former prime minister Robert Fico make a comeback. A nationalist populist hailing from the supposedly leftist Smer party, Fico was forced to resign in 2018

amid mass anti-corruption protests triggered by the killing of young investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová. Infamous for his virulent attacks on LGBTQI+ rights and vilification of civil society, Fico promised to take a pro-Russia line and reverse support for Ukraine. Following a campaign rife with hate speech and conspiracy theories, he formed a three-party **coalition government** including the left-wing Hlas ('Voice') party and the far-right ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party.

In Austria, which holds parliamentary elections in 2024, and Germany, where regional votes are due in the country's east, **Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)** and **Alternative for Germany (AfD)** are surging in the polls. Strongly anti-immigration and anti-Muslim, these parties are also engaging in culture war issues, particularly on gender rights. From the pandemic onwards, they've increasingly tapped into people's financial anxieties and the legitimate concerns of those left behind, such as farmers mobilised against agriculture subsidy cuts.

In early 2024 it was revealed that in **secret conference** in Germany in November, far-right politicians, business leaders and even some members of mainstream conservative parties – such as the Christian Democratic Union, Angela Merkel's party – discussed 'remigration' plans: the deportation of asylum seekers, foreigners with residence permits and German citizens deemed to be 'unassimilated'. Also present was notorious Austrian far-right activist Martin Sellner.

This was a wake-up call. People took to the streets in protest in numerous German towns and cities, which **inspired Austrians** to protest in Vienna and other cities across the country. Protesters **came** from many walks of life, including civil society groups of various kinds, different political parties, churches and unions, united to resist a far-right resurgence.



Far-right presidential candidate Javier Milei of La Libertad Avanza raises a chainsaw, symbolising his promise to reduce the size of the state, at a rally in Buenos Aires, Argentina on 25 September 2023.

Over the past two decades, western states have invested billions in the global south to foster democracy, facilitate peacebuilding and deter violence that poses a threat to western interests. However, the largest current threat is posed by right-wing extremist movements operating within western countries. This situation requires an urgent shift in approach. Given the internationally networked character of violent far-right groups, our response must also be globally interconnected.



PETER ANHALT AND MAXIMILIAN RUF  
Violence Prevention Network, Germany

Across the world in South America, the far right burst into the Chilean constitution-drafting process in May and a right-wing libertarian won the Argentinean presidency in November.

In Chile, the far right came first in the vote to choose the body tasked with producing a new constitution. The Republican Party, led by defeated presidential candidate José Antonio Kast, came first overall and in 70 per cent of municipalities, gaining veto power over the process. This election came as part of a traditional, closed-doors constitution-making process after a first attempt at replacing the dictatorship-era constitution with a progressive, rights-oriented alternative produced through an inclusive and participatory process, was rejected in a referendum. The new draft was however **rejected** in a December referendum, sending the process back to square one.

In Argentina, polarisation reached a new level in the presidential election runoff, won by right-wing libertarian Javier Milei, a political outsider leading the recently founded far-right party La Libertad Avanza, offering a radical, libertarian ultra-free-market agenda.

Generally speaking, Argentina's democratic institutions work. The elections took place normally and the results were out very quickly. However, we've seen a huge setback in terms of public debate. Intolerance and verbal violence have increased. Supporters of different parties can hardly talk to each other. There's a lot of aggression on social media. These are all medium-intensity warning signs that, if not addressed, will only pave the way for more violence and authoritarianism.



YANINA WELP  
Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy





People rally in defence of democracy in Sao Paulo, Brazil on 9 January 2023, in reaction to attacks on federal government buildings by supporters of former far-right president Jair Bolsonaro.

Photo by Carla Carmel/Reuters via Gallo Images.

An irate economist who entered politics only two years before, Milei campaigned on two promises: stripping what he characterised as a parasitic political class off its privileges and, borrowing Trump’s rhetoric, ‘making Argentina great again’. In his narrative, the shock economic measures required, including tight fiscal austerity, would hurt political elites rather than the people he claims to speak for.

While his libertarian philosophy put him at odds with traditional conservatism, Milei made a marriage of convenience with the socially conservative right to win the election, threatening hard-won sexual and reproductive rights and gender mainstreaming policies.

But nowhere in the region did the far right show an uglier face than in Brazil. A week after taking office on 1 January 2023, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva faced an insurrection

by disgruntled followers of his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro. Although Bolsonaro didn’t appear to be personally involved in organising the invasion of the headquarters of Brazil’s major federal institutions, he set the scene by consistently sowing disinformation, stoking doubts over the election’s integrity and demonising his opponents, making their rule illegitimate in the eyes of his supporters. The attacks indicated deep division on basic principles among Brazilians – a split far from settled, as revealed by a **large demonstration** of support for Bolsonaro, currently subject to police charges, in São Paulo in February 2024.

Democratic consensus has been eroded and the out-of-control forces unleashed by Bolsonaro threaten to be a lasting presence in Brazil’s political life.

## Setbacks for the far right in Poland and Spain

The European far right also experienced setbacks in 2023. The biggest came in Poland in October, when despite efforts to skew the election in its favour, the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) lost its majority. Although it came first, it was unable to form a government. Three opposition groups committed to put their differences aside and form a joint administration to end PiS' eight-year rule, and with it its attacks on judicial independence, the rule of law, civil society and women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

The change owed a lot to civil society, whose support the new government will continue to need as it works to restore civic freedoms and democratic safeguards while dealing with a PiS-aligned president and an administrative and judicial machinery packed with PiS loyalists.

Civil society played a crucial role in ensuring the fairness of the election. Several organisations conducted extensive training for thousands of people who volunteered to become electoral observers, empowering them to oversee the elections and ensure compliance with the law. Civil society educated voters on election participation and organised several extensive campaigns to encourage turnout, particularly dedicated to women and young people, resulting in a remarkable 74.4 per cent voter turnout, a Polish record.



**SONIA HORONZIAK and FILIP PAZDESKI**  
Institute of Public Affairs, Poland

Another setback for the forces of regression came in Spain, where far-right party Vox lost over half its seats in the snap July



Pedestrians walk past a poster depicting the socialist candidate with the word 'Forward' and the conservative and far-right candidates with the word 'Backward' during the election campaign in Madrid, Spain on 9 July 2023.

Photo by Thomas Coex / AFP via Getty Images.

election. Vox's ferocious anti-rights campaign evidently backfired, bringing major losses.

This election campaign was plagued by expressions of homophobia and transphobia. We've seen politicians refuse to address trans people in a manner consistent with their gender identity and threaten to abolish laws that have enshrined rights, such as the Equal Marriage Law and the Trans Law. This has been reflected in an increase in harassment of LGBTQI+ people.



**EMILIO DE BENITO**  
LGTB+ Collective of Madrid, Spain

Against all predictions, Vox didn't enter the government alongside the mainstream conservative Popular Party, whose victory over the incumbent Socialist Party (PSOE) was far narrower than expected. With no other party prepared to support a government that included Vox, it was the PSOE that led the coalition formation process that pieced together a new administration.

But dangers still lurk around the corner, with Vox poised to take advantage if the PSOE-led minority government, propped up by various regional pro-independence parties, unravels.





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## WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

### AI challenges

Roughly half the world's population has a chance to vote in 2024, making it the **biggest** election year ever. Some of the most highly populated countries on earth are holding elections: India, the USA, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia and Mexico, although Russia's only superficially resembles an election. But in the competitive votes, there's a lot at stake. And troublingly, the **potential** of AI to wreak electoral havoc has already started to show.

In **Slovakia's** tight race, fake audio recordings released days before voting may have had decisive impact. The AI-generated deepfake mimicked the voice of the Progressive Slovakia party leader discussing election-rigging tactics. He and the journalist he was supposedly speaking with immediately denounced the audio as fake, but it was posted during a 48-hour moratorium ahead of polls opening, making it difficult to debunk. Because it was in



A billboard depicting the AI-generated avatars of presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto and running mate is illuminated at rush hour in Jakarta, Indonesia on 12 January 2024.

Photo by Willy Kurniawan/Reuters via Gallo Images.

audio form, it exploited a loophole in Meta’s regulations, under which only faked videos are against the rules.

Similar abuses of AI for election purposes surfaced in the **USA** even before the real election season began. Ahead of New Hampshire primaries in January, an AI-generated robocall impersonating President Joe Biden urged voters not to turn out and instead ‘save’ their vote for the general election.

And it isn’t only anonymous wrongdoers using AI tools; official campaigns are doing so too. In **India**, long-dead respected figures have been resurrected through AI to shower praise on politicians. In **Indonesia**, the winning candidate – a former general accused of human rights abuses – used an AI-generated avatar to rebrand himself as a ‘cute grandpa’ TikTok star who captivated Gen Z voters. In **Pakistan**, campaigners used AI to create messages from former prime minister Imran Khan, currently in jail.

In January ChatGPT published **new rules** banning the use of the tool for political campaigning. This included a ban on creating images of real people, including politicians. It’s clear regulation is lagging far behind events, and it doesn’t appear technology companies are ready to meet the challenges of this super election year.

Problems **AI presents** to the integrity of elections include disinformation campaigns fuelled by deepfake videos and the micro-targeting of voters through the exploitation of their data, among others. Civil society is doing what it can to tackle these – sometimes in partnership with governments, sometimes on its own – through **combinations of tactics**. These include supporting local journalism, running media literacy education campaigns, fact checking, labelling social media content, developing counter-messaging strategies, improving cybersecurity for elections and

campaigns and changing recommendations algorithms. Civil society is also calling for better international AI regulation

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## Troubling beginnings

This biggest election year kicked off with Bangladesh – a country with closed civic space – going to the polls on 7 January. Its election saw the ruling Awami League retain power and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina start her fourth consecutive term. The outcome was never in doubt, with the main opposition party refusing to run over well-founded concerns about electoral integrity. For all practical purposes, Bangladesh is now a one-party state.

Voting was preceded by an intense pre-election crackdown in which the authorities harassed, criminalised and jailed thousands of opposition activists and met protests with **violence**. The lack of electoral choice was reflected in ballots padded with fake opposition candidates and a plummeting turnout.

“ The space for civil society in Bangladesh is closed. CSOs are free to operate only as long as they don’t challenge the ruling system. Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly are being restricted and forcefully violated. Extremely politicised state institutions are being used as an extension of the ruling party, a trend many argue could lead to the materialisation of a totalitarian state. This was a one-sided election in which we already knew who the winner would be.



**DR MUBASHAR HASAN**

Bangladeshi academic and social justice activist

A month later, **Pakistan** – a country with repressed civic space – held what may have been its **least clean** election since the 1980s. The most popular politician, Imran Khan, had been thrown in jail under fabricated charges. The authorities did everything they could to block his party, and election day was marred by violence. Khan’s party still managed to win the most seats, and in response, the two establishment parties, trailing in second and third, quickly announced a coalition, installing a government that’s unlikely to speak to the unhappiness many voters expressed about military power, political dynasties and economic strife.

Then came Indonesia, with its 200 million-plus registered voters. The outgoing incumbent, President Jokowi, undermined the rule of law to pave the way for his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, to become Prabowo Subianto’s running mate – and win. The state’s repression of government critics, journalists, activists and academics intensified ahead of voting. Government officials from the president down used and abused state resources to back the official campaign. They got the result they wanted.

Democratic decline has been evident over the past five years under the Jokowi administration, and Prabowo’s victory is unlikely to improve the situation. Prabowo’s victory represents the worst-case scenario for the future of human rights in Indonesia. Not only does he lack perspective and commitment to human rights, but he was also involved in the abduction of activists in 1998 when he was the commander of Indonesia’s special military forces.



**RIZKY ARGAMA and VIOLLA REININDA**  
Centre of Indonesian Law and Policy Studies

Much more of this can be expected, because attacks on the conditions that enable free and fair competition are underway in many countries that will soon hold elections, including **India**, **Mexico** and **Senegal**.

Where people can vote freely, in contexts of great anxiety and an uncertain future, voters increasingly dissatisfied with the current state of affairs will continue to opt for alternatives that present themselves as radical. It’s to be expected that many of 2024’s elections will result in a collapse of support for incumbents and the political establishment, and maverick politicians with simplistic and sensationalist answers to complex problems will win power. In power they’re bound to disappoint, and they’re certain to attack civil society. And even if they don’t win they’ll help make the political weather.

Civil society will continue to press for governments to call overdue elections, for elections to take place in free and fair conditions, for people to have the information they need to make informed choices, for votes to be properly counted, for losers to accept defeat and for winners to govern in the interests of everyone rather than just their supporters, doing so with respect for people’s rights and freedoms.



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