2025 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT

AUTHORS
Andrew Firmin
Inés M. Pousadela
Mandeep Tiwana

RESEARCHERS
Martina Guarnaschelli
Samuel King
Nirvaly Mooloo
Victoria Ubierna

COMMS SUPPORT
Camille De Ocampo
Kgalalelo Gaebee
Thapelo Masiwa
Lerato Pagiwa
Silvia Puerto Aboy
Joseph Sila

DESIGNER
Juliana Pecollo

COVER PHOTO: Protest in Washington DC, USA, against federal job cuts and Elon Musk's role in government. Photo by Bryan Dozier/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Welcome to the 2025 State of Civil Society Report from CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance. This year's report, the 14th in our annual series, looks back at the events of 2024 and early 2025 to identify trends in civil society action at every level and in every arena, from responses to conflicts to demands for global governance reform and struggles for democracy, inclusion and climate justice.

This year's report comes in a new shorter and more accessible format. It draws from our rolling analysis and commentary initiative, **CIVICUS Lens**, and is directly informed by the voices of civil society affected by and responding to the major issues of the day. It reflects over 300 interviews and 80 articles published by CIVICUS covering more than 120 countries and territories. You'll find links to articles with the icon and to interviews with the icon.

Our report offers a civil society perspective of the world as it stands in early 2025: one plagued by crises, including of human rights and democratic values, and one where an embattled civil society faces a growing crisis of resourcing. But despite increasing restrictions on civic space, civil society continues to work hard to hold the line. In volatile times, civil society still manages to achieve important victories through strategic advocacy, mobilisation, litigation and international solidarity.

In a realigning global landscape marked by the rise of right-wing populism, autocracy, sickening violence, climate inaction and economic inequality, this report documents both the challenges and the inspiring responses of civil society activists and organisations worldwide. Through their persistent efforts and against the odds, they continue to carry the torch for the vision of a more peaceful, equitable and sustainable world. This report is dedicated to everyone striving to keep this vision alive.

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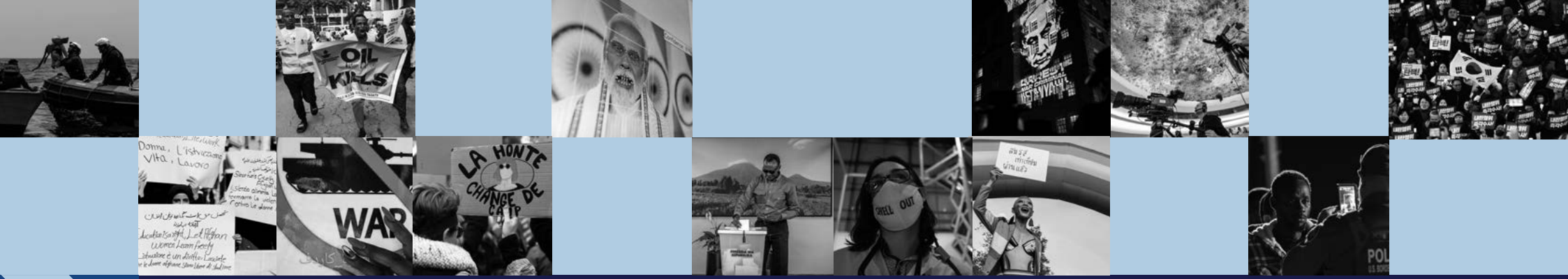


OVERVIEW

A world in crisis

The world is experiencing multiple and accelerating crises. Civilians are being slaughtered in conflicts around the world – in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and many other countries – and perpetrators of atrocities are confident of enjoying impunity. A global realignment appears underway, driven by the Trump administration, which seems determined to reward acts of aggression, ripping up longstanding international alliances and shared assumptions in favour of an axis of authoritarianism. These shifts could trigger more wars as aggressors anticipate that they can use force to win advantage without facing consequences, potentially driving humanity towards a catastrophic global conflict.

Any progress achieved in forging a rules-based international order where human rights are respected risks being discarded in favour of the attitude that might makes right. A global governance crisis is seeing a lack of principled leadership. Instead of cooperation to solve the pressing problems that transcend borders, there's a growing assertion of narrow national interest and transactional approaches to international relations. Military spending is increasing at the expense of aid for the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.

Worsened by conflicts, the crises of climate change and biodiversity loss are accelerating, with 2024 the hottest year on record. Yet fossil fuel companies are reaping record profits, planning further extraction, scaling back renewable energy plans and using their economic power to lobby for inaction.

Soaring oil and gas profits are just one sign of a profoundly dysfunctional global economy, in which the world's richest people just keep getting richer while many people struggle under a seemingly permanent cost of living crisis. The super-rich are no longer merely content with influence over policies that directly affect their wealth, such as on taxes. Increasingly they seek to control politics, raising legitimate fears of oligarchic state capture. Crony capitalism is reaching new levels, benefiting tech billionaires and media moguls who use their power to shape and distort political debate by spreading lies and hatred. A crisis of disinformation is being further accelerated by fast-moving developments in generative AI.

Aided by disinformation, right-wing populism, nationalism and autocratic and military rule are on the rise, bringing a crisis of democracy as checks and balances, the right to express dissent and the ability to scrutinise the powerful are swept away. This crisis of

democracy is also a civic space crisis, as fundamental civil rights are attacked wherever democratic freedoms are eroded. Anti-democratic forces are pushing anti-rights agendas that scapegoat and vilify excluded groups and attack their rights. Attempts to roll back the rights of women, LGBTQI+ people and migrants and refugees are well underway.

Just when civil society is most needed, it's experiencing an accelerating funding crisis. In recent years, major funding sources such as state donor agencies have been cut back and become more aligned with narrowly defined national interests, particularly defence, diplomatic and trade agendas. This has made it harder for civil society organisations to secure support for core work and raised the risk of being instrumentalised around agendas that aren't theirs. Many states have also passed laws to make it harder for organisations to receive international funding and vilify those that do so.

Several European states have reduced their support for civil society and others in the rest of the world have failed to fill the gaps, leaving implementation of the universal Sustainable Development Goals badly off track. Now the reckless, ill-intentioned USAID funding freeze has brought the crisis to a head. Many civil society groups face an existential threat.

Civil society's vital role

The world needs civil society. Imagine life without it. Human rights violations and impunity would flourish on an even greater scale. Democracy would be further eroded and people would lose agency to shape decisions that affect their lives, with autocratic political leaders and oligarchs free to run amok, bending states to serve their interests. Climate change would accelerate past every tipping point and environmental breakdown would reach catastrophic levels. Women would lose control over their bodies and LGBTQI+ people would be forced into fearful, closeted lives. Excluded minorities would routinely face violence. These dangers are growing more pressing by the day.


Photo by Pietro Bertora/SOS Humanity.

Members of the German CSO SOS Humanity help people from an overcrowded boat during a migrant rescue mission in the Mediterranean.

Even under extraordinary pressure, civil society continues to prove its value. In conflict zones, grassroots groups are filling critical gaps in humanitarian response, documenting human rights violations and advocating for civilian protection. International allies are taking legal action and engaging with global institutions to try to stop the slaughter, halt arms supplies to human rights violators and hold perpetrators of atrocities to account.

In numerous countries, civil society has successfully mobilised to prevent democratic backsliding, ensure fair elections and challenge authoritarian power grabs. Struggles for gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights continue through persistent advocacy and campaigning, winning legislative and court victories despite intensifying backlash.

Photo by Rodrigo Buendia/AFP via Getty Images.

Waorani Indigenous protesters demonstrate at Ecuador's Constitutional Court against oil extraction in Yasuní National Park on 30 August 2024.

Through strategic litigation, civil society has established groundbreaking legal precedents to force governments to take more ambitious climate action and respect environmental rights. Environmental activists continue their vital work to hold states and corporations accountable despite facing extreme danger.

Across diverse contexts, civil society is employing a wide range of tactics – from mass mobilisation and online campaigning to legal action and international advocacy – proving it can and will hold the line in troubling and volatile times, even as civic space restrictions intensify and funding is deliberately slashed.

Civil society is a vital source of resistance, resilience and hope. Right now, things are bad, but without civil society they'd be even worse.

The path forward: reimagining civil society

In tough times, it's a challenge to be creative, and introspection may seem self-indulgent. But crises can present opportunities to experiment. The time has come to reimagine how civil society can ensure it's able to keep defending and advancing human rights amid a cascade of crises.

A **movement mindset** is essential for civil society's future. Rather than functioning as rigid bureaucratic organisations, structured to suit funder requirements, civil society groups must embrace flexibility. This means developing organisational forms that align with the changes civil society wants to see in the world and that make sense for the communities it serves.

The most successful civil society actions of recent years have embodied movement characteristics: distributed leadership, nimble decision-making, a focus on shared values, a willingness to listen and the ability to mobilise broad constituencies rapidly. The climate movement has shown how decentralised structures led by young people can drive action. Feminist movements offer lessons in building power through horizontal organising that connects people across class, race and geographic barriers, putting typically excluded voices at their centre. They've shown what it means to prioritise social change through collective action over institutional self-preservation.

Civil society must prioritise **authentic community connections**, particularly with those most excluded from power. This means going beyond traditional stakeholder consultations to develop genuine relationships with communities, including those outside urban centres, disadvantaged by digital divides or otherwise far removed from decision-making structures and processes. Effective civil society work increasingly means facilitating community self-organisation and being accountable to those civil society exists to serve, rather than speaking on their behalf.

This implies substantial shifts in the way civil society operates. While many organisations are already walking this path, civil society as a whole still has a journey to make. Key steps include investing in deep listening, sharing power with community partners and learning to measure success by the strength of the relationships nurtured, and not just by outcome metrics.

Informed by its listening, civil society needs to develop **effective counter-narratives.** These should move beyond problem diagnosis to articulate compelling alternative visions to counter the seductive but dangerous narratives of populism, nationalism and authoritarianism. These counter-narratives must speak to people's legitimate anxieties, including about economic precarity, security concerns and lack of voice, while inspiring optimism and offering inclusive and rights-based solutions that push back against populist appeals to scapegoat excluded groups.

Counter-narratives should connect universal values to local contexts and concerns. For instance, it may prove more effective to frame climate action in terms of community resilience, livelihood opportunities and fairness for coming generations than to talk about global summits and targets. Rather than mounting an abstract defence of key democratic principles, it may make sense to characterise democracy as a system capable of reacting to people's preferences by delivering tangible benefits that improve their lives.

To respond to democratic regression and civic space degradation, **early warning systems** are needed. Civil society can develop these by tracking key indicators of closing space, from regulatory changes that may be presented as benign to more overt attacks on activists and organisations. These systems must be linked to rapid response mechanisms that enable coordinated national and international pressure when warning signs appear. The CIVICUS Monitor already tracks civic space globally, but more localised early warning systems with specific triggers for action could enhance preventive responses.

Photo by Daniel Ceng/Anadolu Images.

Protesters hold a candlelight rally against President Yoon Suk Yeol's martial law declaration outside the National Assembly in Seoul, South Korea, 4 December 2024.

All responses must be based on the galvanising principle of **solidarity in resistance.** This means standing with each other when under threat and embracing the inherent value of mobilisation and participation beyond immediate policy wins. Even when victories seem distant, mobilising plays a critical role in bringing people together, nurturing collective identities, strengthening movement resilience, upholding hope and maintaining spaces where alternative visions and practices can flourish. Optimism must remain civil society's guiding light.

To enable its responses, civil society must build and improve the functioning of **networks at every level** from local to global and across the broadest possible range of civil society and allies. Civil society's resilience lies in its ability to build solidarity across issues, constituencies and geographies. These connections allow rapid mobilisation of support when crises emerge, the sharing of

Photo by Kent Nishimura/Reuters via Gallo Images

People protest outside the USAID building in Washington DC, USA, following closure orders on 3 February 2025.

successful strategies and the pooling of resources and capacities. New technologies may facilitate connections, but networks can't rely on them alone: they must be built on genuine trust and reciprocity. They should be horizontally organised and democratic, not top-down or global-north driven.

Alongside networks, **principled leadership** is now more essential than ever. Civil society leaders must resist the temptation to self-censor or downplay core values to appease funders, governments or other powerholders. This requires the development of supportive cultures within organisations and movements and across civil society that reinforce shared values and provide mutual aid when people or organisations face repression or resource constraints. Leadership development initiatives must go well beyond management skills to instil ethical decision-making capacities, a values-based approach to leadership and the courage to take a principled stand under pressure.

Finally, it should be clear that the donor-reliant funding model has reached its limits. The funding sources civil society groups have long relied on are increasingly unreliable, politically constrained or inadequate for today's needs. Whether from bilateral and multilateral funders or private philanthropy, funding often reproduces economic and political power imbalances and can lead to a project-driven civil society unable to confront power.

Civil society must therefore develop more **diverse and sustainable resource models.** This includes exploring community-based funding approaches such as membership models, crowdfunding and community foundations, developing ethical enterprise and investment activities that align with civil society missions while generating unrestricted income and leveraging non-financial resources through skilled volunteerism, time banking and resource sharing. Out of necessity, many civil society groups, particularly in the global south, are already pioneering these approaches, distributing financial risk, increasing independence and making themselves accountable to the communities they serve rather than external funders. Civil society as a whole can learn from these examples.

It's time to move on from survival strategies or any hope of going back to business as usual, and instead reimagine civil society for an age of multiple, intersecting and accelerating crises. A more movement-oriented, community-driven, narrative-focused, resistance-ready, networked, principled and financially independent civil society can better withstand current threats and more effectively realise its collective mission of building a more just, equal, democratic and sustainable world.

CONFLICT: MIGHT REPLACES RIGHT

INTERNATIONAL LAWS ARE BEING ROUTINELY VIOLATED IN CONFLICTS, WITH CIVILIANS DELIBERATELY TARGETED AND WAR CRIMES COMMITTED WITH IMPUNITY.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN BEAR THE HEAVIEST BURDENS IN CONFLICT ZONES, AND WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS PLAY A CRUCIAL BUT UNRECOGNISED ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING.

CIVIL SOCIETY IS WORKING TO STOP ARMS TRANSFERS TO PERPETRATORS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES, ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND BUILD COALITIONS FOR PEACE DESPITE GROWING RESTRICTIONS ON ITS WORK.

Conflict scars the world. At the time of publication, a fragile and far from fully respected ceasefire holds in Gaza and a cessation of hostilities may happen in Ukraine under pressure from the Trump administration, rewarding Russia's imperial ambitions and sacrificing Ukraine's sovereignty in the process. But conflicts continue to rage off the international radar in several countries, including the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, **Ethiopia**, **Myanmar** and **Sudan**. The consequences are death and destruction on an unimaginable scale, mass displacement and enduring trauma.

In all these conflicts civilians are being killed, not by accident but due to deliberate targeting. Civil society personnel, humanitarian workers and journalists are being killed for their work helping civilians, defending rights and documenting abuses. Long-established **principles of international humanitarian law** meant to provide protection and minimise human suffering are being flouted with impunity. United Nations (UN) institutions and other international bodies appear powerless. The principle that might makes right is winning out over international law.

Gaza ground zero

Nowhere has the devastation been greater than in Gaza. So far at least **48,291 people** have been killed in Israel's attacks, most of them civilians, and this figure may well be an underestimate. At least **1.9 million people**, 90 per cent of the population, have been displaced, with 92 per cent of Gaza's homes destroyed or severely damaged. Some **170 journalists** and at least **320 humanitarian workers** have been killed, many deliberately targeted. The trauma will be felt for generations. The consequences of the genocidal decisions made by Israel's leaders are sure to fuel further instability and contribute to a climate of global impunity.

The ceasefire agreed in January 2025, brokered by Egypt, Qatar and the USA, brought a merciful pause in the killing, although with repeated violations, including Israel's **further blocking** of humanitarian access. At the time of writing it's uncertain whether the supposed second and third stages – a permanent ceasefire and reconstruction– will be respected.

The deal Israel eventually accepted was little different from the one Hamas agreed to in May 2024 and put forward in a UN Security Council resolution in June, which Israel ignored. It could have happened **much sooner**, and with much less killing. But slaughter was a political choice. It was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to unleash collective punishment – a war crime – on an entire population for the actions of a terrorist group, with no evident attempt to limit impacts on civilians. Unpopular before the 7 October attacks and awaiting corruption trials, Netanyahu faced further public criticism for the failure of Israel's vast security apparatus. War has held his government together and kept him in power.

The Biden administration provided diplomatic cover and arms to Israel, and now Trump's return makes a lasting peace less likely. Trump appears to see Gaza's eventual reconstruction as a property development deal where he can build a second Dubai, with the remaining Gazan population ethnically cleansed through removal to other countries. The idea involves extraordinary doublethink: it simultaneously acknowledges that Gaza's destruction leaves the territory needing complete reconstruction while rejecting the possibility that such extensive damage might constitute evidence of human rights crimes.

Israel's violence has extended to the West Bank and its deadly bombing of Lebanon, and it also took advantage of the **ousting of Syria's Bashar al-Assad** in December to invade the part of the Golan Heights it didn't already occupy. In February 2025, it launched another **bombing campaign** against Syria.

Domestically, Israel's violence has been accompanied by a **sustained crackdown**. Since the start of the current phase of conflict, the Israeli government has passed **at least 19** emergency regulations restricting key freedoms. Israeli authorities have consistently used violence against protesters and journalists covering protests and subjected Palestinian citizens of Israel to surveillance and arbitrary arrest, including on terrorism charges.

Here, Israel has a lot in common with Russia, where the authoritarian state has imposed a **barrage of new restrictions** to suppress domestic dissent during its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while relentlessly propagating a false narrative portraying Russia as victim rather than aggressor and systematically **targeting Ukrainian civilians** with deadly strikes on residential areas, hospitals and other non-military infrastructure.

Israel's restrictions have reverberated around the world. Authorities in at least 12 European countries have **banned** protests in solidarity with Palestine, and demonstrations in many countries have been met with vilification, violence and arrests. **Around 10 per cent** of all civic space violations recorded by the CIVICUS Monitor in 2024 were related to Israel, Palestine and solidarity protests around the world.

Students set up protest camps on many **US campuses**, including

to call for divestment from companies with ties to Israel. Many institutions responded by banning encampments, imposing restrictions and suspending students, and students have had job offers **withdrawn** after taking part. Security forces have used violence against protesters. Protesting students have routinely been vilified as antisemitic.

Artists of all kinds are also working to document the suffering and tell the stories of Gaza. Incredibly, Gazan artists are making art in the midst of devastation, and creative people around the world are speaking out in solidarity, but they're facing a backlash for doing so. People are being disinvited from events, having contracts cancelled and awards withdrawn, all of which may encourage self-censorship. It's getting harder for people who speak out against genocide in the media, while social media platforms are **censoring** voices in solidarity with Palestine even as hate speech flourishes. The right to speak out on Palestine is a key test of respect for freedoms that too many in positions of power are failing.

Photo by Kent Nishimura/Reuters via Gallo Images

Visitors contemplate a painting at an exhibition by Palestinian women artists depicting war suffering in Deir Al-Balah, Gaza, 10 December 2024.

Women on the frontlines

Most of those killed by Israeli forces in Gaza have been **women and children**, and it's sickeningly the case that women and girls pay a devastating price in conflicts the world over. A record number of women and girls – **around 612 million** are affected by armed conflict.

In **Sudan**, both sides in the brutal civil war are waging a campaign of systematic sexual violence, including sexual assault, abduction and forced marriage. Child marriage and sexual exploitation and trafficking have increased.

In conflict conditions, women are often the first to go hungry, and girls are denied education much more than boys. Women survivors have little hope that justice systems will hold those who inflicted such cruelty on them to account.

Women aren't just targets in conflicts – they're also a vital but under-recognised part of the solution. In Sudan, local women's organisations are braving dangerous conditions to deliver essential aid, running safe houses, holding clinics in refugee camps and providing survivors with psychosocial support. They're documenting and exposing human rights abuses and atrocities, leading international advocacy campaigns and demanding accountability.

Women-led organisations should be at the forefront of peace efforts. But women's voices are often excluded from peacebuilding processes. Evidence shows that peace agreements last longer and are better implemented when women are involved. Yet, as the **UN's annual report** on Women, Peace and Security shows, women currently make up only 9.6 per cent of negotiators in peace processes.

Any meaningful effort to build lasting peace requires the

Photo by Fabrice Coffrini/AFP via Getty Images.

A woman with a Sudanese flag-painted nail holds a placard at a protest outside ceasefire talks in Geneva, Switzerland, 14 August 2024.

substantive involvement of women throughout. In Syria, the change of government following a long civil war presents a crucial opportunity. A key measure of success in Syria will be whether peace processes advance women's rights.

Impunity and the global system

This threatens to be an age of impunity: perpetrators of conflict are broadly able to evade accountability. Even when ceasefires come and hostilities end, those responsible for mass atrocities are unlikely to face justice.

The body of international humanitarian and human rights law developed in the aftermath of the Second World War was designed to ensure that atrocities of the kind committed by Nazi Germany and its allies would never happen again and, if they did, those responsible would be punished. But international law and the institutions designed to oversee it are being tested by conflicts in which aggressors act with impunity while states make hypocritical calculations based on political alliances rather than legal principles.

The Security Council has been as ineffectual towards Israel as it has with Russia, in both cases because of the veto power of its five permanent members. Russia has prevented any action against its blatant violation of the Council's mandate, while the USA, as Israel's chief ally, has consistently blocked condemnation since the start of the bombardment of Gaza. The Security Council has issued a handful of weak resolutions, heavily diluted through diplomatic tussles, which the Israeli government has found easy to ignore. UN General Assembly resolutions have come in the absence of Security Council action, but these lack enforcement mechanisms.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), the UN's main judicial body, at

least acted quickly in January 2024 when it issued an urgent **interim ruling** on a case filed by South Africa alleging Israel is in breach of the Genocide Convention. The judges found there was a plausible risk of genocide and gave Israel six orders, including to 'take all measures in its power' to ensure its forces comply with the Genocide Convention, facilitate humanitarian access and stop public incitements to genocide. But Israel simply ignored them, as it did when the court issued further orders in March and May. It did the same in July, when the ICJ **issued** an advisory opinion in a separate case concluding that Israel's illegal settlements constitute multiple violations of international law. Netanyahu **lashed out** at the decision, while the Security Council hasn't followed up on Israel's failure to comply with ICJ orders.

Double standards are on ample display. Several global north states that **got behind** a case The Gambia **brought** against Myanmar alleging breaches of the Genocide Convention **criticised** South Africa for initiating the case against Israel.

Then there's the International Criminal Court (ICC), which prosecutes individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression, operating as a global court of last resort when national justice is absent. In November, it **issued arrest warrants** against Netanyahu, former Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant and three Hamas leaders who are now dead. The ICC found reasonable grounds to believe Gallant and Netanyahu were responsible for 'the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare' and 'the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts'.

Any state that's adopted the Rome Statute to recognise the ICC's jurisdiction is obliged to arrest Netanyahu if he visits their country. But several global north states said they wouldn't arrest him or otherwise distanced themselves from the court's decision. Germany's likely next chancellor Friedrich Merz has made a point of **assuring** Netanyahu he can visit the country without arrest. It was a different story in 2023, when the ICC issued arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and an associate, and just about every global north state lined up to affirm their support and demand justice.

Meanwhile the Israeli state is engaged in a **long dirty tricks campaign** to try to undermine the ICC, including through hacking, surveillance, smears and threats. Netanyahu reacted to the decision to issue warrants by **comparing** ICC chief Karim Khan to a Nazi-era judge. One of the early acts of the second Trump administration was to **impose sanctions** on ICC staff, as it did the first time around.

The ICC has made clear that being a key ally of a global north power doesn't necessarily guarantee impunity, and the response has been telling. The notion of a rules-based international order can't be sustained if states pick and choose when they think the rules should apply on the basis of their allegiances.

Many global north states have also been only too happy to believe the **Israeli government's smears** about UNRWA, the UN's agency for Palestine, which Israel is determined to shut down. They cancelled or suspended funding based on Israeli claims that turned out to be largely unsubstantiated, causing great harm to people.

This pattern of international dysfunction and naked self-interest can be seen in other conflicts. There's been over four years of fighting in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup, with forces opposed to the junta now controlling the majority of territory and the military responding with brutal repression. But the key regional body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, **stands on the sidelines**, with its authoritarian member states happy to pretend the plan put forward after the coup still has any credibility, ignoring civil society's alternatives – a recipe for the killing to continue.

State interests and alliances are hampering progress elsewhere. Authoritarian Rwanda is the **power behind the rebel forces** that captured the DRC city of Goma in January 2025, but many global north states prioritise their diplomatic relations over holding it

accountable. Conflict also **continues** in parts of Ethiopia, but the government has leveraged its relationships to limit international scrutiny, and the African Union and the UN have largely been silent. Civil war rages across Sudan partly because the United Arab Emirates (UAE) heavily **backs the militia** in its bid to replace the government.

Civil society is calling for everyone to respect international law, for the international system to do its job and for states to put narrow national interests aside. A potentially promising step in this direction comes in the form of a **proposed treaty** to prevent and punish crimes against humanity. The UN adopted a resolution in December 2024 with the aim of agreeing a final draft by 2029. The treaty would require states to cooperate internationally to protect victims and witnesses and to prosecute or extradite suspects. But it faces some strong opponents, not least Russia, which won concessions on the resolution's language and timelines before it was adopted.

Civil society has played a key role in advocating for the treaty, urging governments to back it and drafting articles for consideration. International law is an imperfect and always incomplete project, but the only alternative is global anarchy, where the powerful can impose their will without constraint. States that support a treaty on crimes against humanity must work with civil society to defeat attempts to delay and weaken it.

Advocacy on the arms trade

Another way civil society seeks to uphold international law is by advocating for an end to arms transfers to Israel. The Arms Trade Treaty, which came into force in 2014, is designed to prevent arms transfers that could lead to serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. UN human rights experts have **called for** an immediate halt to all arms exports to Israel on the grounds that they'll likely be used to violate international humanitarian law. Some states, including Belgium, Canada, Japan and Spain, have suspended shipments, but many others continue to supply Israel.

Photo by Kent Nishimura/Reuters via Gallo Images.

An image of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a call for his arrest are projected onto a building near the White House as he meets with Donald Trump in Washington DC, USA, 4 February 2025.

Civil society in several European countries has **gone to court** to try to halt supplies, including in **Germany**, the **second-largest** arms provider to Israel after the USA, along with Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK. A key issue is the supply of parts used in F-35 fighter jets, a major weapon in Israel's killings of civilians.

In February 2024, a court in the Netherlands **ordered** the Dutch government to stop the transfer of all such parts, citing clear risks of violations of international humanitarian law. The court also rejected the government's argument that evidence from civil society shouldn't be taken seriously. The government however has appealed to the supreme court to try to overturn the ruling.

Photo by Mark Kerrison/In Pictures via Getty Images

Sudanese exiles and allies denounce escalating violence and the role of the United Arab Emirates as a supplier of weapons and ammunition to the Rapid Support Forces at a demonstration in London, UK, 21 January 2024.

In Denmark, the case remains pending, but one notable aspect has been the **rapid public support** for the action's crowdfunding appeal. Meanwhile in the UK, following **extensive civil society advocacy**, the government announced a **partial suspension** of arms sales to Israel in September. But this only involved the cancellation of around 30 of 350 licences and didn't include parts supplied to countries assembling F-35s, 15 per cent of which come from the UK. UK law is clear about compliance with the Arms Trade Treaty, and civil society continues to pursue legal action.

More broadly, civil society is working to focus public pressure on the deadly arms trade. Global military spending has risen for **nine years running** to stand at US$2.3 trillion a year, and the total value of arms imports and exports between states is estimated to be **at least US$138 billion**. The USA is the largest arms exporter, followed by France, Russia, China and Germany; these five account for three quarters of arms exports.

Arms spending is only likely to increase. The Trump administration is pressuring NATO members to spend more on defence, while current fears from European states that they'll **no longer be able to rely** on US defence backing are also likely to drive up expenditure on European defence capabilities. In a sign of the direction of travel, in February 2025 the UK government **announced** it would increase its defence spending by slashing its foreign aid budget, prioritising arms over support for the world's most vulnerable people.

There are multiple conflicts, including in Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan, where it's clear states are supplying weapons that are being used in violation of international law. China, India and Russia, for example, are providing arms to Myanmar's murderous junta, while the UAE is supplying rebel forces who are killing civilians in Sudan. One problem is that while 116 states have ratified the Arms Trade Treaty, it falls far short of global coverage. Major holdouts include Russia and the USA. Civil society was at the forefront of pushing for the treaty and remains active in trying to strengthen the global rules and subject arms transfers to greater human rights scrutiny.

As technology develops, it's being used to make killing easier, and it's developing much faster than regulations. There's particular concern about the **use of AI and automated weapons**. AI is being integrated into military systems, including in processes that decide who lives and dies, reducing the potential for the exercise of human conscience. Faulty or biased data can have huge human costs.

Israel uses AI to **generate lists** of assassination targets, leading to civilian deaths. The military has been accused of expanding its decision of who constitutes a valid target in violation of international law, essentially broadening the number of targets to match its killing capacity. Soldiers are given just seconds to approve or reject a machine-generated assassination recommendation. This represents

a further depersonalisation of lethal violence, removing those responsible for killing from the scene, in a way pioneered by remote drone warfare. Developments like these – including the potential use of **killer robots** – must urgently be the subject of effective international regulation.

A realigning world

The **early days of the Trump administration** have unleashed a wave of global disruption. Talks about Ukraine were held between Russia and the USA that excluded Ukraine, followed by the ugly and very public televised bullying of Volodymyr Zelenskyy by Trump and his vice president J D Vance. There's no attempt to hide the naked self-interest and transactional politics behind the US government's determination to condition any future role in Ukraine on privileged access to minerals. The USA also did something until recently unimaginable, siding with Belarus, North Korea and Russia in **voting against** a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion. Meanwhile there's been endless rhetoric about the USA somehow assimilating Canada and **Greenland**, taking control of the Panama canal and 'owning' Gaza.

In this might-makes-right world, little can be ruled out, including a Russia-USA alliance or a carve-up of the world into spheres of influence centred on China, Russia and the USA, underpinned by the ever-present possibility of conflict to assert regional dominance. The lesson Russia may take from its war with Ukraine is that it can intervene militarily elsewhere around its borders, while for China it could be a signal to step up plans to invade Taiwan, something that would destabilise Asia and create insecurity among China's many other neighbours.

But global realignments can also cause sudden shifts that create opportunities for local breakthroughs. In Syria's case, the **changing dynamics** and priorities of Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Russia and Turkey, including as a result of conflicts they're involved in, helped create the conditions for change. In addition to demanding respect for the international rules, urging regulation of the arms trade and holding perpetrators accountable, global civil society and international institutions must respond quickly when opportunities arise.

In Syria, as in so many conflict settings, **civil society played a key role** in providing vital support on the ground, documenting human rights violations and advocating for international assistance, and paid a high price for doing so. Now Syrian civil society must be enabled and supported in building an inclusive, just and democratic peace where human rights are respected. There's no path to sustainable peace, in Syria and in the world's many other conflict zones, that doesn't involve civil society.

DEMOCRACY: REGRESSION AND RESILIENCE

DEMOCRACY IS UNDERGOING SIGNIFICANT REGRESSION, WITH RISING RIGHT-WING POPULISM, FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND DISINFORMATION UNDERMINING DEMOCRATIC FOUNDATIONS.

THERE'S STILL DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE, EVIDENCED BY PEACEFUL TRANSITIONS OF POWER AND SUCCESSFUL MOBILISATIONS TO DEFEND DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND PRACTICES.

CIVIL SOCIETY PLAYS KEY ROLES IN MONITORING ELECTIONS, COUNTERING DISINFORMATION, ENSURING INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION AND MOBILISING AGAINST REGRESSION.

The potential global realignment underway and the decisions being made about conflicts show that political choices matter. The decisions voters make at the ballot box – and those they can't make when democracy is denied – can have global repercussions.

2024 was hyped as the 'super election year', with around half the world's population having a chance to vote. Seven of the world's 10 most populous countries held national elections, but only four – India, Indonesia, Mexico and the USA – met the minimal democratic requirement that change via the ballot box was a possibility. Around four in 10 people with a chance to vote lived in countries where the basic conditions for free and fair elections weren't met, while for many of the rest, the experience was one of flawed, constrained democracy, with **only a minority** living in flourishing democracies characterised by full respect for civic and political freedoms.

The year demonstrated the vulnerabilities of democracy – to anti-rights narratives, disinformation and foreign interference – but also its resilience and potential to deliver change. While examples abounded

of tightly controlled or fraudulent elections maintaining authoritarian control, as in Russia and Venezuela, there were also many examples of peaceful transfers of power, as seen in Botswana and Senegal, and instances of people taking to the streets to successfully defend democracy, including in Guatemala and South Korea.

Where elections were sufficiently free and fair to reflect public sentiment, the result was often the rejection of incumbents and embrace of political novelty, fuelled by economic anger. Right-wing populists and nationalists continued to benefit. The **warning signs** are there, even in seemingly stable systems, that if mainstream parties don't connect with public discontent, populist parties will.

Right-wing populism rises

Right-wing populism has long moved from the fringes to the political centre stage in many countries, raising the spectre of the return of fascism. As the USA is showing with Trump's barrage of **executive orders**, populist leaders can win democratic elections but then pose a **significant threat** to democracy. This time, people knew what they were voting for and Trump won a majority of the popular vote. He now controls all three branches of government. Trump's personality may be unique, but his campaign drew heavily from the now-established populist playbook, blending nationalist, anti-immigration and culture-war narratives against a backdrop of economic anxiety.

He's far from alone. The far right is **part of the government** formed in the Netherlands in April, after the Party for Freedom came first in the **December 2023 election**. The party controls key ministries, including on **migration** and international development. In **Croatia**, the far-right Homeland Movement entered government following the April parliamentary **election**.

Even when they don't reach power, right-wing populists are influencing the political debate, tilting politics in their direction as mainstream parties adapt. They consistently attack excluded groups, independent media and civil society, eroding democratic norms and checks and balances.

Austria's September election saw the far-right Freedom Party come first with 29 per cent, campaigning on border security and **anti-immigration rhetoric**. It was only kept out of government by three mainstream parties putting their differences aside to **form a coalition** but will remain an influential voice from the sidelines. In Germany in September, Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the first far-right party to win the most seats in a state-level election since the Second World War. Though mainstream parties have so far **refused** coalition agreements with it, the anti-immigrant party strongly **influences** political debate. In February 2025, the AfD came second in the federal election with its **highest-yet** national total of over 20 per cent of the vote, and has its eyes on power at the next election.

The far-right National Rally continues to make waves in **France**, coming first in the European Parliament election in June. President Emmanuel Macron reacted by calling an early parliamentary election. An unusually robust alliance of left-wing parties and **civil society** mobilised in response, leaving the National Rally disappointed with the final result, although its vote has grown steadily over the years and it hopes to come first next time. In **Portugal**, the far-right Chega party made a breakthrough with 18 per cent in the March parliamentary election, reflecting **discontent** with economic stagnation and corruption.

Interference and disinformation

Right-wing populists and nationalists often benefit from concerted disinformation efforts. Russia often plays a major role in election

interference efforts, particularly in eastern Europe, aimed at boosting pro-Russia politicians and disrupting pro-European Union (EU) political forces. Civil society plays a crucial role in identifying and countering these efforts, although effectiveness often depends on support from state and international partners.

Far-right nationalist Călin Georgescu unexpectedly won the first round of **Romania's** presidential election, capitalising on social media campaigns targeting younger voters disaffected with mainstream politics. But Romania's Constitutional Court took the extraordinary step of nullifying the results, finding on the basis of declassified intelligence documents that there had been a major Russian campaign of election interference.

Next door, **Moldova** also experienced significant Russian interference in its presidential election and an EU membership referendum. Tactics included economic pressure, cyberattacks, vote buying, threats of violence and disinformation, including deep-fake videos spread through fake accounts. Voters still **backed** Moldova's pro-EU course, but both votes were much closer than expected.

Lithuania, whose government strongly supports Ukraine, faced similar disinformation campaigns during multiple votes, including presidential and legislative elections. Disinformation that mainstream parties planned to introduce compulsory vaccinations played a part in Austria's election.

Russian interference made an impact in **Georgia**. The Georgian Dream party, which is increasingly aligned with Russia despite claiming to support EU accession, took victory in October's parliamentary election amid **fraud allegations**. The party had previously passed Russian-inspired laws restricting LGBTQI+ advocacy and civil society and media that receive international funding. Pro-Russia disinformation also played a major part in the **North Macedonian** election, which resulted in a more Russia-aligned government.

Photo by Giorgi Arjevanidze/AFP via Getty Images

People protest against election irregularities that favoured the ruling party outside parliament in Tbilisi, Georgia, 28 October 2024.

In elections in the **Solomon Islands**, where the government has embraced partnerships with China, pro-China disinformation was to the fore. It's little surprise the same happened in **Taiwan's election**.

In addition to state-sponsored interference, democratic processes faced unprecedented challenges from disinformation campaigns boosted by AI and social media manipulation. This was a major concern in the year's biggest election, held in **India**, with deepfake videos and false claims about the opposition and the country's Muslim minority aiming to influence voter behaviour. The scale and sophistication of these campaigns posed unprecedented challenges for election officials and fact-checkers.

Disinformation outpaces attempts to control it. It's now **cheaper and easier** to spread than ever before. Social media companies simply aren't doing enough to match the scale and speed of

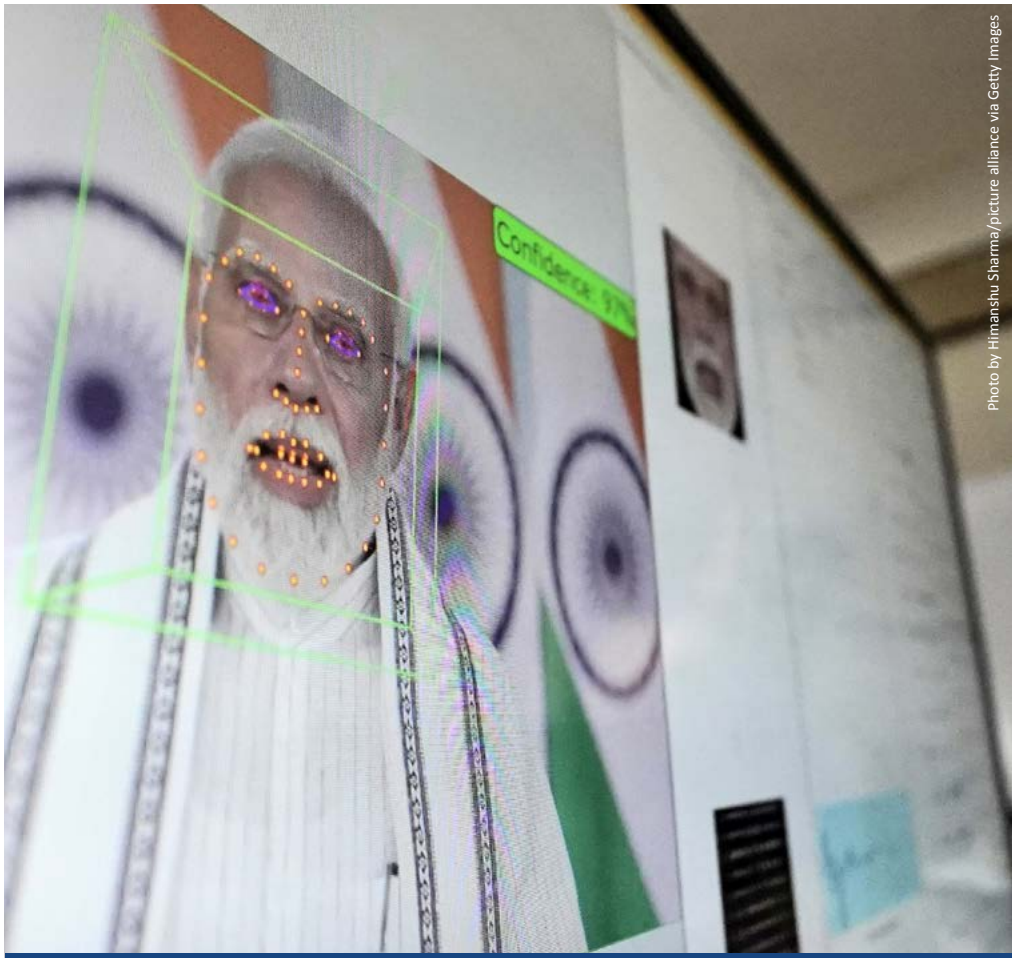


Photo by Himanshu Sharma/picture alliance via Getty Images

Representatives of an AI company that creates deepfake videos for election campaigns show potential customers an avatar of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking in a synthesised voice in Ajmer, India, 15 May 2024.

disinformation campaigns, particularly in electoral contexts and when they're backed by state resources and well-funded individuals. The recent alignment of many social media companies with Trump suggests the problem will only get worse.

Electoral and constitutional manipulation

In many countries, however, elections simply didn't matter. Those in power manipulated them, leaving them devoid of any real democratic substance, with incumbency unchallenged.

Russia's presidential election, held in March, showed how authoritarian power can put electoral processes at its service. After constitutional changes in previous years that allowed Putin to remain in office, the 2024 vote rubber-stamped his continued rule. Opposition candidates were systematically prevented from running through legal technicalities or criminal charge. The figure who would have presented the greatest political threat to Putin, **Alexei Navalny**, died in suspicious circumstances in an Arctic Circle prison shortly before the election. Independent election monitoring was severely restricted, and state media gave Putin overwhelmingly positive coverage while marginalising or vilifying opponents.

In neighbouring Belarus, Putin's ally Alexander Lukashenko orchestrated his seventh term through judicial manoeuvres and **intense repression**. In the run-up to the **January 2025 election**, the authorities arrested over 1,200 people, many merely for participating in online chats used to organise protests following blatant election fraud in 2020. With no credible opposition allowed, all that was on offer was a **staged show**.

Venezuela's July **presidential election** was one of the year's saddest

examples of **democratic hopes** dashed by blatant fraud. Despite the government **closing civic space** and denying the franchise to millions of exiled Venezuelans, turnout was substantial and evidence suggested an opposition landslide. The ruling party refused to release the vote tallies and declared victory without any proof. Subsequent protests faced severe repression, but people still took to the streets during Nicolás Maduro's third-term **inauguration**, held amid heightened security measures. Maduro is now **rewriting the constitution** to tighten his control over a government he doesn't intend to leave.

Constitutional engineering in the service of authoritarian regimes continues in West Africa. Recent changes in **Togo** established a parliamentary system in which the president of the Council of Ministers is chosen by parliament rather than popular vote. This change enables Faure Gnassingbé, president since 2005, to extend his family's decades-long grip on power. The government's **response to protests** was to ban them, disrupt civil society gatherings, arbitrarily arrest protesters and criminalise journalists covering the dissent.

North Africa also saw clear instances of manipulation. For Algeria's September **election**, the date was moved to make it harder for opponents to stand and campaign, while many activists, journalists and opposition politicians were jailed and civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent media were shut down. With no real opposition, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune was able to claim an implausible 94.65 per cent of the vote.

In **Tunisia**, President Kais Saied held onto power in October having systematically changed laws to dismantle democratic checks and balances. His government has **imprisoned opponents**, vilified critics as foreign agents and focused populist anger on **migrants and refugees** to distract from economic failures. With a highly **limited choice** on offer, turnout was incredibly low.

In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele **won re-electin** by a landslide. But the contest wasn't fair, since Bukele was able to run thanks to **judicial manoeuvres** that violated the constitution and abused state media and resources. While his tough policies against **gang violence** have won him popular support, they have meant the mass imprisonment of tens of thousands based on little evidence, with flagrant disregard for due process and basic human rights protections. With judicial independence crumbling and constitutional safeguards dismantled, El Salvador is **sliding into autocracy**.

Military rule and authoritarian control

Military rule remains the particular strain of authoritarian governance in several African states.

In Burkina Faso, the ruling junta postponed elections indefinitely, **saying** they weren't a priority, and a **heavily repressed** civil society could do little about it. **Guinea's** military junta also missed another deadline for democratic transition at the start of 2025, sparking protests that the state met with **repression**. It's a similar story in **Mali**, where the military junta, in power since 2021, **postponed** elections again, changed the constitution to expand presidential powers, **consolidated control** by suspending all political party and civil society activities and offset international criticism by strengthening its ties with Russia.

Chad held elections, but only to lend a **veneer of legitimacy** to authoritarian rule. In a context of severely restricted civic space and minimal competition, victory predictably went to Mahamat Idriss Déby, who took power in a military coup in 2021 after his father's death. The most prominent challenger was killed in suspicious circumstances before the vote.

In Rwanda too, elections serve to disguise authoritarian control with no space for dissent. President Paul Kagame still has much

domestic support, but his regime has become increasingly repressive, with critics facing consequences ranging from criminalisation and harassment to forced exile. And even exile doesn't bring safety, as dissidents are **at risk** of assassination and forced return to Rwanda. The July general **election** was held with minimal competition following a systematic crackdown on civic space. Widespread fraud allegations ensued.

Fraud allegations dogged votes in other **African countries**, including **Comoros**, **Mauritania** and **Mozambique**. Post-election **protests** in Mozambique were met with lethal security force violence.

In Central Asia, **Uzbekistan's** parliamentary election was also a staged procedure lacking any substance. In the Middle East, **Kuwait's** parliamentary election in April and **Jordan's** in September took place in carefully managed political environments that maintained the appearance of participation while ensuring regime stability. Iran's multiple **votes** – two rounds each of parliamentary and presidential elections – displayed the theocratic regime's tight control of political participation. The July presidential election, following the death of President Raisi, saw a reformist ex-health minister defeat an ultra-conservative former nuclear negotiator – but ultimate power remains with the unelected Supreme Leader.

In **Pakistan's** restricted civic space, an election produced a result the country's powerful military neither wanted nor expected, when candidates aligned with jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan won the most seats. The military **did everything it could** to block Khan's party, but many voters seized the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with military power and economic strife. The two mainstream parties then joined forces to prevent an inconvenient outcome for the military, enabling it to keep undermining the democratic process.

Photo by Mike Kemp/In Pictures via Getty Images

People celebrate outside Downing Street as the Labour Party replaces the Conservative government after 14 years in power in London, UK, 5 July 2024.

Democratic resilience and political change

In contrast, when democracies prove more resilient, it often goes unnoticed. Systems that work as intended don't make headlines. But examples abound of democratic institutions quietly withstanding pressure and doing their job of ensuring the conditions where people have a voice. Robust civil society action has defended and strengthened democracy in some challenging contexts.

In 2024, several democratic countries held elections that uncontroversially delivered a change of government, often arising from discontent over inflation, unemployment, corruption and inequality, as seen in **Ghana**, **Sri Lanka** and the **UK**, although right-wing populists have also established themselves in British politics.

Photo by Cem Ozdel/Anadolu via Getty Images

Thousands of protesters march to demand the presidential election is held without delay in Dakar, Senegal, 17 February 2024.

Botswana passed a key test when an opposition coalition unseated the liberation-era Botswana Democratic Party after 58 years in power. The outgoing president conceded defeat and the transition was peaceful. Similarly in **South Africa**, the African National Congress, the party in power since the advent of democracy, now has to share power as part of a 10-party coalition. In **India** and **Japan** incumbents also shed support and were forced to form coalitions. The less-than-overwhelming win scored by India's strongman Prime Minister Narendra Modi, despite an intense propaganda campaign that projected Modi as an omnipresent all-powerful figure, may offer civil society and the **Muslim minority** an opportunity to reverse attacks on human rights and strengthen democratic freedoms.

Democracy also prevailed in **Taiwan**, where the geopolitical stakes are high. A successful vote showed that democratic practices can prevail despite external pressures and foreign disinformation campaigns. In contrast, elections drove **Indonesia** toward **more authoritarian rule** under Prabowo Subianto, a former general accused of human rights abuses, while **Maldives** and the **Solomon Islands** reoriented towards China amid **restrictions on key freedoms**.

Elsewhere, civil society action played a vital role in making democracy a reality. **Senegal's** civil society successfully mobilised against the incumbent's attempt to postpone elections and unconstitutionally extend his mandate. The vote was held following a court order and an opposition leader recently released from jail won the presidency. The outcome illustrated the determination of Senegal's large youth population to make their voices heard.

South Korea's democracy survived a **severe test** when President Yoon Suk Yeol reacted to political difficulties by declaring martial law, claiming he was protecting the country from North Korean forces and 'anti-state elements'. Following widespread public protests, parliament rapidly suspended and impeached him. Yoon evidently didn't count on the resolve of South Korean people to use their civil rights to defend democracy.

Bangladesh's January election initially appeared to cement authoritarian rule when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured her fourth consecutive term amid an intense crackdown on opposition. But months later, mass student-led protests **ended her 15-year rule**. The **interim government**, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed Yunus, includes protest leaders and civil society representatives.

Guatemala's democratic transition, though turbulent, resulted in the inauguration of Bernardo Arévalo as president despite **repeated attempts** by entrenched elites to prevent it. As a political outsider leading a party born out of anti-corruption protests, Arévalo's victory and inauguration were the result of sustained civil society mobilisation, combined with international democratic solidarity.

Steps forward in representation were taken when **Namibia** and **Mexico** elected their first female leaders, although there were concerns about the fairness of the Namibian vote, while Mexico's election was marred by **political violence** and **attempts to concentrate power**, raising concerns about the long-term health of democracy.

Civil society and the future of democracy

Several trends are evident. Authoritarian regimes are increasingly employing sophisticated electoral manipulation techniques and distorting constitutional and legal frameworks to maintain power under a veneer of democratic legitimacy. In 2024, this was particularly evident in Central Asia and several African countries where formal elections were held but with no real competition.

Democratic backsliding is often achieved through seemingly legal means, with democratic institutions and processes maintained but hollowed out. Disinformation and social media manipulation accelerate this erosion, creating information environments where people struggle to distinguish fact from fiction.

Civil society is however proving itself a crucial defender of democratic norms, with successful mobilisations in countries including Bangladesh, Guatemala and South Korea showing that authoritarian trajectories can be arrested. The implication may be that it's easier to stop regression when it's happening than reverse it once authoritarianism has consolidated.

CSOs **play vital roles** in supporting democratic processes. They serve as watchdogs, advocates and educators, monitoring election integrity, combating disinformation, facilitating voter registration and ensuring excluded groups can participate.

Civil society's work extends well beyond elections. Efforts to engage people in governance processes, hold power accountable and build reform coalitions represent the quiet, often unheralded work that sustains democracy. CSOs are increasingly focusing on digital literacy and media education, helping people navigate complex information environments while offering spaces for dialogue across political divides. In regions experiencing democratic backsliding, civil society often serves as the last line of defence for maintaining civic space and supporting excluded groups, frequently at considerable risk.

To confront global democratic decline more effectively, efforts should prioritise the protection of democracies against backsliding. Strategies should embrace diverse perspectives and mobilise broad coalitions that cross ideological divides. Pro-democracy narratives must move beyond abstract concepts and make clear how democracy can lead to better standards of living and security.

There's a need to tackle the sources of distortion of democracy. This includes elite wealth, which plays an outsized role in political power, and the barrage of technological developments that are supercharging the disinformation game, which demand adequate regulation with strong human rights safeguards.

In a time of collapsing civil society resourcing, funding sources need to reorient around providing more flexible, long-term support for the grassroots movements that help sustain democracy.

2024 has shown that democracy faces serious challenges, but it has significant capacity for renewal. The key to democratic resilience lies in building stronger connections between formal democratic structures and grassroots civic engagement. Efforts will need to keep evolving in response to authoritarian creep and its increasingly sophisticated tactics. Civil society action can make the difference between democratic recession deepening or reversing.

ECONOMY: THE ERA OF PRECARITY AND INEQUALITY

THE WEALTH GAP CONTINUES TO WIDEN DRAMATICALLY, WITH GLOBAL POVERTY REDUCTION STALLED WHILE BILLIONAIRES KEEP INCREASING THEIR WEALTH AND ATTEMPT STATE CAPTURE.

ECONOMIC EXCLUSION IS FUELLING POLITICAL VOLATILITY AND PROTESTS, WITH YOUNG PEOPLE LEADING MANY PROTESTS, WHICH ARE OFTEN MET WITH VIOLENT STATE REPRESSION.

CIVIL SOCIETY IS PUSHING FOR TANGIBLE SOLUTIONS, INCLUDING TAXES ON THE ULTRA-RICH, REFORM OF INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME PROGRAMMES.

The economic anger driving many political shifts, including rejection of incumbents and rising populism, has several sources.

In recent decades, and at least partly thanks to civil society efforts, advances were made in reducing the global share of people living in extreme poverty, but **progress has stalled** since the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of the pandemic's impacts, economies are being tested by the consequences of conflict – particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which caused energy prices to rocket up – and the worsening impacts of climate change.

Hostilities may cease in Ukraine, but global realignment, impunity and US unpredictability mean new conflicts may start. Extreme weather – made **more likely and frequent** by climate change – is disrupting agriculture, **pushing up food prices** when harvests fall short. The impacts of food inflation are likely to worsen as climate targets are missed. High food and energy costs could become the new normal.

Years of neoliberal economic orthodoxy pushed by political elites have often hollowed out public services and made them more expensive. Falling global unemployment rates mask **high levels of informal work** and workplace powerlessness. This is particularly the case among the burgeoning gig economy, with the situation worse in low-income countries and worst for young people everywhere. Around the world, young people are leaving universities with an education but few prospects, facing potentially years of struggles to get by. Increased automation as a result of the growing applications of AI could further reduce employment prospects. Spiralling prices are leading to a housing crisis with an acute **shortage of affordable homes**. In many countries, young people face the prospect of never owning a home, instead handing over an increasing proportion of their income in rent.

All this adds up to an age of economic precarity. Around the world, many are forced to use all their resources just to make ends meet, and things have only become harder in recent years. Food and fuel price inflation mean money doesn't stretch as far as it used to, worsening people's quality of life. Small economic shocks can have big impacts. Even when economic baseline indicators suggest all is healthy, as in the USA, many see a different story when they buy their groceries, which is at least part of the reason Trump won.

Economic anger

Discontent is expressed in street protests whenever economic pressure grows. 2024 provided further proof that price increases of essentials or the introduction of new taxes affecting those already struggling consistently trigger public protests. Protest movements often evolve beyond their initial catalysts, voicing broader demands for a redistribution of economic and political power.

The year saw a **wave of protest** across several African countries, led by first-time protesters from Generation Z. It started in **Kenya**, triggered by a plan to introduce sweeping tax increases. The measures were quickly reversed, but the protests continued. Similar protests followed in countries including **Ghana**, **Nigeria** and **Uganda**, all of which have large youth populations facing economic hardship and limited opportunities.

Because protests inspired by anger over the cost of living frequently expand into broader demands about economic and political power, states often respond with violent repression. In Kenya, alongside security force violence against protesters, a disturbing pattern emerged of young activists being **abducted** by armed plainclothes personnel widely suspected of being state agents. Similar heavy-handed responses have followed in other countries, including lethal security force violence in Nigeria.

Economic anger fuelled protests elsewhere. In Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, **protests erupted** in May in response to the rising costs of food, fuel and utilities, quickly escalating into violence. In Bolivia, thousands of supporters of former president Evo Morales **marched** on the capital, La Paz, in January 2025 amid an **inflation, currency and fuel crisis**. In this polarised country, protests are likely to recur during an election year. In the French Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, 2024 saw sometimes **violent protests** sparked by food inflation, which connected with anger at **colonialism**. Further protests triggered by high costs and tax rises are inevitable during 2025, and violent state repression is likely in countries where civic space is constrained.

Global institutions often exacerbate the problems. The prescriptions imposed as loan conditions by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) frequently become the focus of public anger. The tax increases that sparked protests in Kenya, for example, were part of an IMF-mandated package that also included public spending cuts and privatisation measures. In Nigeria, President Bola Tinubu followed

World Bank recommendations to end fuel subsidies on his first day in office and subsequently devalued the currency, making imported goods more expensive and helping create the conditions for protests.

Economic inequality and state capture

But it's not the same story for everyone. The gap between the super-rich and everyone else keeps widening. In 2024, the world's **2,769 billionaires** added another US$2 trillion to their wealth, the equivalent of around US$5.7 billion a day. Over the past decade, the world's richest one per cent have added **US$42 trillion** to their wealth. Five years on from the start of the pandemic, the pattern revealed then has worsened: the ultra-rich **are getting richer** while everyone else is struggling. And they'll perpetuate their power by passing on vast fortunes to their heirs: **36 per cent** of billionaire wealth now comes from inheritance.

And this super-rich class is getting more involved in politics than ever before. Ultra-wealthy elites have always leveraged their influence to shape government policies on taxation, labour rights and business regulation to their advantage. Oligarchic power has long been a feature of less democratic states. But the Trump administration has assembled a cabinet that includes an unprecedented number of billionaires, raising concerns that the USA too is becoming an oligarchy. US policies that have global implications will be shaped by people with no clue how it feels to be poor and vulnerable but plenty of ideas about how to protect and expand their wealth. Wherever it exists, oligarchy undermines democracy and human rights.

The numerous companies that have altered their policies to accommodate the Trump administration, including by **abandoning** diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives after Trump ended federal DEI programmes, demonstrate that businesses will readily compromise when profitability is at stake. Similarly, in France's high-stakes election, business leaders openly **expressed** their preference for the National Rally rather than the leftist coalition having power. In India, billionaire industrialists Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani, who maintain close ties with Modi, have dramatically expanded their corporate empires and consolidated unprecedented control over critical economic sectors under his rule. Big business and fascism can coexist quite happily.

Photo by Angela Weiss / AFP via Getty Images

Elon Musk speaks during Donald Trump's inaugural parade in Washington DC, USA, 20 January 2025.

Inequality is reproduced in key global institutions. The IMF and World Bank remain dominated by global north interests, with governance structures unchanged since their creation following the Second World War. The economic neoliberalism they push on global south countries reflects this, disproportionately burdening the most vulnerable and widening economic inequalities. Civil society's proposals to reform these institutions must be seriously considered.

Photo by Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters via Gallo Images

People protest against economic hardship, hunger and insecurity during Nigeria's Independence Day celebrations in Lagos, Nigeria, 1 October 2024.

Change needed

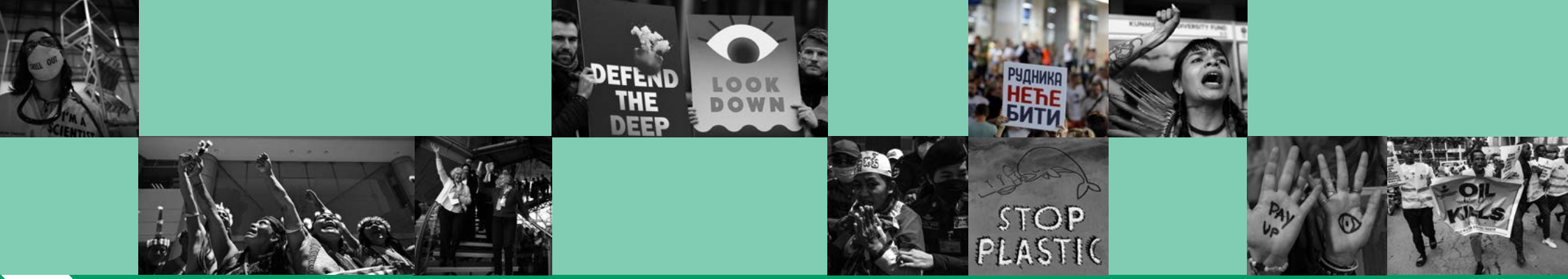
Change is needed, and the ideas are out there, developed through years of civil society research, analysis and advocacy. They include proposals to reform international financial institutions and introduce a universal basic income. Meanwhile, the four-day work week concept, pioneered by civil society to restore healthy work-life balances, continues to gain traction. As of January 2025 in the UK, **200 companies** had permanently adopted four-day weeks, benefiting some 5,000 employees, with trials confirming no reduction in productivity. Younger workers in particular, where labour market conditions grant them leverage, are increasingly demanding stronger labour rights as well as shorter working weeks and more flexible remote work arrangements.

But it's hard to see progress without some attempt to reckon with the growing and grotesquely visible gap between the ultra-rich and everyone else. If the global economy only really works for a small minority, then in the interests of justice there must be some measure of redistribution.

Proposals for wealth taxes and windfall taxes – such as on the energy companies that through no genius of their own banked **record profits** because Russia invaded Ukraine – should be taken seriously. Wealth taxes alone could unlock over **US$2.1 trillion** a year. Inheritance taxes could help tackle the perpetuation of elite economic power and the inequalities that persist across generations. The G20 club of the world's major economies is rarely an arena civil society looks to for progressive moves, but it made some progress at its 2024 summit in Brazil when leaders **agreed** on the need to tax the super-rich.

There's also a huge global problem of tax shortfalls: **US$492 billion a year** is lost as corporations and people exploit offshore tax loopholes. Where oligarchs hold sway, tax advantages are likely to grow. But if the G20 has begun to acknowledge the problem, it means it's time to start building momentum for reform. One promising international process underway, to develop a UN **global tax treaty** by 2027, provides an opportunity to put international cooperation on a firmer footing to recoup more of the lost tax.

A strong treaty and wealth taxation should be major areas of focus for **civil society advocacy** in 2025, including at the forthcoming **International Conference on Financing and Development**, and in the years to come. The resources unlocked should be used to build a more just and equitable world.



CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT: HEADING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

NOWHERE NEAR ENOUGH FUNDING IS BEING ALLOCATED TO TRANSFORM CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITMENTS INTO TANGIBLE ACTION.

CIVIL SOCIETY IS SECURING CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL VICTORIES THROUGH MULTIFACETED APPROACHES, INCLUDING STRATEGIC LITIGATION THAT ESTABLISHES LEGAL PRECEDENTS FOR CLIMATE ACTION.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS FACE INCREASING DANGERS WORLDWIDE, RANGING FROM THE CRIMINALISATION OF PEACEFUL PROTEST TO ARBITRARY DETENTION AND VIOLENCE.

As the rich get richer and fossil fuel profits soar, the world burns. On top of fossil fuel companies' Russian windfall, over the past five decades the oil and gas sector has made profits averaging **US$2.8 billion a day**. Yet companies are currently **scaling back** their investments in renewable energies and planning still more extraction – all while using their deep pockets to lobby against measures to rein them in.

Largely as a result of the fossil-fuel powered economic model, 2024 was the hottest year on record and the first year that temperatures exceeded 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels, the limit set by the 2015 Paris Agreement to prevent the worst impacts of climate change. The year was crammed with extreme weather events, from heatwaves to floods. From **climate-induced inflation** to growing **migration**, the impacts are being felt in everyday life.

But too little is being done. Fossil fuel companies continue their deadly trade. Global north governments, historically the largest greenhouse gas emitters, are watering down plans as right-wing politicians who typically oppose climate action gain sway, and they're

failing to provide the money needed to help global south countries adjust. International commitments such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity show ambition on paper, but not enough is being achieved when states come together at summits such as COP29 climate conference. Progress on new international agreements – such as on plastics – is lacking.

Civil society is doing all it can to demand climate and environmental action that matches the scale of the crisis, winning victories through a combination of tactics including street protest, advocacy and litigation, but it's coming under attack, with peaceful protesters jailed and activists facing violence in many countries.

Key summits a letdown

For the global-level processes ostensibly designed to protect the climate and biodiversity, 2024 was a letdown. December saw **COP29**, the latest climate summit and the first to focus on financing. As a matter of both practicality and justice, global south countries want the most powerful economies, which have benefited from the industries that have caused the bulk of climate change, to help finance the costs of a low-carbon transition – as an alternative to pursuing fossil-fuel powered development – and of adapting to climate impacts. An estimated US$1.3 trillion a year is needed, but the most global north states agreed to was US$3 billion a year. This threatens to do little to cap temperature rises and leave the countries that have done the least to cause climate change the most vulnerable.

For the second year running, the summit was held in a petrostate, Azerbaijan, and for the third year in a row it was held in a country with **closed civic space**. Ahead of the summit the government, which systematically suppresses civil society, **intensified its crackdown**. Treating the meeting as a public relations exercise, it failed to show strong leadership, allowing powerful states' interests

Photo by Murad Sezer/Reuters via Gallo Images

Young activists protest during the COP29 climate change summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, 22 November 2024.

to dominate. This led to the inadequate financing offer and, thanks to repressive petrostates such as Saudi Arabia, no progress on phasing out fossil fuels. With civil society voices subdued and **at least 1,773** fossil fuel lobbyists present, failure was pretty much guaranteed.

Meanwhile, a second global summit failed to live up to civil society's hopes. **COP16** on the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, hosted by Colombia in October, also focused on finance. It was supposed to reach a deal to finance the **Global Biodiversity Framework**, agreed in 2022, which makes a landmark commitment to conserve 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030. But the meeting broke up with no agreement. Global north countries refused to set up a new fund to help meet the US$30 billion commitment. The issue was kicked down the road to meetings scheduled for this year. Meanwhile, more than half of countries have made **no plans** to meet the biodiversity framework's targets.

COP16 did make some progress on other fronts. It struck an agreement on biological genetic data, much of which comes from global south countries and is increasingly used by businesses. Under the deal, companies should pay into a new fund when they use the data – but it's only a voluntary arrangement.

COP16 also broke new ground by **setting up a body** to represent Indigenous peoples and local communities in negotiations, an innovation other international processes should be encouraged to imitate. This new body could help offset the influence of the business lobby: **1,261** private sector representatives attended COP16 to try to influence its proceedings, including many from fossil fuel companies.

It's also been a frustrating experience for civil society in negotiations to develop a legally binding treaty on plastic pollution. A **fifth round of talks** took place in Busan, South Korea but broke up in December without any agreement, even though a treaty was supposed to be finalised by then.

The key division is between states pushing for an ambitious treaty and those – typically oil and gas economies – seeking to limit its scope. Civil society and states that want a strong treaty recognise the devastating impacts of plastic pollution and the need to reduce plastic production; those that want a weak treaty focus solely on waste management, despite the limited effectiveness of recycling.

Plastics are made from chemicals derived from fossil fuels, and the oil and gas industry, while fighting tooth and nail against climate action, sees plastics as a fallback. Once again the sector was well represented, with a record 220 petrochemical industry representatives registered, including several as part of state delegations.

Civil society provides a vital counterweight to industry voices and has maintained a constant presence, combining scientific research, public awareness campaigning, direct action and strategic policy advocacy. For civil society, a bad and rushed deal has been avoided, and the push for a strong treaty **remains on**.

Civil society action

Beyond international summits, civil society keeps working on all fronts. In April, it won a **landmark victory** at the European Court of Human Rights, setting a precedent for 46 European states. KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz **won its case** against the Swiss government, arguing that their rights to family life and privacy are being violated because the government isn't doing enough to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Civil society is also taking legal action to protect biodiversity and combat environmental degradation. In Italy in April, civil society **won a court case** over pollution caused by intensive hazelnut production that makes water undrinkable. This was the third in a series of successful legal challenges.

ClientEarth, the lead organisation in the recent Italian cases, is also **leading a legal challenge** against a huge new plastics plant in Belgium. It's working with 15 other organisations to try to stop chemicals giant INEOS constructing the facility in Antwerp. The action has already led INEOS to scale back its plans.

Historically most climate and environmental litigation has taken place in global north countries. But it's a growing tactic for civil society in the global south, with climate lawsuits now filed in **55 countries**. In August, South Korea's Constitutional Court **ruled** that the lack of emissions cuts targets violates the constitutional rights of young people and ordered the government to amend the law. In April, India's Supreme Court **ruled** that people have a fundamental right to be free from the harmful impacts of climate change. Another groundbreaking judgment came in Ecuador in July, when a court **recognised the rights** of the Machángara River, based on the constitution's recognition of the rights of nature, and ordered the authorities to clean it up.

Photo by Badru Katumba/AFP via Getty Images

Activists protest against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline Project in Kampala, Uganda, 26 August 2024.

Advocacy is also achieving some important results. In October, climate activists in the DRC **successfully campaigned** for the suspension of a controversial oil and gas licence auction that threatened two vital carbon reservoirs. Now they're pushing for the permanent cancellation of auctions.

Activists are targeting institutions complicit in greenwashing, which through sponsorship arrangements and partnerships lend their credibility and positive public image to businesses that do climate and environmental harm. In July, the UK's Science Museum **agreed to end** its sponsorship deal with Norway's state-owned oil giant Equinor. The decision marked the successful conclusion of an **eight-year campaign**. Thanks to civil society's efforts, almost all of the UK's major cultural institutions that used to accept fossil fuel sponsorship have stopped doing so.

Civic space under attack

Protest remains another important way of keeping up the pressure for climate action. But in many countries, what authorities once accepted as legitimate protest is being criminalised. Amid a **global landscape** of civic space restriction, climate activists, and defenders of environmental, land and Indigenous rights, are **among the groups most targeted** for repression.

Activists for environmental, land and Indigenous rights risk violence, including lethal violence. Global Witness reports that in 2023, **196 people** were killed for defending environmental, land and Indigenous rights. **Colombia** was the most dangerous country with 79 killings, around half of them of Indigenous activists. States and companies often see Indigenous people as an obstacle to extraction and exploitation. Violence and killings often involve criminal groups linked to corporate interests. Of over 2,000 environmental and land rights defenders killed since 2012, **around a third** were Indigenous people. As well as Colombia, threat levels are high in countries including **Brazil**, **Ecuador**, **Honduras**, **Mexico**, **Paraguay** and **Peru**.

Security force violence and mass arrests and detentions, particularly levelled against protesters, are also becoming normalised. In the Netherlands, authorities **detained** thousands of people for taking part in mass roadblock protests demanding the government keep its promise of ending fossil fuel subsidies. In France, police **used violence** including stun grenades at a protest against road construction in June and banned another protest in August. In Australia, activists opposing a huge **coal terminal** development and a **gas project** were among those arrested in 2024.

In Uganda, campaigners against a major oil development, the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, continue to face state repression. In May and June, authorities **arbitrarily arrested** 11 activists involved in the campaign. They have faced intimidation and pressure to stop their activism.


Photo by Cem Ozdel/Anadolu via Getty Images

Mourners attend the funeral of environmental leader Juan López, shot dead for his anti-mining activism, in Tocoa, Honduras, 16 September 2024.

Activists from Cambodia's Mother Nature group have paid a **heavy price** for their work in trying to stand up to powerful economic and political interests seeking to exploit the environment. In July, 10 young activists from the group were **given long jail sentences** after documenting river pollution.

Serbia's increasingly authoritarian government has responded to **protests** against lithium mining with repression. Lithium is used in electric vehicle batteries, but its extraction is highly polluting. Civil society won a victory in stopping licensing in 2022, but the decision was **reversed** in 2024. Protesters against plans to resume mining have been **vilified** by the president and **jailed** for blocking railway lines.

Some states, like the UK, have recently rewritten protest laws to expand the range of offences, increase sentences and strengthen police powers. In July, five Just Stop Oil activists were handed **brutally long sentences** of up to five years merely for planning a roadblock protest. The UK now arrests environmental protesters at **three times** the global average rate.

Italy's **right-wing government** is **introducing new restrictions**. In January, parliament passed a law on what it calls 'eco-vandals' in response to high-profile awareness-raising stunts at monuments and cultural sites. People could now receive jail terms of up to five years. Another repressive law is being introduced that will allow sentences of up to two years for roadblock protests.

The work continues

In difficult conditions, change remains possible. Every fraction of a degree that temperature rises can be limited to matters for the lives of millions of people. 2024 delivered some important achievements. In September, for example, the UK shut down its last coal-fired power station; just a decade earlier, around 30 per cent of the UK's electricity came from coal. This was a testament to the power of long-running **civil society advocacy**.

In the EU, a breakthrough came in July with the adoption of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. This aims to protect human rights and the environment while responding to climate change, requiring large companies to align with the Paris Agreement. European courts will have new powers to hold companies to account, with fines for violations. In some cases, civil society groups will be able to bring claims against companies.

Civil society **played a major role** in campaigning for the directive, working with the EU presidency and supportive states and engaging with large companies to encourage their support, in the face of opposition from right-wing parties. Some compromises had to be made to get the deal through, with the final directive focusing on a

smaller number of companies. And now the rightward shift and loss of seats for green parties in the European Parliament may mean less urgency. It falls to civil society to keep up the pressure and scrutinise companies over their compliance.

Another landmark came in May, when the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea issued its first climate-related **ruling**, stating that greenhouse gases absorbed by oceans count as marine pollution. This means states are expected to control and reduce emissions. The court's opinion sets an important precedent in establishing that states have obligations beyond the Paris Agreement.

The ruling could help inform other international processes seeking to raise the bar on states' responsibilities. In December, the ICJ **began hearing a case** brought by a group of Pacific Island states. They're seeking an advisory opinion on what states are required to do to address climate change and help countries suffering its worst impacts. The origins of the case lie in civil society: in 2019, student groups in eight countries **formed** the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change network to urge their national leaders to take the issue to the court. The court has now heard submissions from over 100 states and organisations. A positive ruling could create a powerful new norm that civil society can use to hold states to account.

Similar action is underway at the regional level. In 2023, Chile and Colombia asked the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for an advisory opinion on their duties and obligations to protect human rights in the face of the climate crisis. Public hearings took place in 2024, reflecting the **high level of interest**, with over 220 **civil society groups** making submissions. The court is expected to issue its opinion in 2025.

Looking ahead

There's a rocky road ahead, given the implications of Trump's return. The world's biggest historical emitter and largest current fossil fuel extractor has once again given notice of its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, **torn up** renewable energy policies and made it easier to drill for fossil fuels. In response, other industrialised nations must show climate leadership. US subnational administrations under more progressive control must do all they can to curb emissions.

Even then, radical change is needed on funding. It may be hard to reach international agreements on climate and the environment, but it's clearly even harder to finance them. Ambition is needed in 2025. The figures involved may seem huge, but in global terms they're tiny. The US$1.3 trillion needed for climate action is less than one per cent of global GDP, and far less than military spending. It's also much less than the cost will be of dealing with the damage caused by unabated climate change.

To drive more ambitious commitments and follow-up, it's also necessary to reform summit processes so states genuinely committed to climate action host and lead, civil society is able to participate fully and fossil fuel lobbyists are excluded. Civil society will be pushing for improvements at COP30 in Brazil this November.

Ahead of COP30, states are required to submit new plans – nationally determined contributions – to cut greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. This is probably the last chance to keep the temperature rise below 1.5 degrees. Civil society is pushing for these plans to show the ambition needed – and for money to be mobilised at the scale required.

Without civil society pressure, there'll be no progress. States and companies must stop attacking climate and environmental activists and organisations. They must let civil society play its leading role in responding to the crisis.



TECHNOLOGY: HUMAN PERILS OF DIGITAL POWER

TECH BILLIONAIRES ARE INCREASINGLY ALIGNING WITH RIGHT-WING POLITICS AND AUTHORITARIANISM, ABANDONING PREVIOUS COMMITMENTS TO SOCIAL GOALS IN FAVOUR OF PROFIT AND POWER.

AI TECHNOLOGIES ARE GIVING RISE TO MOUNTING CONCERNS, INCLUDING OVER CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS, SURVEILLANCE CAPABILITIES AND BIASED OUTPUTS, WHILE MAJOR POWERS RESIST GLOBAL SAFEGUARDS.

CIVIL SOCIETY FACES CHALLENGES IN HOLDING TECH PLATFORMS ACCOUNTABLE AS SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES PRIORITISE ENGAGEMENT OVER TRUTH, ALTHOUGH COUNTERMEASURES SUCH AS ADVERTISER PRESSURE AND LEGAL CHALLENGES MAY HELP.

AI concerns

There's growing awareness of AI's climate and environmental impacts. The huge data centres needed to power AI consume vast amounts of electricity and water, and as AI expands, so does the problem. A single question to an AI chatbot can use **10 times more energy** than a conventional search. As a result, AI growth is driving a **boom** in the construction of gas-powered electricity plants, even though these should be phased out to meet climate goals. Thanks to expansion of its data centres, Google's greenhouse gas emissions **leapt 48 per cent** from 2019 to 2023; so much for its stated aim of becoming net zero by 2030.

The latest innovation, DeepSeek, could alleviate some of these concerns, since it appears not to need data centres on the same scale. But there are other questions about this Chinese development that caused a stir in January 2025, when it instantly became the most downloaded app in over 150 countries. Ask DeepSeek a question about Hong Kong, Taiwan or Tiananmen Square and it will either

Photo by John Moore/Getty Images

US Border Patrol agents photograph people to capture biometric data for tracking purposes at a migrant processing centre in Arizona, USA, 7 December 2023.

clam up or spew out Chinese state propaganda. It's a development that does nothing to alleviate fears that AI will help manipulate opinions by spreading narratives based on lies.

The power of disinformation, as seen in many of 2024's elections, has been turbocharged by developments in generative AI – technologies that produce text, images and videos from prompts. These tools reflect the biases of their makers and the inputs they've been fed, and have simplified the creation of convincing fake photos and videos. Even when disinformation isn't deliberate, generative AI has a habit of making up plausible sounding but factually incorrect answers. A recent study suggests **around a fifth** of BBC news obtained from AI chatbots contains factual errors.

Both generative AI and the quest for artificial general intelligence – which could replicate and surpass human ability to learn and understand – could bring benefits, but they also raise an array of concerns. It may sound alarmist to voice fears, but in December 2024 the scientist often considered the 'godfather' of AI, Nobel laureate Geoffrey Hinton, offered a chilling **warning** that there's a 10 to 20 per cent chance of AI wiping out humanity within decades.

AI models currently in use have already brought concerns about impacts on jobs, copyright and intellectual property, given the human-generated material they're trained on, and biased results that fuel further exclusion.

AI is also increasingly used in surveillance technologies, including the growing field of facial, emotional and biometric recognition. Here there are issues of bias, overreach and function creep, as technologies that may initially be used to combat terrorism, for example, become more widely deployed to undermine freedoms simply because they're available. AI's growing military use is another area of concern; in February 2025, Google's parent company Alphabet **dropped** its promise not to use AI for weapons development or surveillance, a far cry from Google's former don't be evil' motto.

It's clear developments in AI are far outstripping the pace of regulation. But when the AI Action Summit was held in Paris in February 2025, while around 60 states endorsed a statement backing sustainable, open, transparent, ethical and safe AI, the USA and UK **refused to sign**, with the USA expressing concern about 'excessive regulation'. One of the first things Trump did was **rescind** an executive order that established AI safeguards. The danger is of a growing regulatory gap.

Spyware is another issue that civil society is concerned about, and that affects civil society. Numerous states have used Pegasus spyware, supplied by Israel's NSO Group, to spy on civil society, the media and the political opposition. The government of Jordan is the latest **revealed** to be using Pegasus, targeting at least 35 people as part of a sustained civic space crackdown.

There's an urgent need to ban spyware, which the NSO Group only sells to states, and for a global moratorium on the development and sale of digital surveillance technologies until strong human rights safeguards are in place.

Tech leaders align with Trump

If only tech leaders could be trusted. But they're increasingly showing they can't. Silicon Valley's billionaire entrepreneurs once tried to paint themselves as socially conscious, but their act has become increasingly difficult to maintain.

One troubling sign is the way they quickly **lined up** behind the Trump administration, **donating millions of dollars** to his inauguration fund. Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft and Uber each gave US$1 million, and tech CEOs such as Apple's Tim Cook and OpenAI's Sam Altman chipped in too.

At the very least, donations of this unusual magnitude signalled a determination to stay onside with a fractious president. They may also have indicated a desire to limit potential AI and cryptocurrency regulation and grab a greater share of defence spending.

But for Meta, owner of Facebook, Instagram, Threads and WhatsApp, the donation was just one of the ways it's taken a pro-Trump-direction. In January 2025, the company **announced** it was ditching its independent fact-checking programme in the USA. Zuckerberg claimed fact checking had led to excessive censorship and the move would promote free speech. Instead, Meta will adopt something similar to Twitter/X's community notes system.

Zuckerberg's conflation of fact-checking with censorship is disturbing, and there are many **problems** with Twitter/X's alternative, including that most disinformation spreads before notes can correct it. Meta has already been **accused** of failing to prevent its platforms being used to spread hate speech that fuelled violence in India, Myanmar and recently in **Ethiopia**, while **systematically censoring** posts speaking out for Palestine. Under its changed policies, it's now **acceptable** to accuse LGBTQI+ people of being mentally ill or refer to women as property. Trump **welcomed** the changes.

Meta also **agreed** to pay Trump US$25 million to settle a lawsuit he filed after the company suspended his accounts following the January 2021 insurrection and **axed** its DEI initiatives following the Trump administration's attacks on them. Zuckerberg's charity, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, **ditched** its DEI team too. Other tech companies have **followed suit**: Google dropped diversity hiring targets and announced it would no longer observe events like Black History Month and Pride Month, while Amazon removed the diversity and inclusion section of its annual report.

For some tech leaders, alignment with right-wing populism has come easily. They see themselves as exceptional people to whom normal rules don't apply. They like to move fast and break things, to quote Facebook's former motto. They're suspicious of the state – unless, perhaps, they're in charge. They see Trump as a kindred spirit. None more so than Elon Musk.

Musk makes his move

Generally reckoned to be the world's richest man, Musk put his fortune at the service of getting Trump elected, appearing at his rallies, donating **US$288 million** and offering swing-state voters the chance to **win US$1 million** for signing a pro-Trump petition.

Musk consistently retweets extremist content. He has the most

followers, and in 2023 he insisted on **algorithm changes** to make his content even more prominent. So whatever he touches has huge reach – particularly in the USA, where the platform has the most users, and among the young men who **disproportionately use** it. Buying Twitter/X may have been bad business – the company is believed to be worth a fraction of the US$44 billion he paid – but it was successful politics. A once relatively liberal platform is now a right-wing bastion. Many leftist voices have left, banned extremists have been allowed back and Musk **intervenes constantly** to steer the conversation.

The business leader no one voted for has inserted himself into the heart of Trump's oligarchical operation, heading the pseudo government Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) with the professed aim of achieving drastic public spending cuts, although the agenda is clearly more political than financial. Among federal bodies targeted **are those** perceived by the Trump camp to have a liberal bias, including the Department of Education, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which provides climate data, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the world's biggest aid agency.

The USAID spending freeze, imposed at Musk's prompting in January 2025, caused instant chaos. Programmes that provide the world's poorest and most vulnerable people with vital services like healthcare shut down. Refugees from Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya minority, for example, were **left** without the most basic aid in camps in Bangladesh.

Civil society has been rocked. Many CSOs and independent media working in restricted civic space and conflict settings where domestic resources are lacking rely on USAID support. This includes many **independent Ukrainian and exiled Russian** media organisations, which have been left **struggling**.

If the cuts become permanent, the result will be a diminished civil society far less able to defend rights and hold the powerful to account. The fact that some of the world's most authoritarian leaders **welcomed the move** said it all. This wasn't a step anyone who cares about democracy and human rights – including freedom of speech – would take.

Photo by Julia Demaree Nikhinson/Pool via Reuters/Gallo Images

Tech leaders including Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Google's Sundar Pichai and Twitter/X's Elon Musk attend Donald Trump's inauguration in Washington DC, 20 January 2025.

It isn't just with the USAID freeze that Musk has had an impact beyond the USA's borders. He's repeatedly intervened in the UK's politics, attacking Prime Minister Keir Starmer and posting and boosting far-right content. Following a series of **riots** sparked by anti-migrant and anti-Muslim disinformation in the wake of a horrific knife attack, he **posted** that 'civil war is inevitable' in the UK, **shared disinformation** from the leader of a far-right hate group and promoted the false claim that the UK's criminal justice system treats Muslims more leniently.

Musk also intervened in Germany. Ahead of the **February 2025 election**, he **hosted** a 75-minute uncritical interview with AfD co-leader Alice Weidel and claimed that 'only the AfD can save Germany'.

Poster installed by the activist collective Everyone Hates Elon Musk on a bus shelter in London, UK, 12 March 2025.

Striking back

Social media has power because so many use it, and people can choose which platforms they use and don't use. Hundreds of thousands, and several CSOs and businesses, quit Twitter/X following Trump's re-election. But the broader challenges were seen in the fact that many fled to Threads, only to face another choice when Zuckerberg introduced his Trump-friendly changes.

As new platforms emerge, populist and nationalist politicians continue to do best on them. In 2024, TikTok, with its young demographic, was embraced by Trump, along with Subianto in **Indonesia** and Georgescu in **Romania**. In many elections, such as those in Germany and the USA, young men in particular are **disproportionately** backing right-wing populists, and it's a trend partly influenced by the social media they're relentlessly exposed to.

Much political debate takes place on platforms that exist to get eyeballs on advertising. Algorithms seek to keep users hooked by serving eye-catching, sensationalist content. This rewards simplistic and populist narratives over nuance and reasoned debate.

But as people become more selective about the platforms they use, the notion of being participants in a shared global town square recedes, replaced by the danger of retreat into smaller circles of confirmation bias. For some companies and creatives, switching from platforms with broad reach to others with less engagement isn't feasible, while progressive voices might not want to cede territory to regressive forces. Completely quitting social media is hard because it's addictive by design.

Pressure on advertisers is one response, given how important ad revenue is. When civil society **research** found that hate speech against Black US citizens on Twitter/X tripled after Musk's takeover, publicity about its findings led to a fall of around US$100 million in ad

Photo by UN/Department of Economic and Social Affairs

The 2024 Internet Governance Forum, supposedly intended to address the opportunities and risks posed by AI and other digital technologies, was held in Saudi Arabia, where the state frequently criminalises online expression.

revenue. There's also evidence of a backlash against Musk in a **sharp drop** in Tesla cars sales in Europe.

It's hard to see progress without proper and principled regulation. But there are huge dangers. When states introduce social media bans, it's often to block criticism and scrutiny. In 2024, social media restrictions in countries including **Bangladesh**, **Pakistan** and **Solomon Islands** served precisely that function. In the USA, Trump suspended Biden's TikTok **ban**, imposed on the grounds that its Chinese ownership made it a threat, but the condition may be that its owners sell its US arm to one of his supporters, a move that would replace concerns about Chinese state influence with those of pro-Trump bias.

Brazil however proved it's possible to hold social media companies to account. Its supreme court **banned Twitter/X** after it repeatedly refused to comply with orders to moderate content from several accounts linked to an attempted **far-right insurrection** in January 2023. The court imposed heavy fines for non-compliance, but Twitter/X closed its Brazil offices. When the company failed to meet a deadline to appoint a legal representative, the court ordered its closure.

The move was controversial, with civil society particularly critical of an order for VPN services to block access. But whatever the rights and wrongs of the decision, the result was that despite much posturing, Musk backed down. He doesn't have to get his way. It's possible to strike a balance between freedom of expression and holding social media platforms accountable.

Regulation pitfalls

The global nature of the challenge demands an international response. Not much progress was made as part of the UN's 2024 Summit of the Future on strengthening international cooperation, which adopted the **Global Digital Compact**. Civil society **engaged extensively with the process** but didn't necessarily see its input on key human rights issues reflected in the resulting text. While the compact condemns surveillance and calls for privacy protections, it's silent on the gendered aspects of online abuse and pulled its punches on internet shutdowns.

Not all internet regulation is good news. In August, the UN agreed a **Cybercrime Convention**. There's no doubt people need protections from cybercrime, which is expected to cost **over US$10 trillion** this year. But it's also the case that many states brand people as cybercriminals merely for speaking out. **Numerous states** have adopted broad and excessive cybercrime laws, and in 2024, authorities in countries including **Indonesia**, **Jordan**, **Nigeria** and **Serbia** used their heavy-handed laws to arrest and detain people,

including for raising concerns about environmental issues, exposing corruption and expressing solidarity with Palestine. Now such repression could be presented as compliance with a global treaty.

Many in civil society questioned why the treaty, **sponsored** by Russia, was needed: existing agreements, particularly the Council of Europe's **Budapest Convention**, which is **only partially operational**, would suffice if implemented. The challenge was one of damage control, with civil society **engaging** to demand human rights safeguards and advance a narrow definition of cybercrime that didn't encompass online expression.

The final treaty, while better than the first draft, **lacks** clear, specific and enforceable human rights protections, leaving them up to domestic law. It gives wide scope for international cooperation in data collection and sharing, offering disturbing potential for the expansion of surveillance powers. Civil society is calling on states to consult before ratifying, and to ensure their response to cybercrime is consistent with respect for human rights.

The UN's latest Internet Governance Forum, held in December, didn't offer much of an opportunity for civil society to debate the treaty. Shockingly, it was hosted by authoritarian Saudi Arabia, and when civil society tried to highlight the fact that the host government is one of the worst offenders in jailing people for online expression, UN staff apparently intervened to **remove critical content**. At the very least, the UN must guarantee safe international spaces to discuss human rights and tech issues.

When it comes to AI, the most significant regulatory development in 2024 was the entry into force of the EU's AI Act. Again, civil society **engaged with the process**, which led to some improvements, including limits on biometric identification and the inclusion of fundamental rights impact assessments. But again, there are **strong concerns** about insufficient human rights safeguards. AI systems are exempt from protections if they're used for national security, loopholes allow some surveillance systems and migrants aren't accorded have the same rights as EU citizens. The potential remains for the EU's more repressive states, such as Hungary and Slovakia, to use AI against civil society, and for states to deploy it in a race to the bottom on migrants' rights.

What's clear is that tech leaders, whether Musk, Zuckerberg or those who take a lower profile, can't be trusted to self-regulate, and regulation can't be left to states either. In difficult times, it remains necessary to assert the centrality of human rights and push for global standards consistent with them. Civil society's voices must urgently take centre stage in this crucial debate.







GENDER RIGHTS: BACKLASH, RESISTANCE AND PERSISTENCE

GENDER RIGHTS ARE REGRESSING GLOBALLY DUE TO THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND ANTI-RIGHTS POLICIES.

ANTI-LGBTQI+ LEGISLATION IS SPREADING ACROSS REGIONS AND IS INCREASINGLY BEING USED AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL CONTROL.

THROUGH STRATEGIC RESISTANCE AND PERSISTENCE, CIVIL SOCIETY CONTINUES TO WIN VICTORIES FOR WOMEN'S AND LGBTQI+ RIGHTS.

The rollback of DEI initiatives so enthusiastically backed by leading tech companies is one of the ways in which Trump's return has quickly dismantled protections for women's and LGBTQI+ rights. These are under attack by right-wing populists the world over.

Meanwhile the impacts of the USAID spending freeze will disproportionately affect women and girls, particularly those in conflict zones, rural areas and the world's least wealthy countries. The Guttmacher Institute **projects** that the freeze will deny 11.7 million women access to contraception, potentially leading to 4.2 million unintended pregnancies and over 8,300 maternal deaths. Even if the spending pause ends, the Trump administration has also reinstated the **global gag rule**, which restricts aid to organisations that provide or advocate for abortion services. During Trump's first term, this policy **resulted** in around 108,000 maternal and child deaths and 360,000 new HIV infections.

These shifts reflect a broader global trend of right-wing movements targeting gender rights, with surveys in countries with a recent track

Photo by Simona Granati/Corbis via Getty Images

Ahead of International Women's Day, women protest against gender apartheid and call for the UN to recognise the systematic oppression of women as a crime against humanity in Rome, Italy, 7 March 2025.

record of policies to improve rights increasingly showing that many, particularly young men, believe efforts to promote gender equality have gone too far, even though the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Gender Index** shows how far even the most progressive countries are from gender equality.

Activists across continents link much of the backlash to the growing organisation and mobilisation of anti-rights forces, in a backlash that encompasses social media disinformation, hate speech and misogyny and extends beyond national borders into international forums. Over the years, and 2024 was no exception, activists have **observed** the growing presence of **increasingly vocal anti-gender groups** at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which convenes every March with the stated aim of advancing gender justice.

A global landscape of rights erosion

There's a disturbing pattern of rights erosion spanning multiple regions. The most extreme example of gender rights regression remains **Afghanistan**, where the Taliban has methodically constructed a comprehensive system of **gender apartheid**. Women have been systematically stripped of their rights to work, education and leisure, increasingly confined to their homes in an attempt to literally **silence their voices** and erase them from public life.

In **Iran**, the aftermath of widespread 2022 and 2023 protests sparked by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a young woman detained for breaching hijab laws, showed the theocratic regime's determination to maintain control through brutal repression. The crackdown left over 500 dead, thousands injured and many more imprisoned. This was followed by a **wave of executions** aimed at creating fear and **discouraging** further mobilisation attempts.

In another alarming case of regression, Iraq's parliament is considering **amendments** to the 1959 Personal Status Law that could lower the minimum marriage age to nine and remove women's rights to divorce, custody and inheritance. The situation for LGBTQI+ people also remains dire, with parliament **passing legislation** imposing severe prison penalties for same-sex relations and transgender identities.

In **Russia**, the government's campaign against 'child-free propaganda' represents a new form of state control over women's bodies and choices. Parliament passed a bill banning the promotion of what it calls a 'childless lifestyle' in media, films and online content. The government characterised this as an effort to promote 'traditional family values' and address demographic challenges exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. This is part of a trend seen in recent years in which right-wing populists and nationalists, including in Hungary and Italy, have introduced policies to counter falling birthrates. The motivations are at least partly racist, inspired by the white supremacist 'great replacement' conspiracy theory that

white Christian populations are being replaced by Black and Brown Muslim people. These policies dovetail with restrictions on women's reproductive rights, including abortion rights, and LGBTQI+ rights.

One of the ways in which **Georgia** followed Russia's lead was by introducing a law to **severely restrict** LGBTQI+ people and organisations. Bulgaria's parliament took similar steps, **passing** an education law banning 'LGBTQI+ propaganda' in schools by a significant majority, despite vocal street protests. The law aimed to appeal to far-right voters at a time of political volatility. Proposed by a pro-Russia party, it criminalises discussion of non-traditional sexual orientations and gender identities in education settings. As in Russia, it positions LGBTQI+ rights as a threat to child protection.

LGBTQI+ people and organisations in Turkey face increasing public vilification, criminalisation and bans on Pride marches and symbols. The latest target is Tarlabaşı Toplum Merkezi, a CSO, with the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs, the İstanbul Governor's Office, government politicians and pro-government media **pushing for its closure**. This coordinated campaign shows how anti-gender attacks are often part of a broader political agenda, linked to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's determination to stay in power by appealing to socially conservative voters.

In **China**, women's rights activists are being targeted because the totalitarian government sees their independent activism as a threat to its monopoly on power. In June, it sentenced Sophia Huang Xueqin, a prominent #MeToo activist, and Wang Jianbing, a labour rights activist and campaigner against workplace harassment, to five and three and a half years in prison for 'inciting subversion of state power'.

New laws targeting LGBTQI+ rights, often driven by political opportunism, have been introduced in several African countries. **Mali's** military junta passed a law criminalising homosexuality as part of its broader crackdown on rights. **Ghana's** parliament passed a draconian 'anti-LGBTQI+ bill' and **Uganda's** Constitutional Court

Photo by Chanakarn Laosarakham/AFP via Getty Images

People celebrate on 18 June 2024 as Thailand becomes the first country in Southeast Asia to legally recognise same-sex marriage.

upheld the country's harsh **Anti-Homosexuality Act**. A **Family Protection Bill** that would outlaw LGBTQI+ advocacy remains before parliament in Kenya. In **Malawi**, the Constitutional Court dismissed a petition challenging the criminalisation of same-sex relations, arguing there's no evidence criminalisation is discriminatory.

Claiming rights against the odds

In challenging political environments, civil society continues to secure important victories. **Thailand** became the first country in Southeast Asia to legalise same-sex marriage, while **Greece** became the first majority Orthodox Christian country to do so. In **South Korea**, the Supreme Court dismissed a government appeal and affirmed that same-sex couples are entitled to the same health insurance benefits

Photo by Amanda Perobelli/Reuters via Gallo Images

Women in São Paulo, Brazil, protest against a proposed law that would classify abortions after 22 weeks as murder, 15 June 2024.

as heterosexual couples. **Germany** and **Sweden** passed laws making it easier for transgender people to legally change their gender. In Australia, **New South Wales** state banned conversion therapy, a pseudoscientific practice that human rights experts consider akin to torture, while **Kentucky** became the 24th US state to prohibit it.

Amid intensified national-level attacks, US campaigners scored state-level **victories**, with several state courts ruling to protect gender identity rights and legislatures outlawing book bans and passing shield laws to protect people crossing state lines to get reproductive health services or gender-affirming care. Reproductive rights remain a **battleground**. While access to abortion is banned or restricted in **19 US states**, voters in **seven out of 10** states with ballot measures in 2024 passed provisions expanding or protecting abortion access. France strengthened its protection of reproductive rights by **enshrining** the right to abortion in its constitution. This stood in stark contrast to continuing struggles elsewhere in Europe, particularly in Poland, which has some of the **strictest abortion laws**, and where attempts to decriminalise abortion assistance were **narrowly defeated** in parliament despite the **new coalition** government's reform promise. Progressive change also **failed to materialise** in Ireland, where two initiatives to modernise the constitution by expanding the definition of the family beyond traditional marriage and removing sexist language about women's role in the home were soundly defeated in referendums.

The debate in France extended beyond reproductive rights, as thousands **rallied** in September in support of rape survivor Gisèle Pelicot. Her brave testimony of the horrific crimes she endured could become a catalyst for legal reform, potentially leading to the adoption of a consent-based definition of rape, a step **Poland** took in June. Another response to demand justice in the wake of dreadful events came in **India**, where large-scale protests against gender-based violence followed the rape and murder of a 31-year-old female medical trainee.

The struggle for reproductive rights remains particularly challenging in Central America. In **Honduras**, which bans abortion with no exceptions, activists took their case to the UN Human Rights Committee. In El Salvador, which has equally restrictive legislation, activists **await a ruling** from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that they hope will pave the way for the legalisation of abortion.

In Brazil, thousands of women **protested** against a bill that would classify abortion after 22 weeks as homicide, punishable by six to 20 years in prison. Abortion is currently legal in Brazil only in cases of rape, foetal malformation or danger to the life of a pregnant person. The bill, promoted by evangelical representatives, would criminalise people who have abortions more severely than rapists. Public outcry has taken on the anti-rights threat, slowing down the bill's progress.

In Argentina, now under a **far-right administration**, June saw renewed #NiUnaMenos (NotOneLess) demonstrations against gender-based violence. Argentinians again **took to the streets**

in February 2025 to **protest** against President Javier Milei's homophobic rhetoric and reject plans to remove femicide as an aggravated category of homicide from the Criminal Code.

Despite increasing restrictions, African feminist movements kept **gender-based violence** on the agenda by combining street protests, advocacy and online campaigning. Kenya's #EndFemicideKE protests **encouraged survivors** to seek justice and resulted in new government commitments, even though they faced the same police repression as economic protests. Activists again **demanded** action on rising femicides on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in November, when they were also dispersed with teargas. People also protested against femicides in **Somalia**.

The global struggle to ban child marriage saw success in **Colombia** and **Sierra Leone**, while campaigners scored a major victory in The Gambia when widespread protests helped **defeat a bill** seeking to decriminalise female genital mutilation (FGM), a practice **outlawed in 2015**. **FGM remains illegal** and is punishable by up to three years in prison. This outcome demonstrated the power of coordinated civil society action.

Meanwhile, **Namibia's** High Court bucked the regional regressive trend on LGBTQI+ rights when it overturned colonial-era provisions that criminalised same-sex acts between men. While the ban was rarely enforced, it enabled discrimination and violence and prevented LGBTQI+ people from accessing healthcare. However, backlash led to the enactment of a law **banning** same-sex marriage just months later.

In Kenya, where homosexuality remains criminalised, a court issued an interim ruling following a petition from an activist group ordering anti-LGBTQI+ groups and people to refrain from inciting violence against LGBTQI+ people. This offered a **temporary reprieve** from hate speech, vilification campaigns and threats of violence.

In the Caribbean, **Dominica's** High Court overturned a colonial-era ban on consensual same-sex relations in response to a civil society lawsuit, following similar recent victories in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados and St Kitts and Nevis. As elsewhere, activists **acknowledged** that legal change is just one step in a much longer journey, and continue to work on shifting social attitudes and behaviours while pushing for similar changes in the five Commonwealth Caribbean states that still criminalise same-sex relations. Among them is **St Vincent and the Grenadines**, where years of activism led to disappointment as the High Court rejected a legal challenge and upheld criminalisation. In **Turks and Caicos Islands**, activists have also brought a legal challenge against discriminatory legislation against LGBTQI+ people, seeking the same rights as married partners.

Even in the most repressive environments, activists are finding ways to resist. Afghan and Iranian women continue to campaign for gender apartheid to be recognised as a crime under international law to help enable accountability and redress. At home, they have turned to more subtle forms of civil disobedience to keep up the pressure without risking their lives.

The global **16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence**, with actions on several continents, was the culmination of year-long grassroots feminist efforts. **Pride events** worldwide exemplified resilience against backlash, with participants defiantly asserting visibility in the face of attempts to deny LGBTQI+ people's right to exist in public spaces, despite in some cases facing restrictions on their right to assemble and **violence** from anti-rights groups. While offering opportunities for celebration, Pride events also retained their vibrant protest character, with participants marking hard-won victories, showing unity and determination to respond to setbacks and expressing solidarity with people in more restrictive environments denied the chance to mobilise.

Photo by Manon Cruz/Reuters via Gallo Images

A protester holds a sign reading 'Shame changes sides' in support of rape survivor Gisèle Pelicot outside a courthouse in Avignon, France, 23 November 2024.

Reasons for hope

The scale of the **challenges** is daunting, but there are reasons for hope. Alongside the victories and defeats, 2024 offered valuable lessons. It showed that progress is neither linear nor inevitable, requiring constant vigilance even in seemingly progressive contexts. Examples abounded of legally established rights facing renewed challenges as political landscapes shifted. As activists in countries ranging from Dominica to **Greece** pointed out, one clear lesson was that legal changes must be accompanied by much more laborious social transformation to achieve lasting impact.

The importance of intersectionality was particularly evident in the year's victories. The success of Thailand's same-sex marriage campaign was at least partly due to its **intersection** with the country's youthful democracy movement. Iran's women and LGBTQI+ people, groups equally targeted by theocratic repression, are also both at the **forefront** of the liberation struggle.

International solidarity continues to play a vital role, particularly in supporting activists in the most repressive environments. However, the increasing interconnectedness and sophistication of anti-rights movements, domestically and in the global arena, suggests that rights defenders must also strengthen their transnational networks and strategies.

Looking ahead, the key challenge remains that of supporting and strengthening movements to resist backlash while protecting hard-won gains. The experiences of 2024 demonstrate that even in the face of severe repression and organised opposition, civil society can achieve meaningful progress through strategic adaptation, creativity and sheer persistence.

MIGRANTS' RIGHTS: HUMANITY VERSUS HOSTILITY

GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT HAS HIT A NEW RECORD, WITH MOST REFUGEES HOSTED BY GLOBAL SOUTH COUNTRIES.

DESPITE RECEIVING A MINORITY OF MIGRANTS, GLOBAL NORTH STATES ARE ADOPTING INCREASINGLY RESTRICTIVE POLICIES, DRIVEN BY A RIGHTWARDS SHIFT.

CIVIL SOCIETY CONTINUES DEFENDING MIGRANTS' RIGHTS DESPITE GROWING CRIMINALISATION OF ITS HUMANITARIAN WORK.

The same regressive forces attacking women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights are also targeting migrants and refugees. Here, they're finding an even more receptive audience among many governments. Worsening political hostility means civil society faces mounting challenges in efforts to protect migrants' rights. The situation is becoming particularly difficult in two major migration corridors where a concerning trend of prioritising border control over human rights has consolidated: North America and the EU.

Anti-migrant policies deny the reality that more people are on the move than ever before. Each year, with 2024 being no exception, sees a record in the number of migrants and refugees. An estimated **123 million** people are now forcibly displaced worldwide, including **75.9 million** internally displaced. Sudan's conflict alone has left almost **11 million** people internally displaced, the highest figure ever recorded for a single country. Many others are fleeing to neighbouring Chad and South Sudan, which are grappling with their own humanitarian crises.

Millions have fled Ukraine, while over two million have been internally displaced in the DRC, along with a similar number in Gaza and Lebanon. In the **Americas**, one of the largest modern migratory movements continues unabated, with an estimated eight million Venezuelans having fled since 2015, the largest recorded forced displacement not caused by war.

The ongoing surge in migration is driven by a complex interplay of factors including conflict, political persecution, human rights violations, economic strife and climate disasters. But the political backlash that mobilises against people forced on the move generally doesn't address the causes.

Current frameworks for understanding migration, particularly the artificial distinction between voluntary migration and forced displacement, are increasingly inadequate. They fail to understand the complex realities of movement, where economic necessity can be as coercive as direct persecution. Reality also disproves prejudice: contrary to what the backlash suggests, most migration occurs between global south countries, rather than from global south to north. At least **71 per cent** of the world's international refugees are hosted in global south countries and 69 per cent stay in countries that neighbour their own.

Tightening restrictions in the global north

Migration policies have become increasingly restrictive in the USA. During the first Trump administration, the USA pursued a deterrence policy, marked by the propagandised construction of about 130 kilometres worth of **new barriers** on the US-Mexico border, the separation of families and the implementation of the **Remain in Mexico** policy, which forced asylum seekers to await their US immigration court hearings in Mexico. Human rights organisations widely condemned these policies. The Biden administration pursued

Photo by David Peinado/Anadolu via Getty Image

People wait to surrender to US authorities after crossing the Río Grande from Mexico, 7 March 2024.

a mix of humanitarian and restrictive measures: it rolled back some of its predecessor's restrictive measures but implemented stricter asylum rules and expanded **Title 42 expulsions**, a policy initially introduced during the pandemic to rapidly expel migrants at the border.

The US Border Patrol **reported** over 2.1 million encounters at the border with Mexico during the 2024 fiscal year, down from 2.5 million in 2023. This was attributed to a new approach that combined restricting asylum eligibility for those who crossed the border without permission and expanding legal migration pathways. But this changed on day one of the second Trump administration, with a succession of executive orders declaring a '**national emergency**' at the southern border, enabling military deployment, cancelling the **mobile app** used to process applications, suspending all entries by declaring an 'invasion' and dissolving the family reunification taskforce that was still working to reunite families separated by the first Trump administration.

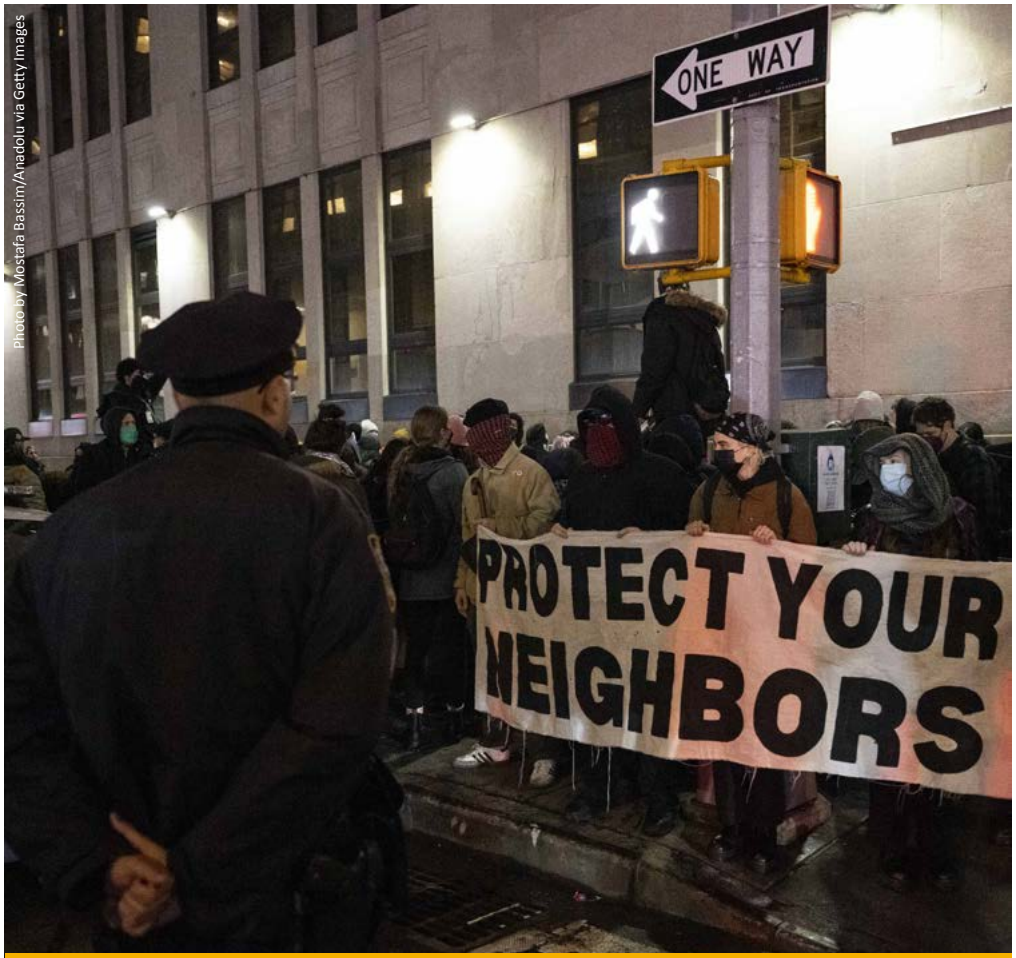


Photo by Mostafa Bassim/Anadolu via Getty Images

Protesters march against raids targeting migrants in New York, USA, 13 February 2025.

Inauguration Day orders **instructed** immigration authorities to detain people 'to the fullest extent permitted by law', and immigration raids started soon afterwards, **promising** the largest deportation programme in US history. The new approach, conflating illegal immigration with criminality and using rhetoric about invasion reminiscent of the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory, raised serious concerns about the potential for increased violence against migrants.

In Europe, the rise of right-wing populist politics has led to the prioritisation of border control over human rights. A February 2025 **gathering** of far-right European leaders in Madrid underscored the growing trend of anti-immigration sentiment. Representing the Patriots for Europe group, which holds 86 seats in the European Parliament, far-right leaders including France's Marine Le Pen, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Spain's Santiago Abascal explicitly positioned themselves against what they call 'open door immigration policies'. They claim immigration destabilises nations and threatens European identity and culture. This coalition amassed over 19 million votes in the European Parliament elections.

Even as the number of people entering the EU was falling, the European Commission's response to mounting political pressure was to develop the EU Migration Pact, a comprehensive legislative package aimed at facilitating deportations and allowing member states to close their borders on security grounds. The EU's approach has increasingly prioritised deterrence and externalised border control in states outside Europe, as evidenced by **controversial deals** with the authoritarian governments of **Egypt** and Tunisia, through which the EU provides substantial funding in exchange for heightened measures to stop migrants crossing into Europe. Thes agreements mirror that struck with Turkey in 2016, which enabled further human rights abuses. The result is **avoidable deaths** at the EU's borders and an **undermining** of the EU's claims to stand as a champion of human rights and civil society ally.

In 2024, some EU states echoed the policy **pioneered by the UK**,

Activists protest against the Italy-Albania migrant processing agreement as asylum seekers arrive on an Italian navy vessel in Shëngjin, Albania, 16 October 2024.

where the former government tried to remove asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing. The new government at least scrapped this plan, although the arguments it made were about cost and efficiency and there's been no let-up in hostile rhetoric.

Italy's **right-wing government** agreed to outsource the management of asylum and return procedures to **Albania**, allowing for the transfer of migrants rescued by Italian vessels in international waters to new Albanian detention centres, funded and administered by Italy. The policy was intended to act as a deterrent, and although it was initially **blocked by civil society court action**, it eventually **resumed**. However, the detention centres are currently empty following a further **court ruling** that ordered the government to return the people held there to Italy. Despite the scheme's problems, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is increasingly seen as an influential figure in the EU, and the European Commission is **backing** Italy's position in a European Court of Justice case to decide on the policy's legality.

Another outsourcing plan has been put forward in the Netherlands, with the Party for Freedom proposing to send rejected asylum seekers to Uganda in exchange for financial aid. Rights groups reject this abdication of the state's protection obligations, **highlighting** Uganda's problematic human rights record and anti-LGBTQI+ laws.

Germany changed its Schengen area passport-free policy, implementing expanded border controls. Civil society groups warn that these supposedly temporary measures could become permanent, potentially influencing other European countries to follow suit. The policy changes reflect the **far right's growing profile**, which has led several German states to push for increasingly stringent measures, including tougher deportation rules, reduced social benefits, tighter restrictions on family reunification and expanded powers for immigration enforcement.

Politicians instrumentalise migration

In many of 2024's elections, politicians cynically instrumentalised migration concerns and deliberately stoked tensions. Migration was a battleground in several campaigns, with parties on the right and, increasingly, in the centre taking hard-line stances.

This instrumentalisation often involved the use of misleading or false information about migrants, exaggerating the scale of immigration and linking migrants to crime and other social ills, rhetoric that dehumanises migrants and fosters a climate of fear and hostility.

Migration was a **dominant issue** in the run-up to the **UK's July election**. The incumbent Conservative government faced **sustained pressure** over the number of irregular crossings of the English

Channel. The Labour party, which won power, adopted a more aggressive tone, while the right-wing populist Reform UK party has made migration its core issue and now leads some polls. The ideological spectrum has shifted rightwards on immigration.

In the European Parliament elections, far-right parties running on explicitly anti-immigration platforms made **significant gains**. These included the National Rally's **significant victory** in France, the AfD's best-ever performance in Germany and the 28 per cent received by Meloni's Brothers of Italy. Bucking the trend, far-right parties with anti-immigration stances **underperformed** in Nordic countries, where they'd been on the rise only a few years earlier. They were surpassed by parties on the left, in part because far-right parties had already played a role in government in some countries and some voters were disenchanted with them.

The increased representation of far-right parties in the European Parliament is likely to have a significant impact on EU migration policy as they push for stricter border controls, reduced immigration levels and a greater emphasis on narrow national sovereignty.

Immigration was of course one of the most contentious and defining issues in the 2024 US presidential election, with the US-Mexico border question drawing intense focus from both major parties and intersecting with other major campaign themes, including public safety, economic policy and national security. Trump's victory suggests he won the argument on this. Civil society warned throughout that the politicisation of migration would only lead to more suffering and death among those attempting to cross into the USA.

The politicisation of migration isn't confined to the global north, as the use of populist anti-migrant rhetoric ahead of Tunisia's election indicates. In the Dominican Republic, Haitian migration was also a key issue in the May presidential election campaign, with most candidates seeking political gain by **exploiting racist prejudice** in Dominican society. In doing so, they further legitimised the

Protesters gather in Brighton, UK, to show solidarity with migrants and refugees at a counter-protest in response to anti-immigration rallies, 8 August 2024.

systematic violation of the rights of Haitian migrants and their descendants born in the Dominican Republic, many of whom are denied citizenship. In India, in the run-up to the Delhi Legislative Assembly election in February 2025, the two major parties in the assembly **competed** over which could position themselves as more hostile towards Bangladeshi migrants.

Civil society responses

Civil society is doing vital work protecting migrants' rights amid rising political hostility and increasingly restrictive policies. Its work spans search-and-rescue operations at sea, provision of humanitarian assistance, documentation of rights violations, support for integration into host communities, advocacy for policy change and education and

awareness-raising efforts to counter xenophobia and discrimination. However, activists and organisations that help migrants and refugees increasingly face legal repercussions.

The criminalisation of solidarity is particularly evident in southern Europe. Humanitarian groups carrying out search-and-rescue missions in the Mediterranean, where **over 2,200 migrants** drowned in 2024, face significant pushback from governments that view their actions as undermining border control efforts.

In 2023, Italy made it illegal for search-and-rescue organisations to conduct more than one rescue per trip, imposing heavy fines and boat seizures for noncompliance. Italian authorities routinely send rescue vessels to distant ports, forcing them to travel long distances to disembark survivors, and issue detention orders based on questionable allegations of maritime safety violations. For instance, in August, they issued a **60-day detention order** on the Doctors Without Borders vessel Geo Barents for supposedly endangering lives, based on information from the Libyan Coast Guard. In December, SOS Méditerranée was **forced to travel** over 1,600 kilometres to bring 162 survivors to safety after authorities ignored pleas for a closer port. These actions achieved their intended goal of reducing active rescue ships, leading to an increase in deaths.

In December the European Council developed a text to be considered by the European Parliament on **new EU rules** about migrant smuggling. Critics **argue** these could further criminalise migrants and those acting in solidarity with them.

The challenges extend beyond Europe. As part of the politicised hostility in **Tunisia**, those campaigning for the rights of Black African migrants face increasing criminalisation, with President Saied labelling them as 'traitors' and 'mercenaries' who receive foreign funding to help migrants settle. These accusations often lead to criminal charges, prosecution and arrests.

Despite the growing obstacles, civil society maintains its commitment to protecting migrants' and refugees' human rights. While acknowledging the economic and social anxieties that right-wing populists exploit, activists advocate for **domestic social policy solutions** that respect human rights and international cooperation aimed at **addressing migration's root causes** rather than punishing migrants. They emphasise the need to shift away from fear-based policies toward comprehensive solutions that uphold human dignity while addressing the complex drivers that put people on the move.

UNITED NATIONS: GLOBAL GOVERNANCE IN CRISIS

THE UN FACES MOUNTING CRISES THAT ARE OUTPACING ITS ABILITY TO RESPOND, AS POWERFUL STATES INCREASINGLY ASSERT NARROW NATIONAL INTERESTS OVER INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION.

THE UN'S SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE FELL SHORT OF CIVIL SOCIETY'S HOPES, WITH CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION LIMITED AND THE FINAL DOCUMENT LONG ON PLATITUDES BUT SHORT ON ACTIONABLE COMMITMENTS.

CIVIL SOCIETY PROPOSES REFORMS TO REVITALISE THE UN, INCLUDING DIGITAL PARTICIPATION, A CIVIL SOCIETY ENVOY AND A MORE TRANSPARENT SECRETARY-GENERAL SELECTION PROCESS.

The world's many current crises – including conflicts, climate breakdown, economic inequality, democratic regression and attacks on rights– are overwhelming the capabilities of global governance institutions designed to address problems beyond the capacity or willingness of states to solve. Emerging technologies such as AI and associated challenges such as disinformation urgently require new global solutions.

The UN bodies that began to develop in the wake of the Second World War have proven unable to prevent continuing human rights atrocities, from Gaza to Ukraine to Sudan. The UN's founding Charter articulates four principles: preventing future wars, affirming fundamental human rights, dignity and equality, establishing conditions for justice under international law and promoting social progress and improved living standards. There's currently little to no progress on any of these.

The post-Cold War era of international cooperation, which produced

major global agreements aimed at addressing contemporary problems, is unquestionably over. Today it would be inconceivable that a global deal to halt runaway climate change could be forged, or that all UN member states would unanimously adopt the SDGs, with their strong human rights and social justice focus – yet both these landmark achievements happened in 2015, just a decade ago.

Many political leaders now strongly champion a narrow interpretation of national sovereignty. Powerful states increasingly prioritise self-interest and transactional politics, including in their roles within international institutions, entirely against the spirit of global cooperation.

The result is blatant hypocrisy as states selectively invoke or ignore international laws and norms according to what suits them. This is exemplified by the way numerous global north states led international accountability efforts against Russia but blocked the same for Israel.

All these trends were underway when Trump returned and immediately announced US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as the termination of US engagement with the UN Human Rights Council. The crisis in international cooperation has now dramatically accelerated.


Photo by Eva Manhart/AFP via Getty Images

Mural 'Woman with Dove - Shaping Our Common Future' by Australian artist Fintan Magee at UN premises in Vienna, promoting the SDGs and the Summit of the Future.

Pact for the Future

In these turbulent and fast-changing times, the UN had an opportunity to refresh itself in 2024 by holding its much-touted **Summit of the Future**, which issued the **Pact for the Future**, alongside the **Global Digital Compact** and a **Declaration on Future Generations**.

The summit's purpose was to strengthen international cooperation on key challenges, address gaps in global governance and reaffirm the UN Charter and other crucial global commitments. But what began as an ambitious idea in 2021, when UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the **Our Common Agenda** report with the aim of revitalising international cooperation and reforming the UN, lost its ambition as the world became more fragmented and national self-interest expressed more nakedly. It became more about defending and consolidating multilateralism than improving it. It was a sign of how difficult it currently is to reach any agreement that states had to rally at the summit to defeat a **late attempt by Russia** to defer the pact's adoption.

Civil society worked hard to try to influence the pact during its two-year development process, taking part in online consultations and a conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in May. But the process fell far short of the open, participatory and inclusive approach civil society

Media at work during the 57th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, 9 September 2024.

wanted. Few governments consulted directly with civil society, and some argued it shouldn't have any role.

Civil society **saw some potential advances** in the pact , including proposals to enlarge, if not properly reform, the Security Council and accelerate restructuring of the international financial architecture. For the most part, however, this was a disappointing outcome that failed to meet the moment, a text long on platitudes but short on the practicalities of implementation. The conditions were such that a more ambitious outcome was probably never on the cards.

Human Rights Council

At least, following extensive civil society campaigning, Saudi Arabia was **excluded** from membership of the UN's key human rights body. The 47-member Human Rights Council exists to address human rights violations and other situations of concern and strengthen the protection and promotion of human rights. Elections are held annually for around a third of members, which serve three-year terms with a maximum of two consecutive terms. States are grouped into five regional blocs, each of which has a set number of seats available each year.

Saudi Arabia, a systematic human rights violator with closed civic space, numerous political prisoners and an appalling track record in executing people, has spent vast amounts of money on **laundering** its international reputation. In 2024, it **succeeded** in its bid to become chair of the Commission on the Status of Women when no other state stood against it, a grotesque outcome given that it treats its women as second-class citizens. But in the Human Rights Council election it came sixth and last in a competition for five seats in its region.

The problem is that several other states with troubling human rights records won seats. In 2024, they included the DRC, Ethiopia and Qatar. This means 27 of the Council's current members, way over

Photo by Christophe Viseux/Getty Images for the Saudi Arabian Football Federation

Amid intense international scrutiny, Saudi Arabia fails to win a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, but its whitewashing efforts are rewarded with hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

half, have serious civic space restrictions, while only six members have open civic space. Disgracefully, nine current Council members are named in the latest annual report on countries where **reprisals** have been committed against people who've cooperated with the UN human rights system.

A big reason for this is non-competitive elections, which have become the norm. Regional blocs tend to nominate only as many candidates as there are seats available. This means that while votes are still held – and can offer a chance to symbolically withhold support – the Council's membership is largely predetermined.

Civil society continues to call for genuinely competitive elections, which could help keep the worst offenders off the Council and offer a valuable opportunity to expose human rights violations, push for higher standards and open up more debate around states' performance.

There's another persistent problem: human rights are one of the UN's **three pillars**, alongside sustainable development and peace and security. But this pillar consistently gets under five per cent of the UN's annual funding. Many initiatives, including special rapporteurs on countries experiencing human rights emergencies, rely on voluntary funding. This is usually slow in coming and falls short, affecting their ability to operate, as was the case with the Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan.

There's a broader issue of non-payment of dues. As of February 2025, **only 65 states** had paid their contributions in full. The already underfunded human rights pillar can least afford this withholding of resources, particularly from states that can always find the money for military spending.

Consistent underfunding also limits the prospects of enhancing civil society access, and the space civil society currently has could be at risk of being further limited on cost-saving and efficiency grounds. A review of the Council scheduled for 2026 offers an opportunity to address these issues, and the UN must ensure civil society voices are heard as part of this process.

US withdrawal

But now the USA's selective withdrawal from the international system threatens to further weaken the UN. Although the USA has sometimes been an obstructive force, including when blocking Security Council resolutions on Israel, global institutions lose legitimacy when powerful states opt out. While all states are formally equal in the UN, the reality is that the USA's decisions to participate or pull out matter more than most because, as well as being a superpower, it's the biggest funder of UN institutions, even if it has a poor record in paying on time.

As it stands, the USA's WHO withdrawal will take effect in January 2026, although the decision could face a legal challenge as it's

questionable whether Trump has the power to overturn the congressional resolutions by which the country joined. It's also possible Trump could rescind his decision if the WHO makes changes to his liking, since deal-making powered by threats and brinkmanship is his way of doing business. But if withdrawal happens, the WHO will be hard hit. The US government is the WHO's biggest contributor, providing around **18 per cent** of its funding. That's a huge gap to fill, and it's likely the organisation will have to cut back its work. Progress towards a global pandemic treaty, **under negotiation**, since 2021, may be hindered.

It's possible philanthropic sources will step up their support, and other states may offer to help fill the gap. The challenge comes if authoritarian states take advantage of the situation by increasing their contributions and expect greater influence in return. China, for example, may be poised to do so.

That's what happened when the first Trump administration pulled out of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). China filled the vacuum by **increasing** its contributions to become UNESCO's biggest annual funder and, presumably not coincidentally, a Chinese official became its deputy head, 56 Chinese sites received coveted World Heritage status and China was able to block Taiwan's attempts to join. It was out of concern about this growing influence that the Biden administration took the USA back into UNESCO in 2023; that decision could be reversed, as Trump has claimed UNESCO is biased against the USA and ordered a review.

The WHO has already been **accused** of being too influenced by China over the decisions it made during the pandemic, when it was criticised as too readily following the Chinese government's line and failing to scrutinise the outbreak's origins properly. China also successfully lobbied to **deny** Taiwan observer status at WHO meetings – flying in the face of the reality that public health issues like pandemics don't respect borders. Civil society should be wary of signs of state capture of multilateral institutions.

World Health Organization Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus advocates for a global pandemic treaty in the wake of COVID-19.

The Human Rights Council may be less immediately affected because the USA isn't currently a member, its term having ended at the close of 2024. It rejoined in 2021 after Trump pulled out in 2018, and had already made the unusual decision not to seek a second term, likely because this would have provoked a **backlash** over its support for Israel. Apart from its relationship with Israel, however, during its term under the Biden administration the USA was largely recognised as playing a positive role in the Council's business. If it refuses to cooperate, it also deprives US citizens of a vital avenue of redress.

A further danger is that the USA's actions might inspire other states with extremist leaders to follow suit. Argentina's President Milei, a keen Trump admirer, has already imitated him by **announcing** his country's departure from the WHO. Israel followed the USA in declaring it wouldn't engage with the Human Rights Council. Both

cited alleged anti-Israel bias. For its own reasons, in February 2025 authoritarian Nicaragua also **announced** its withdrawal from the Council following a report critical of its appalling human rights record.

A domino effect still seems unlikely, and it could be argued that institutions like the Human Rights Council and UNESCO, having survived one Trump withdrawal, can endure a second. But that depends on what happens at the end of Trump's second term. These shocks also come at a different time, when the UN system is already more fragile and damaged. Now the very idea of multilateralism and a rules-based international order is under attack, with hard-nosed national power taking its place. Backroom deals resulting from power games are replacing processes with a degree of transparency aimed at achieving consensus. The space for civil society engagement and opportunities for leverage are shrinking accordingly.

Real reform needed

Revitalising the UN may sound like a tall order in a time of crisis, but civil society has some ideas about how to start putting people rather than states at the UN's heart. The **UNMute Civil Society initiative**, backed by over 300 CSOs and numerous states, makes **five calls** to improve civil society's involvement: using digital technologies to broaden participation and inclusion, bridging digital divides by focusing on connectivity for the most excluded, changing procedures and practices to ensure effective and meaningful interaction and participation at all stages, creating an annual civil society action day as an opportunity to stocktake and assess progress on civil society participation and appointing a UN civil society envoy.

Each of these ideas is practical and easily achievable, and could open up space for greater reforms. A UN civil society envoy could, for example, promote best practices in civil society participation across the UN, ensure a diverse range of civil society is involved in the UN's work and promote the UN's engagement with civil society around the world.

Civil society is also calling for competitive Human Rights Council elections, with a role for civil society in scrutinising candidates, and limits on Security Council veto powers. In addition, the **We the Peoples** campaign, supported by over 200 CSOs and more than 100 parliamentarians from around the world, proposes the introduction of a **World Citizens' Initiative** to allow people to mobilise to collect signatures to put an issue on the UN agenda. A further proposal is to establish a **UN Parliamentary Assembly** to complement the General Assembly and give a voice to **citizens** as well as states.

And as time approaches to pick a new UN Secretary-General, civil society is mobilising the **1 for 8 billion campaign**, pushing for an open, transparent, inclusive and merit-based process that reflects the UN's ideals and enables appropriate input from civil society. The office has always been held by a man, and the call is for the UN to make history by appointing a **feminist woman leader** to the role.

These are all just small steps towards making the UN system more open, democratic and accountable. There's nothing impossible or unimaginable about these ideas, and times of crisis create opportunities for experimentation. A more inclusive UN will be a more effective UN. It's time for the UN to embrace civil society's ideas and work with the states that support them as well as civil society, as the start of a journey to make the UN Charter a reality.

CIVIL SOCIETY: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Despite today's many challenges, civil society continues to strive on all fronts, combining advocacy, protests, online campaigns, strategic litigation, international diplomacy and every other tactic imaginable. In a world overwhelmed by disinformation, civil society's truth telling serves as a crucial counterforce to the false narratives that sow division and mobilise hatred towards excluded groups. As recognition grows about the interconnectedness and transnational nature of today's challenges, civil society is increasingly emphasising solidarity actions that transcend national boundaries and connect diverse struggles across different contexts.

Even in difficult circumstances, civil society achieved notable successes in 2024. On women's and girl's rights, these include victories on child marriage in Colombia and Sierra Leone, and on FGM in The Gambia. On LGBTQI+ rights, civil society's campaigning led to breakthroughs on equal marriage in Greece and Thailand.

People defended democracy by taking to the streets in South Korea to resist martial law, ousting Bangladesh's authoritarian government, ensuring the election result was respected in Guatemala, and pushing for the election to be held as scheduled in Senegal.

Climate and environmental legal victories in Ecuador, India and Switzerland forced governments to recognise the human rights impacts of climate change and do more to reduce emissions and curb pollution. Similar tactics are now exerting moral pressure on governments that supply arms to Israel.

Civil society's struggles are getting harder due to a collapsing funding environment, with the USAID freeze part of a broader **retreat from global solidarity**. Several governments, including those of **Belgium**, the **Netherlands** and the **UK**, as well as the **EU**, are cutting back the international aid that helps sustain civil society and redirecting their international support towards narrow national interests, reflecting growing preoccupations with defence, trade advantages and migration control. Many governments have introduced **hostile laws** that make it harder for CSOs to receive funding or vilify them for doing so. Many CSOs now face an existential threat, and this must prompt an urgent search for new models of resourcing to support civil society's vital work.

In these volatile and unpredictable times, civil society must keep carrying the torch of hope that a more peaceful, just, equitable and sustainable world remains possible, even when many of those in power are moving in the wrong direction. Resilience, resistance and radical optimism are needed more than ever before. Though victory may seem distant and elusive, civic action remains important because it nurtures hope, imagines new possibilities and unites those who dream of change. If civil society perseveres, even in the most difficult of circumstances, then moments of change will come, providing stepping stones toward possibilities of greater transformation.

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- AAKAR PATEL
- ABDELAZIZ AL-HOSSE
- ABDOU AZIZ CISSÉ
- ABDUL NASSER RAD
- ACCESS NOW - JORDAN
- ACDD - NICARAGUA
- AKIO TAKAYANAGI
- ALAAIDDIEN AYOUB
- ALEXANDER SCHWARZ
- ALÍ DANIELS
- ALICIA MÉNDEZ MEDINA
- ALIX BOUCHER
- ALVIANI SABILLAH
- ALVIN NICOLA
- AMINA HERSI
- ANA CARMO
- ANAID ALCÁZAR
- ANDREAS KRANEBITTER
- ANDREAS MÜLLER
- ANJA OLIN-PAPE
- ANJALI BHARDWAJ
- ANNE HARRIS
- ANONYMOUS - MALI
- ANONYMOUS - MALI
- ANONYMOUS - TOGO
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- ANTONINA LEWANDOWSKA
- ARIA DANAPARAMITA
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- ARPITHA KODIVERI
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- MOHAMMED JUMA
- MOHAMMED NDIFUNA

- MOOKDAPA YANGYUENPRADORN
- MORENA HERRERA
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- MUHAMMAD ISNUR
- MUHAMMAD MUDASSAR
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- ZHOU FENGSUO
- ZIAD ABDEL SAMAD
- ZOLELWA SIFUMBA
- ZOYA PHAN

CONNECT WITH US

civicus.org

lens.civicus.org

info@civicus.org

@CIVICUSalliance

/CIVICUS

@CIVICUSalliance

HEADQUARTERS
25 Owl Street, 6th Floor
Johannesburg, 2092
South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)11 833 5959
Fax: +27 (0)11 833 7997

UN HUB: NEW YORK
We Work
450 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY, 10017
United States

UN HUB: GENEVA
11 Avenue de la Paix
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0)22 733 3435