



2026 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT



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Welcome to the 2026 State of Civil Society Report from CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance. This year's report, the 15th in our annual series, looks back at 2025 and early 2026 to identify trends in civil society action at every level and in every arena, from responses to conflicts and struggles for democracy, inclusion and climate justice to demands for stronger global governance.

The report 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 and challenges of the day. It reflects over 250 interviews and 100 articles published by CIVICUS covering around 100 countries and territories. For easy reference, you'll find links to articles identified with the  icon and to interviews with the  icon.

Our report documents a world where unaccountable power is on the offensive: powerful states are dismantling the international rules-based order, impunity is becoming normalised in conflicts from Gaza to Sudan and an axis of tech oligarchs and authoritarian leaders is using its online reach to spread disinformation and tighten surveillance. The withdrawal of funding from multilateral institutions, the weaponisation of AI and the deliberate obstruction of climate action aren't isolated crises but interconnected aspects of a political epoch in which elites are consolidating power at the expense of human rights. Those being hardest hit are the people who already have the least access to rights.

Yet resistance is rising to meet this assault, and this report documents its breadth and power. People across the world are choosing courage over compliance. A new generation is rising to take action. Civil society advocacy, evidence collection and litigation are countering regression and securing victories, demonstrating the value of sustained collective action. In a time of manufactured hopelessness, this report makes the case for resistance.



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OVERVIEW

RESISTANCE AGAINST THE TIDE

Photo by Luis Tato/AFP

This is a time of profound global turmoil, but also of rising resistance, with many people around the world defying unaccountable power. Even in these hard times, civil society is holding the line and standing up for dignity, justice and hope.

A world in turmoil

Powerful states are seeking to reshape the world into spheres of influence, coercing the rest into compliance and tearing up the international rulebook in the process. The global order is buckling under a deliberate assault. Several states are withdrawing from and defunding institutions designed to hold them to account, including the International Criminal Court (ICC) and United Nations (UN) human rights bodies, fragmenting the international system into a patchwork where impunity thrives. The concerted campaign against UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, threatened and smeared by Israel and the USA simply for doing her job of reporting on human rights violations in Gaza, shows how far governments will go to silence those who hold them to account.

Impunity is becoming normalised in conflicts, leaving millions in danger and misery. Israel and Russia are among the states flouting international humanitarian law, deliberately killing civilians and targeting civil society and journalists. In Sudan, atrocities continue to be met with international silence. Civilians are being killed in the latest US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran. Launched in defiance of international law, these strikes bring the risk of wider regional conflict.

Influential states are choosing to overlook human rights crimes, narrowly focusing on material interests. When they intervene, it's increasingly through transactional deal-making in pursuit of economic and strategic advantage, such as access to fossil fuels and minerals, while ignoring atrocities and the root causes of conflict.

Many states are prioritising military power over diplomacy. Soaring military spending, often at the expense of international aid, is fuelling a dangerous arms race and stoking nuclear proliferation fears. Arms corporations are developing increasingly deadly weapons with little oversight and no political leadership to contain them. Combined with impunity and fraying international rules, this is a recipe for escalating warfare.

An axis of unaccountable power is flexing its muscles as economic, military, political and technological elites converge. Tech oligarchs are aligning with authoritarian, nationalist and populist leaders and even more extremist ideologues. They're using the vast reach of their platforms to spread conspiracy theories, disinformation and hatred while defying regulation efforts. A battle for AI supremacy is unfolding with scant oversight; this is supercharging online hatred and enabling the most intrusive surveillance regimes in human history, as states weaken regulation for fear of losing economic and strategic advantage. Tech companies are increasingly embedding themselves in military forces, putting their code and data at the service of automated death and destruction.

A global scramble for the materials needed to power new technologies is reshaping geopolitical alignments, fuelling conflict and driving extractive relationships that benefit powerful states at the expense of communities in resource-rich global south countries.

As economies fail billions of people, economic and political elites are amassing unimaginable wealth and reaping the rewards of corruption. The fossil fuel industry is deliberately delaying climate action, because every day of delay means more profit, at a mounting cost in human suffering. States and corporations are attacking those who defend the environment and demand urgent climate action. Democratic regression is driving and accelerating these trends. Authoritarian leaders are dismantling democratic guardrails, military rule is consolidating, ruling parties are rigging elections to entrench power and populist forces are attacking rights.

Today's interlocking crises hit hardest those who already have the least access to rights. Women, LGBTQI+ people, migrants and refugees, and the civil society that stands with them, are bearing

the brunt of this assault, as civic space restrictions tighten and the funding that sustains them collapses. The withdrawal of support is dismantling the humanitarian architecture, signalling not a short-term disruption but a long-term reset.

Resistance rises

But this isn't the whole story. What stands out from recent events is that many people are choosing courage over compliance. They're looking the powerful in the face and refusing to fall silent. Wherever regressive and anti-rights forces are trying to bully people into submission, resistance is rising to meet them.

The global resistance is diverse and shaped by local dynamics, but across very different contexts, street protest is its most visible form. Many of those taking to the streets are people with no history of activism, compelled to speak out by injustices too big to ignore. They refuse to stay silent in the face of Israel's genocide in Gaza or do nothing as US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents brutalise their neighbours. The extraordinary response to Donald Trump's authoritarianism made the No Kings protests one of the largest mass mobilisations in US history.

People are taking action even though they know it can be dangerous. When protests erupted in Iran in December, people came back to the streets in full knowledge that the state would respond with extreme violence.

In country after country, people from Generation Z are mobilising for the first time. Accumulated frustration at economic and political

failures is being expressed through mass protests at critical tipping points: chronic electricity and water shortages in Madagascar, a social media ban in Nepal, flood control projects gutted by corruption in the Philippines. In some cases, Gen Z-led movements have forced out-of-touch governments to step aside. In Bangladesh, where a Gen Z-led uprising overthrew an entrenched authoritarian government in 2024, the country held its first credible election in almost two decades in February 2026. Even where immediate change hasn't come, something vital has taken root. A new generation is learning from one another, connecting across borders and building the leadership skills that can sustain a long-term activist commitment.

Beyond the streets, resistance takes the form of community-level work. In conflict settings, grassroots efforts are providing essential humanitarian and mental health support and documenting violations. In US cities, neighbours have created early warning systems and physically blocked ICE operations, risking arrest and violence. Afghan women are keeping underground schools running in defiance of a regime that has made girls' education a crime. Humanitarian groups in Europe are refusing to stop helping migrants in trouble at sea, despite being criminalised for it. These are acts of empathy, solidarity and courage.

Resistance also plays the long game. Years of painstaking research, documentation and case-building against the fossil fuel industry helped secure a landmark International Court of Justice ruling establishing that states have a legal duty to protect people against climate harm, a victory that began as a campaign by a determined group of Pacific Island students. Women's groups in the Philippines worked to document thousands of human rights violations committed by former president Rodrigo Duterte. Now he's in ICC detention.



Protesters call for government action to stop the genocide in Gaza in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, on 5 October 2025.

Photo by Keen van Weel/ANP/AFP

Persistent civil society campaigns have helped secure the release of activists jailed for peacefully exercising their rights in countries including Angola, Cameroon, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. Civil society pressure forced South Africa to declare gender-based violence and femicide a national disaster. It contributed to Spain regularising the status of half a million undocumented migrants and Thailand granting around 80,000 Myanmar refugees the right to work.

Resistance is mobilising in efforts to stop tech oligarchs dictating the future. From campaigns to establish human rights safeguards for AI to coalitions demanding curbs on the military uses of technology, civil society is insisting that transformative technologies serve people, not



An anti-ICE protester shouts at a police armoured vehicle in Minneapolis, USA, on 17 January 2026.

power. At the same time, civil society is using technology for positive ends, deploying AI tools to document war crimes in Ukraine and identify victims of enforced disappearances in Mexico.

Then there are the invisible victories. Defensive wins rarely make headlines, but they're no less vital. In a time of backlash, holding the line is an achievement. Civil society action is stalling an anti-LGBTQI+ draft law in Kenya, preventing the repeal of a ban on female genital mutilation in The Gambia and blocking moves in Latvia to weaken protections against violence against women. Resistance is working to prevent things getting worse.

Defying despair

Those who wield unaccountable power – men like Benjamin Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump – expect to get away with their abuses, as do the oligarchs and political operatives who surround and enable them. They wouldn't act as they do without confidence in lasting impunity.

More than anything, they want submission. They work to create the conditions for it, encouraging people to attack the vulnerable rather than the powerful. They want people to be swayed by disinformation and cowed by displays of impunity. They need people to believe problems are too big to solve, the powerful too strong to resist and the price of speaking out too high. A demotivated, divided population is a compliant one.

But those who believe in human rights and social justice know despair is a dead end. Nothing changes if nobody believes it can

change. Autocrats and oligarchs understand this, which is why they work so hard to manufacture hopelessness. Resistance begins the moment people choose to hope.

Resistance is clear-eyed about the challenges but refuses to be pessimistic. Pessimism serves authoritarians, oligarchs and their allies, who insist economic and political power belong to a tiny elite and a more just world is undesirable and impossible. Resistance disagrees. Civil society knows a world is possible where no one goes hungry, struggles economically or faces violence, where everyone's rights are respected and planetary resources are used wisely. With Gen Z-led protests, a new generation that refuses to believe it's bound to lose has entered civic life. Resistance keeps that conviction alive.

Many of today's mobilisations are colourful, noisy and irreverent, offering a direct repudiation of the politicians and business tycoons who think they can tell people how to act and what to believe, and who'll never understand the power of a joke. They bring people together across barriers meant to divide them, of ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexuality and social class, and grow stronger for doing so. They're motivated not just by economic and political grievances but also by compassion: humanity is present wherever those with relative privilege choose to use it to help people with the least access to rights.

The results are real. In Indonesia and Timor-Leste, Gen Z-led protests forced parliamentarians to abandon attempts to award themselves new benefits. Marriage equality came into effect in Liechtenstein and Thailand, and same-sex love is no longer a criminal offence in St Lucia. Denmark and Norway expanded abortion rights. In South Africa, litigation forced oil companies to put a drilling project on hold. A Greek court acquitted 24 humanitarian workers whose only crime was to help migrants at sea. The ICC convicted two militia leaders

from the Central African Republic, partly based on testimony civil society collected from survivors.

This is what happens when people collectively organise, mobilise and speak out. Without these and many other civil society efforts, the world would be a grimmer place.

Civil society faces the future

Current global crises – of climate, conflict, democracy, economic inequality, environmental degradation, exclusion, global governance and human rights – and the successes and failures of acts of resistance should prompt reflection on how civil society works, how change happens and what its priorities should be.

The current civil society funding crisis brings further urgency. As state and philanthropic support collapses and civic space comes under increasing restriction, it might seem understandable for organisations to seek quieter and safer roles. Some have begun scrubbing human rights language from public communications in anticipation of backlash and funding cuts. This is a self-defeating strategy. It concedes ground without a struggle and erodes the trust of communities that most need civil society's support. Civil society must be careful not to let funders or states call the shots. It must hold on to its autonomy and keep standing up for human rights and social justice, because many states, corporations and international organisations have shown they can't be trusted to do so.

Civil society must also guard against the dangers of self-promotion by charismatic figureheads and leaders of the biggest organisations.

The temptation to chase social media virality shouldn't come at the expense of crucial civil society values of collective action and the centring of excluded voices.

Established civil society has lessons to learn from newer movements, including those led by Gen Z. These movements are doing much with little, innovating through collective leadership, decentralised and democratic decision-making, smart social media use and creative communications that genuinely resonate with people. Civil society in global north countries can learn from the adaptation and resilience strategies practised by people in the many global south countries where civic space has been constrained for longer. It must forge new connections to enable mutual learning and challenge perceived hierarchies of knowledge.

Civil society must face the challenge that today's issues are interconnected in ways its structures often aren't. The technology powering deportation algorithms is the same that enables mass surveillance of activists and protesters. The funding cuts gutting migrant support organisations are also hollowing out women's rights groups. Treating these as separate crises to be addressed by separate organisations in separate rooms is a gift to those whose power depends on people not seeing the whole picture.

Established civil society groups should also rethink who they engage with and how. This may be the time to place lower priority on high-level engagement in pursuit of incremental change, and more on finding better ways to connect with communities most affected by crises. Decades of developing international norms haven't stopped states and corporations ruthlessly pursuing their selfish interests. Years of profile-building in international spaces haven't stopped civil society groups being defunded and subjected to growing civic



People write messages to political prisoners on a banner during a solidarity event at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas on 31 January 2026.

space restrictions. Where civil society groups haven't connected with people, proved the value of their work and developed trust, they can't count on support when they come under attack. In some countries, this disconnection enables civic space restrictions.

In a landscape of intensifying repression, those doing the work of resistance must also look after each other. Movements that burn through their people aren't sustainable. Sustaining resistance means supporting people on the frontlines.

Those who seek to engage with and support civil society in this time



Protesters stand on a barricade during a protest against corruption and the government's decision to block social media platforms in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 8 September 2025.

of collapsing funding must also reflect. Many recent advances won by civil society have come from potentially replicable combinations of tactics. Success has often come when different groups, including unlikely allies, pool their strengths and combine their tactics in pursuit of a shared goal. Funders must make strategic choices about what to support and when to do it. A protest movement, for example, might need little and be able to crowdfund, but responses such as litigation, collection of evidence of atrocities and legal support for detained activists might be expensive or need expertise, even if they rarely attract the headlines protests do.

Collective commitment

International Civil Society Week 2025, which brought together around a thousand activists from across the world in Bangkok, offered a glimpse of what civil society can be. The gathering was filled with the spirit of courage and solidarity this moment demands, offering powerful testimonies of resistance, sharing hard-won experience across borders and generations and renewing a collective commitment to defend civic space and demand social justice.

Civil society must take that spirit forward by keeping resistance at the heart of everything it does. This means connecting colourful, noisy street protests and bold acts of community defence with the quieter work of advocacy, documentation and litigation. While protests are its most visible face, resistance takes countless forms, from joining a community group that protects migrants and refugees to contributing to a crowdfunded litigation effort or showing solidarity with imprisoned activists. These all matter, and all become more powerful as more people add their voices. Whatever progress the future holds will come from people joining together to refuse to accept the unacceptable.



Photo by Emmanuel Herman/Reuters via Gallo Images

DEMOCRACY

AN ENDURING ASPIRATION



Democracy is in accelerating global retreat. Military juntas are formalising their rule as transition timelines expire, authoritarian regimes are holding elections without meaningful competition and several compromised democracies have crossed critical thresholds into authoritarianism. In established democracies, right-wing populist parties continue to advance through competitive elections.



The infrastructure of democratic defence has critically weakened. International responses to coups, power grabs and fraudulent elections are increasingly permissive. The USA has dismantled the foreign aid architecture that helped sustain democracy. Measures to curtail civic space, such as foreign agents laws, protest restrictions and transnational repression, continue to spread.



Despite systematic repression and diminishing resources, civil society remains the primary line of resistance. It monitors elections, documents abuses and protects electoral integrity against interference. Gen Z-led mobilisations and other protest movements are taking to the streets, proving that even when it's in retreat as a practice, democracy endures as an aspiration.

Democratic decline is intensifying. Military juntas that seized power in Africa's Sahel region are letting all deadlines for democratic transition expire, formalising ongoing repressive rule. Authoritarian regimes are holding elections without meaningful competition. Flawed democracies and hybrid regimes are deteriorating further. Longstanding democracies are seeing their quality erode.

This crisis of democracy shapes the conditions in which today's multiple crises unfold. When executive power is concentrated and citizens and institutions can't hold it to account, deals that privilege strategic interests over human rights go unchallenged and climate commitments go unenforced. When judiciaries are captured, it obstructs the litigation strategies that might otherwise produce crucial human rights rulings. When civic space closes, climate activists, migrants' rights organisations and women's rights campaigners lose the freedom to operate, and excluded groups become the prime targets of state repression.

In 2025, the epicentre of regression shifted dramatically. For decades, the European Union (EU) and the USA promoted democratic norms and supported civil society and democracy work worldwide. Both have turned inward, with some states becoming actively hostile to the principles they once promoted.

In the USA, **Trump's second administration** is mounting a systematic assault on constitutional checks and balances, concentrating executive power at the expense of Congress, the courts and civil society. This doesn't stop at the border. Its defiance of court rulings, militarised immigration crackdown and rollback of climate and gender protections are being projected internationally through a unilateral assault on the international order that has seen the USA quit numerous international organisations and processes, defund the United Nations (UN),

dismantle the US Agency for International Development, set up its own international bodies and launch illegal military operations. The pattern is consistent: executive will, unchecked by legislatures or courts, exercised with impunity both at home and abroad.

Europe is seeing democratic regression at state and regional levels. Having made significant gains in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, far-right parties are reshaping regional policy. They're eroding asylum and refugee protections and diluting the EU Green Deal, the bloc's climate agenda. Under far-right pressure, mainstream parties in several member states are increasingly adopting positions previously considered extreme. Hungary shows where that trajectory leads. Thanks to its capture of the state machinery, the ruling Fidesz party is now in a position to block EU action on Russia, undermine the mechanisms that tie EU funding to respect for democratic standards and shield other repressive governments from accountability. Domestically, it advances legislation unthinkable in a functioning democracy, including a 2025 law banning Pride events and penalising public support for LGBTQI+ people. Hungary is eroding the EU's democratic credibility and offering a blueprint to undemocratic forces elsewhere in Europe.

Yet this crisis of democracy isn't a crisis of democratic aspiration. In 2025, people took to the streets to protest against arbitrary power, corruption and executive overreach in dozens of countries, including the USA. A new generation emerged as a political force of global significance, with Generation Z-led uprisings shaking governments in several countries and leading to some notable political victories. In **Bangladesh**, the Gen Z-led uprising of 2024 restored democracy, bringing the first credible national election in almost two decades in February 2026. In **Nepal**, protests brought down the government, resulting in a fresh election.

These protest movements are non-partisan but political. Typically triggered by economic malaise, they often quickly escalate to demand what undemocratic governments deny: accountability, transparency and systems that serve the public. Democracy is regressing, but its **promise** continues to mobilise millions.

Democratic erosion from within

Some of the most significant threats to democracy come from democratically elected leaders who use the power voters have trusted them with to dismantle the checks, balances and civic freedoms that are as essential to democracy as elections.

The **USA** under the **Trump administration** is the most consequential case of democratic backsliding. The government defies court orders and treats the constitution as an obstacle to navigate rather than a constraint to respect. It refuses to recognise the legitimacy of opponents and critics, instead criminalising, vilifying and encouraging violence against them. It's **rolling back civic freedoms**, curtailing the right to protest, targeting the media and restricting the space for civil society. It has abandoned the unwritten norms democratic systems depend on, of mutual restraint between political rivals and a shared willingness to exercise power within limits. When those norms collapse, incumbency can become self-reinforcing. A leader willing to dismantle the rules of the game while in office can use that power to lock in their dominance before the next election.

While many powerful institutions have failed to mount collective resistance, civil society is responding. The reaction is extraordinary.



A woman holds a sign reading 'Indifference opens the door to evil' at a rally against political extremism ahead of parliamentary elections in Prague, Czech Republic, on 28 September 2025.

Photo by Eva Korinkova/Reuters via Galo Images

Over seven million took to the streets in what may have been the largest protest in US history.

Across Europe, far-right and nationalist parties have made significant electoral gains, normalising positions that until recently were considered extreme. In **Poland**, right-wing nationalist **Karol Nawrocki** narrowly defeated the pro-EU contender in the presidential runoff. In the **Czech Republic**, billionaire right-wing populist Andrej Babiš **returned to power** despite numerous corruption allegations. **Romania** endured a protracted crisis: following the **controversial cancellation** of its 2024 presidential election due to documented



People protest against the Sanseitō party's platform on migration following the upper house election in Tokyo, Japan, on 21 July 2025.

Russian interference, the **2025 rerun** saw far-right nationalist George Simion win the opening round but lose the runoff to centrist Nicușor Dan, an outcome he decried as a coup.

Germany's election saw the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party double its vote to become the second-largest force, offering a nativist vision of national identity backed with a policy of mass deportations. The AfD remains excluded from government, but has **reshaped** what's considered the political mainstream. In **Portugal**, the far-right Chega party won 60 seats to become the main opposition, capitalising on corruption scandals and a chronic housing crisis that fuelled **anti-establishment sentiment**. In **Norway**, despite the centre-left government holding on in the parliamentary election, the right-wing populist Progress Party surged to its highest-ever finish on an anti-immigration platform.

Beyond the ballot box, far-right forces are making themselves visible on the streets. Over 100,000 people joined a **far-right rally** in London in September that featured addresses from extremist leaders, including Elon Musk via video link, and resulted in violent clashes with the police. That same month, **far-right anti-immigration protests** mobilised in Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Sweden.

Japan's right-wing populist Sanseitō party made **significant upper house gains** on a virulently xenophobic platform combining opposition to immigration with hostility to LGBTQI+ and women's rights. In **Argentina**, legislative elections strengthened President Javier Milei's grip on power, consolidating a right-wing libertarian project that has dismantled feminist infrastructure, gutted public services and concentrated executive authority, with explicit backing from Trump. In **Chile**, far-right candidate José Antonio Kast won

the presidential runoff to become the country's most right-wing president since the Pinochet dictatorship.

A consistent pattern sees regressive forces exploit genuine anxieties, such as corruption, rising costs of living, economic inequality and political exclusion, and direct them against migrants, women and LGBTQI+ people, using disinformation to deepen polarisation and erode trust in institutions.

In several countries, significant numbers of young people, disproportionately young men, have shifted toward the far right. This is the other face of the Gen Z-led mobilisations driving democratic demands. This is a generation that's politically activated and impatient for change, and that rejects conventional politics, but isn't uniformly progressive. Youth engagement in politics will not, by itself, guarantee democratic renewal.

Far-right forces are gaining ground through democratic means in free and competitive elections. The question is not only how democracy can defend itself against these enemies, but how it can speak to the motivations of the people who choose them.

Hybrid regimes harden

In hybrid regimes, elections still happen and can still matter, but the playing field has been tilted, meaning they no longer function as a reliable check on power. Judiciaries are compromised, media landscapes skewed and opposition forces structurally disadvantaged. In 2025, several countries on this ambiguous middle ground moved further from democracy as their leaders and ruling

parties used legal mechanisms such as constitutional amendments, criminal charges and judicial appointments to reduce institutional checks, disqualify opponents and entrench their hold on power. They invariably presented these as democratic, technocratic or anti-corruption measures.

In March 2025, the Turkish government **arrested Ekrem İmamoğlu**, elected mayor of Istanbul, winner of the opposition primary and the only politician polling ahead of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the 2028 presidential race. Corruption and terrorism charges were accompanied by the annulment of his university degree, aimed at barring him from running.

In Georgia, amid ongoing democracy protests, the government of the right-wing populist Georgian Dream party froze the bank accounts of leading civil society organisations and **jailed seven opposition leaders**, accusing them of financing group violence and sabotage. The crackdown followed a February 2025 European Parliament **resolution** declaring the Georgian parliament illegitimate due to manoeuvres used in the 2024 election, including voter ID confiscation and fraudulent electoral practices. Furthering its isolation, the government held municipal elections in October without European observation.

In El Salvador, Congress **abolished presidential term limits**, allowing President Nayib Bukele to potentially rule indefinitely. With over 80,000 people detained under a prolonged state of emergency, a foreign agents law targeting civil society and independent media and an **agreement** with the Trump administration to house US deportees in El Salvador's mega-prison, Bukele demonstrated that authoritarianism can receive genuine popular approval.

Mexico held the **world's first** popular election of an entire

federal judiciary, with the government presenting the process as a democratisation of justice. But turnout was just 13 per cent, and observers documented widespread irregularities, with several winning candidates having credible links to organised crime. The changes might be better characterised as judicial capture dressed as democratic innovation, a template with dangerous potential for replication.

Tunisia🇹🇳, birthplace of the Arab Spring uprisings and once a democratic success story, **continued its descent**🇹🇳 under President Kais Saied. Since winning Tunisia's last truly competitive election in 2019, Saied has methodically dismantled democracy from within, rewriting the constitution to give himself near-absolute power and stage-managing elections to eliminate meaningful competition. In 2025, a court convicted 21 opposition figures on vague terrorism charges and issued shockingly long sentences following a trial observers described as a grave injustice. **Fourteen civil society groups** faced asset freezes and suspensions. The EU, bound to Saied by a migration control deal, remains **largely silent**.

Authoritarian elections

A succession of recent elections produced results that were determined long before voting began. Authoritarian rulers barred, jailed or forced into exile opposition leaders who might threaten their power. Ruling parties controlled electoral bodies and courts. Turnout figures were frequently implausible, counts were never independent and results were often faked. Many such elections were met with protests, which were usually violently suppressed. The international community said little, signalling to authoritarian leaders that stage-managed elections can still provide a serviceable veneer of legitimacy.



Protesters hold a sign reading 'We no longer want a dictatorship' at a demonstration against electoral fraud in Douala, Cameroon, on 26 October 2025.

Photo by Zohra Bensemra/Reuters via Gallo Images

In Africa, four elections followed this pattern in rapid succession. **Cameroon's**🇨🇲 electoral machinery secured a seventh term for Paul Biya, in power since 1982. The government packed key bodies with supporters, prevented the main opposition candidate standing and unleashed lethal violence against post-election protests. In **Côte d'Ivoire**🇨🇮, President Alassane Ouattara won a constitutionally **questionable fourth term**🇨🇮 after authorities disqualified major opposition candidates and banned protests. In **Tanzania**🇹🇼, President Samia Suluhu Hassan secured re-election in a process stripped of all meaningful competition: the main opposition party was banned from standing, its leader detained on treason charges and a further



A member of the Belarusian diaspora carries a placard depicting President Alexander Lukashenko at a rally against the election farce in Warsaw, Poland, on 26 January 2025.

candidate ruled ineligible. African Union observers documented ballot stuffing, internet restrictions and political abductions. **Uganda** opened 2026 with an election that confirmed Yoweri Museveni's seventh presidential term. The vote was accompanied by a nationwide internet shutdown and the abduction of opposition figures.

Biya, aged 92, and Museveni and Ouattara, both in their 80s, rule over some of the youngest populations on earth. Generational chasms such as these have the potential to trigger many more Gen Z-led protests.

Belarus, under President Alexander Lukashenko's grip since 1994, held a presidential election under conditions that made the outcome a foregone conclusion. Anyone who might have posed a credible threat is **in jail** or **in exile**, and the level of repression was such that there were no protests and virtually no opposition.

In the Middle East, similar dynamics were seen in **Iraq**, where a parliamentary election took place against a backdrop of severe civic space restrictions that made it an exercise in elite power distribution rather than a genuine competition.

Military rule consolidates

Since 2020, Africa has experienced 11 successful coups across nine countries, mostly clustered in a 'coup belt' across the Sahel region. Military takeovers are typically presented as necessary to combat jihadist insurgency, uproot corruption and resolve political stalemates. In 2025, two more countries came under military control through markedly different routes.



Supporters display campaign signs in Conakry, Guinea, on 3 November 2025, as military leader Mamadi Doumbouya submits his candidacy for the December presidential election.

In **Madagascar**, the army unit that brought President Andry Rajoelina to power in 2009 forced him out amid widespread Gen Z-led protests sparked by water and electricity shortages. In **Guinea-Bissau**, a coup disrupted proceedings a day before election results were expected, a manoeuvre civil society and international observers condemned as orchestrated by President Umaro Sissoco Embaló to avoid electoral defeat. **Benin** survived an attempted coup in December.

Elsewhere, juntas **consolidated** their power. In **Mali**, five years after General Assimi Goïta took over, the junta dissolved all political parties, imposed punitive fees on independent media, used cybercrime laws against critics and extended Goïta's mandate until 2030. In **Burkina Faso**, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, in power since 2022, postponed elections until 2029, dissolved the independent electoral commission and oversaw arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and forced military conscription of activists and journalists. His **latest step**, in February 2026, was to dissolve all political parties. The security situation both juntas used to justify their takeover has continued to deteriorate.

While some juntas simply refused to leave, others **consolidated their power** through the ballot box. In Chad, Mahamat Idriss Déby, who seized power in a coup when rebels killed his father in 2021, predictably won the 2024 presidential election following a campaign marred by violence, including the **killing of an opposition leader**. In 2025, he **firmed up his control**, with parliament abolishing presidential term limits and extending terms from five to seven years, potentially allowing him to rule for life.

In **Gabon**, General Brice Oligui Nguema, who overthrew dictator Ali Bongo in August 2023, won the presidential election, claiming to have taken over 90 per cent of the vote. A subsequent parliamentary election further concentrated power in his hands. In **Guinea**, the

military held a presidential election with major opposition figures excluded, exiled or imprisoned, allowing coup leader Mamady Doumbouya to transition from junta leader to elected president. The vote came after **repeated delays** and protests that were met with repression, and followed a **constitutional referendum** that removed restrictions on junta members running for office and extended presidential terms.

The mechanisms were consistent. States withdrew from international accountability: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger left the Economic Community of West African States and the International Criminal Court, forming their own Alliance of Sahel States. Juntas systematically repressed civic space through tactics such as arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances. Leaders benefited from propaganda campaigns, exemplified by Burkina Faso's social media operations promoting Traoré as a visionary pan-African leader. Such moves took place within an increasingly permissive international environment, including an **African Union** unable or unwilling to enforce anti-coup mechanisms.

Similar dynamics played out in **Myanmar**. Four years after the coup that brought it to power, and despite controlling under a quarter of the country's territory and continuing to wage war against ethnic militias and pro-democracy forces, the military junta held a **sham election** in an attempt to legitimise its rule. The international environment proved **helpful** to the junta, with China, India and Russia supplying weapons and aid while shielding it from accountability, the Trump administration reversing course on sanctions and cutting funding for independent media and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations persisting with a diplomatic approach that has demonstrably failed.

Civil society under legal assault

Across regions and regimes, states have increasingly turned to law as a tool of repression, exploiting its appearance of legitimacy to suppress civil society organisations that hold them to account. A particularly effective instrument is the **foreign agents law**. Such laws require civil society and media organisations that receive international funding to register as foreign agents, a label carrying deliberate connotations of disloyalty and espionage. Framed as transparency measures, they function as tools of political control.

2025 saw foreign agents laws passed in El Salvador, Slovakia and **Republika Srpska** in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while proposals advanced in Hungary and Serbia. Recent laws share common elements, such as mandatory registration, stigmatising labels, heavy fines and restrictions on advocacy. The law passed in Republika Srpska, later suspended by the Constitutional Court, explicitly banned foreign-funded groups from 'influencing public opinion'. Slovakia's version, adopted after street protests and EU pressure forced the removal of the 'foreign agent' label, retained onerous reporting requirements and ministerial oversight. El Salvador's law went furthest, imposing a punitive 30 per cent tax on all foreign grants alongside registration requirements and broad restrictions on political activity.

In **Hungary**, where Fidesz fears losing the 2026 election, the government introduced a bill to grant the Sovereignty Protection Office sweeping powers to blacklist, defund and dissolve organisations that receive foreign funding. A parliamentary vote on the bill has been **postponed** following protests and international condemnation. In **Serbia**, a bill requiring organisations that receive

over half their funding from foreign sources to register as foreign agents was submitted to parliament in late 2024 but awaits a vote. **Bulgaria's parliament** rejected a similar proposal initiated by a pro-Russia party for the fifth time in 2025.

Beyond foreign agents laws, governments are deploying a wider range of restrictive measures. NGO legislation was adopted or advanced in 2025 in countries including **Ecuador**, **Ethiopia**, **Peru**, **Zambia** and **Zimbabwe**, following a common template of mandatory registration, expanded government monitoring of activities and funding and powers to suspend or dissolve organisations on vague security or public interest grounds. Authorities have also advanced laws restricting the right to protest, including in the UK, where the **Crime and Policing Bill**, currently before parliament, grants police extensive new powers over protests, including provisions on exclusion zones, face coverings and cumulative disruption from repeated protests. Human rights groups describe it as one of the worst-ever attacks on protest rights.

Together, these laws reduce the space available to **those who monitor** elections, document abuses and demand accountability. Civil society **calls** on the UN to respond by establishing a **Special Rapporteur on Democracy**, arguing that while the UN monitors specific rights through specialised mechanisms, democratic freedoms receive no systematic international oversight.

Authoritarianism beyond borders

Authoritarian states also pursue their critics across borders, abducting, harassing, killing and spying on activists, journalists and

political dissidents who've sought safety in exile. While **dozens of states** use transnational repression tactics, 10 are responsible for around 80 per cent of all direct physical incidents recorded. China remains by far the most prolific perpetrator, followed by Russia, Turkey and Egypt.

A 2025 **investigation** found extensive surveillance by Chinese agents, online smear campaigns and harassment of family members living in China. In France, two Uyghur activists **refiled a complaint** with a Paris court alleging that the Chinese embassy orchestrated attacks, surveillance and threats against them during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping. **Hong Kong** democracy activists in exile are specifically targeted, with at least 19 subject to a bounty and police targeting their families back home.

A key tool of Russia's transnational repression is the in absentia conviction, which allows the state to sentence exiled critics and place them on wanted lists that restrict their freedom of movement. In 2026, Moscow courts **sentenced** exiled TV Rain journalist Yekaterina Kotrikadze to eight years in prison for posting about Russian war crimes on her personal Telegram channel, and London-based restaurateur Yevgeny Chichvarkin to nine years for sharing an anti-war statement on Instagram. Both were convicted of spreading 'war fakes' and violating Russia's foreign agents law.

Egypt's transnational repression combines administrative, digital, legal and physical tactics. Digital attacks include phishing, spyware and social media smear campaigns, while security agents monitor and harass activists in European cities and authorities arrest and harass relatives back home. In 2025, family members of diaspora protesters who chained embassy gates shut in protest at Egypt's complicity in Israel's genocide in Gaza were **jailed in retaliation**.

The state has also weaponised administrative and legal mechanisms, denying consular services, withholding passports and leaving children stateless. Authorities place activists on terrorism lists that freeze their finances, flag them at borders and sentence them in absentia.

Turkey similarly uses administrative and legal tools for transnational repression. In 2025, a classified memo revealed that its Security Directorate General covertly sought to circumvent Interpol rules to secure an arrest warrant against a Turkish journalist who'd been granted asylum in Sweden. Turkey also shows how repressive states can support each other: in April 2025, acting on a Turkmenistan government request, Turkish police detained bloggers and human rights activists **Abdulla Orusov and Alisher Sahatov** on false terrorism charges. Despite a Turkish Supreme Court ruling that returning them would endanger their lives, the two were reportedly secretly flown to Turkmenistan, their circumstances unknown.

Tactics can include lethal violence. In 2025, Cambodian opposition politician Lim Kimya was **assassinated in Thailand**. This was one of many instances across Southeast Asia, a **zone of collaborative repression** where governments actively assist or tacitly enable each other in targeting dissidents on their territory, in exchange for reciprocal treatment of their critics living in exile.

The same pattern is taking hold in the Americas. **Roberto Samcam**, a retired army major turned outspoken critic of **Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega**, was shot dead in Costa Rica in June. Two exiled Venezuelan human rights activists were **shot** in Colombia in October. They survived, but the attack had a chilling effect among the Venezuelan diaspora.

Every successful act of transnational repression sends a message about the reach of the state and the limits of safety. Democratic governments that fail to investigate, prosecute and publicly condemn these operations on their territory are complicit. States



Costa Rican police conduct an operation to arrest suspects in the assassination of Nicaraguan dissident Roberto Samcam in San José, Costa Rica, on 12 September 2025.

Photo by Ezequiel Becerra/AFP

should strengthen legal protections for exiled activists and work with **diaspora communities**. In November 2025, the European Parliament adopted its **first report** on transnational repression, calling for European sanctions against the states involved.

Resistance and renewal

Democratic regression is accelerating. But there are positives. **Albania** extended the franchise by introducing diaspora voting.



People take part in a No Kings protest against US President Donald Trump's policies in Chicago, USA, on 18 October 2025.

Samoa held one of the most competitive elections in its history. **Moldova's** moderate ruling party retained power despite a sophisticated Russian **interference campaign** combining cyberattacks, disinformation and illicit funding, with civil society playing an essential role in protecting electoral integrity. **Australia** and **Canada** both rejected Trump-aligned politics in elections where the US government's conduct was a key campaign issue, defying the pattern of incumbents losing over cost-of-living concerns. Following a December 2024 constitutional crisis when a politically embattled president attempted to impose martial law, only to be stopped by mass protests, **South Korea** elected a new president with a mandate for change.

In many countries, elections gave people genuine opportunities to express deep economic grievances and political frustration. This was seen in **Bolivia**, where the October presidential election gave power to an opposition party for the first time in two decades, achieving a peaceful transition amid the worst economic crisis in a generation. There and elsewhere, civil society played vital roles in **protecting electoral integrity**.

Moments of potential democratic opening have come in countries where there long seemed little hope. In **Syria**, the December 2024 collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime ended five decades of dynastic authoritarian rule, creating a fragile but real **opportunity for transition**. In Somalia, a political agreement resulted in the introduction of direct elections for federal lawmakers, a potential shift from the country's entrenched clan-based power structures, though with significant **opposition and limited time** to implement it.

All year long, people put themselves on the line to demand and defend democracy. In the **USA**, millions took to the streets to resist Trump's authoritarianism, with the No Kings movement applying the country's founding rejection of monarchical rule to contemporary concerns about executive overreach. Hundreds of thousands mobilised in Germany, first **against the government's decision to**

pass anti-migration legislation with AfD support, which broke the consensus against cooperation with the far right, then **against the AfD** ahead of the federal election. In **France and the Netherlands**, tens of thousands marched against racism and far-right policies. People took to the streets in **France** again to support a court verdict that found far-right leader Marine Le Pen guilty of embezzling European public funds and declared her ineligible to stand in the 2027 presidential election.

In **Turkey**, İmamoğlu's politically motivated arrest triggered a nationwide **Gen Z-led uprising** against Erdoğan's decades-long dismantling of democratic institutions. Despite violent repression, in June Georgia marked **200 consecutive days** of protests calling for a rerun of the fraudulent 2024 election and restoration of the country's plans to join the EU. In **Togo**, the arrest of a popular rapper sparked the 6 June Movement, **mobilising a generation** that has never known democracy but refuses to accept almost six decades of dynastic rule.

Authoritarian leaders who used elections to entrench their power also faced protests, typically responding with violence. In **Côte d'Ivoire**, opposition supporters took to the streets months before the October election to protest against the exclusion of the two main opposition candidates, leading to some 700 arrests and 80 prison sentences, while 11 people were killed. In **Tanzania**, security forces **killed hundreds** when protests erupted following the undemocratic election. In **Cameroon**, the state used **lethal force** against post-election protests. In **Uganda**, security forces killed at least 30 opposition protesters and detained 2,000, while Museveni's son, head of the army, publicly **threatened** to kill the main opposition candidate.

In **Iran**, widespread protests erupted on 28 December, with people demanding the end of the theocratic regime. Triggered by a sharp depreciation of the currency and **accelerating inflation**, the movement rapidly expanded into a direct **challenge** to the ruling



A student holds a flare at a protest against the detention of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul, Turkey, on 21 March 2025.

Photo by Umit Bektas/Reuters via Gallo Images

elite's legitimacy. Authorities responded by **killing thousands** of protesters, detaining tens of thousands and, once the streets were clear, handing death sentences to protesters.

Around the world, millions of people have shown they believe democracy is something worth risking their lives for. The question is whether these instances of resistance can coalesce into sustained pressure for democratic renewal, or whether regressive trends will continue to deepen. Much will depend on whether international institutions can uphold the norms they've spent decades building, and on whether civil society can resist the restrictions closing in around it to keep democratic aspirations alive.



TECHNOLOGY

INNOVATION WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY

Photo by Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images



Tech oligarchs have accumulated vast power and are using it irresponsibly. Many have aligned themselves with authoritarian, nationalist and populist leaders, including by forging links with the Trump administration and publicly supporting extremist movements. Convergence between military, political and technological elites is enabling conflict atrocities and threatening civic space and the rights of excluded groups.



Technology companies are rapidly rolling out generative AI without adequate human rights safeguards while regulations haven't kept pace. AI is amplifying electoral disinformation, powering military kill lists, driving surveillance technology that's used against civil society and enabling deepfake pornography that overwhelmingly targets women and girls. States are failing to regulate out of fear of missing out on economic and military advantage.



Civil society is leading the campaign to make technology more responsible, providing fact-checking initiatives, litigating against tech companies over hate speech and its amplification in conflict settings, exposing corporate complicity in human rights abuses and demanding global standards for technology, including AI.

Technology companies are rapidly rolling out generative AI as they seek to get ahead of a potential financial bubble burst. Under intense competitive pressure, tech companies have de-emphasised ethical commitments, unleashing products regardless of potential human rights impacts. Tech leaders are also increasingly showing they can't be trusted by aligning themselves with politicians who attack rights. Companies are exploiting governance gaps, since technologies develop faster than regulations, and states, increasingly captured by or deferential to tech interests, are failing to act.

Civil society is encouraging responsible use of new technologies while exploring their activist uses. Social media plays a key role in mobilising Gen Z-led resistance to unaccountable political and economic power. In repressive contexts, **diaspora activists** use social media to work with those at home. As funding sources collapse and civic space restrictions deepen, civil society groups are using AI tools in campaigning, research and grant applications.

Civil society is using tech tools to pursue accountability for rights violations. Investigators in **Ukraine** use AI and open-source tools to identify and collect war crimes evidence. **Mexican** civil society has created a platform to help families identify disappeared people from recovered belongings. Young activists from **Myanmar** have developed a platform to help people organise securely in conflict zones.

Digital repression

At the same time, states and corporations use digital tools to restrict and repress civil society. Social media companies have shown themselves willing to de-prioritise and shadow-ban activist content



The Metropolitan Police deploys a live facial recognition system at Oxford Circus in London, England, on 13 May 2025.

Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images via Galo Images

and apply opaque moderation policies, while failing to deal with disinformation, hate speech and threats. Authoritarian states impose internet shutdowns, limit social media access and criminalise activists and journalists for online expression.

Governments in **Cameroon**, **Tanzania** and **Uganda** imposed internet shutdowns around non-competitive elections. Iranian authorities shut down internet access during their lethal repression of **anti-government protests**. Nepal's government blocked 26 social media platforms, quickly backtracking in the face of **Gen Z-led protests**. Faced with **Gen Z-led protests**, Turkish authorities severely limited bandwidth for key social media platforms. Indian



Journalists protest against 'fake news' legislation used to criminalise opinion and silence dissent in Lahore, Pakistan, on 31 January 2025.

authorities ordered the **blocking** of around 10,000 Twitter/X accounts amid **conflict** with Pakistan over Kashmir.

States use cybercrime and so-called fake news laws to criminalise online dissent. **Mali's** military junta uses cybercrime laws against activists, journalists and opposition politicians, deploying catch-all offences such as 'undermining state credibility'. In repressive **Belarus**, the government detains people for following Telegram channels it deems extremist. In Indonesia, eight activists **face long sentences** for supporting **Gen Z-led protests** on social media.

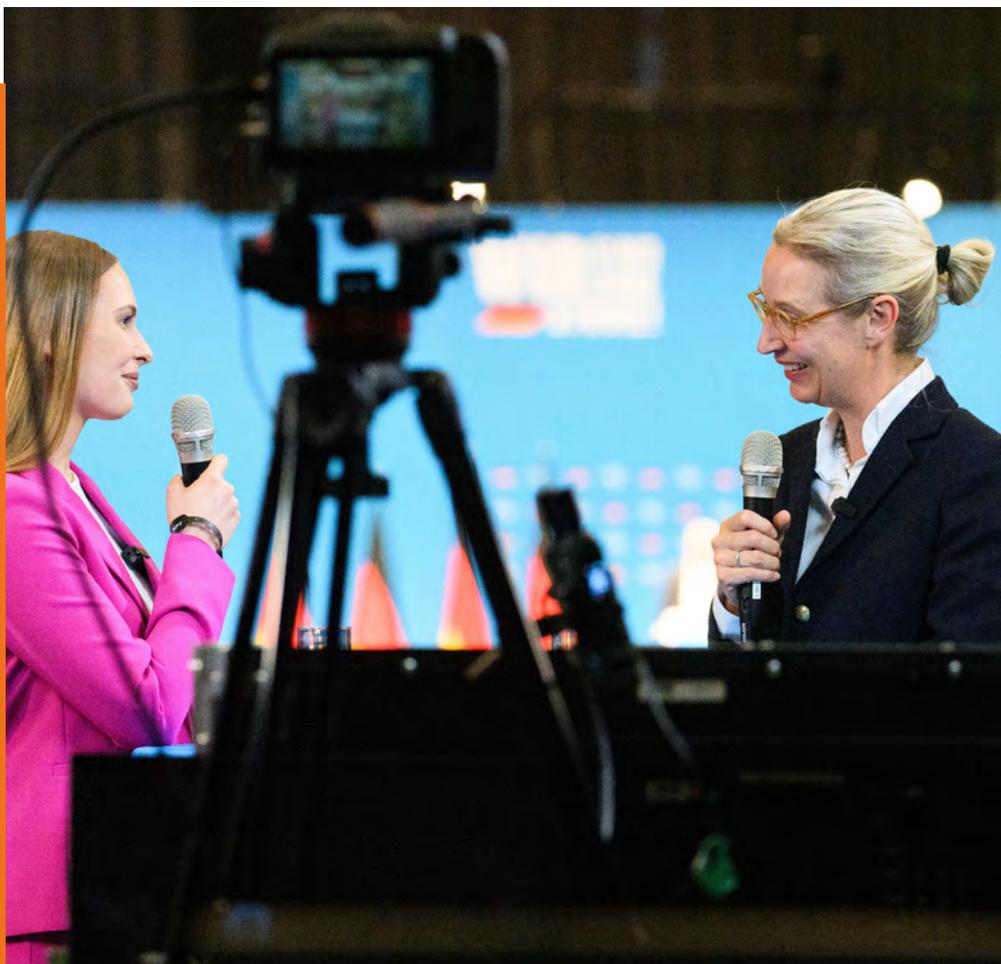
Kenyan activist Albert Omondi Ojwang was **killed in custody** after his arrest for criticising a police official on social media. Turkish authorities **returned** two exiled bloggers to Turkmenistan on false terrorism charges; their whereabouts remain unknown.

Tech companies often align with repressive states, complying with requests to take down accounts and provide user data. YouTube, for example, has **given in** to Israel's demands to block Al Jazeera livestreams.

Disinformation thrives

Disinformation thrives online, and regressive voices are often the loudest. Algorithms promote sensationalist content, while civil society's more nuanced messaging struggles to compete.

Populists and nationalists have followed Donald Trump's lead, exploiting social media to build their brands. Argentina's President **Javier Milei** bypassed traditional media to cultivate an



AfD federal chairwoman Alice Weidel is interviewed for the party's YouTube channel during the national party conference in Essen, Germany, on 29 June 2024.

anti-establishment persona through meme-heavy content and AI-generated Instagram and TikTok imagery. **Japan's** far-right Sanseitō party far outstrips the ruling party's YouTube numbers, which helps it recruit young voters. The far-right Alternative for **Germany** party has a strong TikTok presence. **Burkina Faso's** military ruler Ibrahim Traoré has won a following through disinformation that plays up his charisma and minimises rights violations.

Politicians use social media reach to attack civil society. Slovakia's populist prime minister Robert Fico **boosted** an online smear campaign against a reproductive rights activist. A far-right Portuguese politician published the names of migrant students, accusing them of taking spaces from Portuguese-born children and **calling** activists who support them extremists.

Amid an online pandemic of misogyny, women activists are particularly vulnerable to gendered attacks, including doxing, online stalking and deepfake porn, **supercharged by AI**. The danger is that women disengage and leave the space free for those who spread hate. Online vilification drives violence, as LGBTQI+ **Tunisians** can attest. Online climate denial is rife, with Spanish authorities **warning** about growing hate speech against climate researchers.

Tech companies have intentionally boosted right-wing disinformation. In **Poland's presidential election**, TikTok's algorithm served new users far-right content twice as often as centrist or left-wing content. In Ethiopia, Facebook stands **accused** of algorithmically boosting hateful content during conflict.

Alongside Poland, elections in the **Czech Republic**, **Moldova** and **Romania** were awash with pro-Russia disinformation. Moldova saw Russia's most intense interference attempt, with people paid to

covertly spread propaganda on Facebook and TikTok. In Romania, the Constitutional Court controversially annulled an election following evidence of a large-scale TikTok manipulation campaign.

Disinformation campaigns often target civil society. In Thailand, leaked documents exposed the existence of a secret government team running online **smear campaigns** against organisations including Amnesty International. Syria's White Helmets, a volunteer rescue group, routinely **faces disinformation** branding it as a terrorist network.

Surveillance societies

Tech companies are enabling states to put civil society activists and organisations under surveillance. One method is spyware: **Togo's** authoritarian government has deployed it against journalists. In **Italy**, the government hacked the phones of activists and journalists, including people working on migrants' rights. In **Serbia** it was used against a student activist involved in Gen Z-led protests.

The most widely used spyware, Pegasus, and Graphite, the spyware used in Italy, are produced by Israeli companies. Israel is a world leader in these hostile technologies. Its tech companies are closely entwined with its military forces, and sell only to states, although complex vendor networks obscure where spyware ends up. The Israeli government shields its tech companies; its refusal to cooperate forced a Spanish court to **drop** a spyware investigation.

Protesters are threatened by the growing use of **facial recognition technology**. AI enables live facial recognition without human

oversight. Introduced on security grounds, this technology normalises intrusive surveillance and pre-emptive policing. Authoritarian states have pioneered it and China exports it, including to Afghanistan. Russia uses it to pre-emptively intercept people who may protest against its war on Ukraine. Turkey **used it** to identify participants in the 2025 democracy protests. Hungary's **new law** banning Pride events is enforced through facial recognition.

AI also enables systematic surveillance of social media activity. The US government uses AI to **scan** accounts of student visa holders, looking for expressions of sympathy for Hamas to justify deportations. It uses **automated vehicle licence plate** readers and doorbell camera technologies to identify migrants and protesters, while Iran's theocracy uses licence plate readers to enforce restrictions on women. **Israeli** police now have authority to control cameras and microphones in private devices.

Tech-authoritarian alliances

Tech companies are working openly with authoritarian regimes. When tech companies and leaders donated millions to Trump's inauguration fund, they abandoned any pretence of social responsibility. Companies such as Amazon, Google and Meta quickly dropped or downplayed diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, while Meta **announced** the end of its independent fact-checking programme in the USA.

Trump has repaid tech leaders generously, opposing regulations and handing them greater power. Several have become his advisers, tightly connecting defence, political and tech elites. The Trump

administration is shaping the tech landscape, forcing the sale of TikTok's US arm to a consortium including Oracle, owned by ally Larry Ellison. This **threatens** to turn the platform into a surveillance tool against people targeted by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and those who protest against state violence.

Ideological alignment is evident. Trump allies include Peter Thiel, the Antichrist-obsessed extreme right-winger who owns data broker Palantir. The company provides technology that supports Israel's genocide and US deportations. Twitter/X owner Elon Musk worked with the Trump administration in its **chaotic cost-cutting operation**. In 2025, he addressed a UK **far-right rally** and **endorsed** the Alternative for Germany party, while his AI chatbot Grok has repeatedly generated claims that 'white genocide' is unfolding in South Africa.

In 2026, Musk was embroiled in another controversy when the platform enabled users to post AI-generated nude pictures of women. This so-called nudification dehumanised women online; some children were also targeted. When the UK introduced plans to outlaw the creation and supply of nudification tools, Musk was forced to block it in countries where it's illegal, but not before offering to limit access to subscribers, as though misogyny were a privilege that could be purchased.

Time and again, women and girls are the targets, and in cases like this, problems stem less from regulatory omission than from deliberate political choices. Toxic masculinity, the far right and the unaccountable power of tech oligarchs are interconnected problems.

The ubiquity of technology provided by US firms is also fuelling rising concerns about data security and the potential for the US



Tech executives Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai and Elon Musk attend Trump's presidential inauguration in Washington DC, USA, on 20 January 2025.

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

government to use denial of access as a coercive tool. This has led to the French government's **decision** to pursue digital independence by replacing US technology. France can expect retaliatory threats, while less powerful states won't be able to make the choice.

AI arms race

Tech giants are also spearheading a literal AI arms race, increasingly **partnering** with military forces, even if it means rewriting mission statements that used to rule out military cooperation.



Activists from the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots stage a protest at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany, on 21 March 2019.

Israeli forces use algorithmic systems to generate kill lists and track Hamas personnel so they can bomb them at home with their families. Several states now possess **autonomous weapon systems**— killer robots – that can select and strike targets without human intervention. The UK government recently signed a deal with Palantir to develop an AI-assisted ‘kill chain’. Automated systems lack conscience, empathy and an awareness of consequences. Because they rely on pattern recognition and probability calculations, and their algorithms are trained on biased data, they make mistakes.

The technology is advancing quickly and may soon become too entrenched to backtrack. Talks under an existing treaty, the United Nations (UN) Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, have been slow, with major powers blocking progress. In December 2024, a UN General Assembly resolution established a new process to develop global regulations, with talks held in 2025.

The **Campaign to Stop Killer Robots** is playing a leading role. Most states support its proposed two-tiered approach, which would ban the most dangerous autonomous weapons and regulate the rest.

Civil society is also working to hold tech companies accountable for their role in Israel’s genocide. A Dutch group **revealed** that a Microsoft data centre in the Netherlands stores data for Israeli military intelligence, which uses cloud-based services for systematic surveillance of Palestinians. Civil society is urging employees to protest and is working to spread awareness about tech companies’ complicity in atrocities.

The governance struggle

The rapid spread of generative AI has exposed a **fragmented regulatory landscape**. Neither states nor corporations can be trusted to develop regulations alone. Given the transnational nature of technology, civil society is calling for global governance standards rooted in international human rights law. Standards should be developed through consultative processes, and civil society should play a central role in oversight.

There's been some regulatory progress at the European Union (EU) level. The European Media Freedom Act protects journalists against spyware, although states can abuse exceptions. In 2024, the EU adopted the AI Act, to be rolled out over several years. In 2025, it opened a voluntary code of AI practice for tech companies to sign.

The AI Act takes a tiered approach based on risk, banning high-risk applications and imposing transparency requirements on lower-risk ones. Civil society influenced its development but has major concerns, including over AI applications in defence, law enforcement and migration management.

But tech leaders are furious about constraints on their power, and they have Trump's backing. Under their pressure, in November the EU proposed delaying the Act's rollout until December 2027. The Trump administration has also spoken out against the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, which governs personal data management. EU states may end up watering down AI and other regulations to avoid tariffs.

China has proposed its own rules, strongly centred on economic development, security and state sovereignty rather than human



US President Donald Trump gestures after signing an executive order at the 'Winning the AI Race' Summit in Washington, DC, USA on 23 July 2025.

rights. The USA's 2025 AI Action Plan reflects the influence of tech leaders, prioritising deregulation and asserting the goal of US global AI dominance. At the AI Action Summit in Paris in February 2025, the USA and UK refused to sign a declaration supporting ethical, inclusive and open AI governance. The latest summit, in India in February 2026, failed to make any progress on human rights safeguards.

In August 2025, the UN **took a step forward** with a resolution that created a panel of independent scientific experts and a Global Dialogue on AI Governance. Achieved after extensive negotiations, the resolution sought a compromise between the approaches of China, the EU and the USA. More difficult negotiations lie ahead, and

it's hard to be optimistic given that powerful states are increasingly undermining the UN and tech companies continue to use their power to weaken regulatory efforts.

In September, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa **launched** a Global Call for AI Red Lines, backed by hundreds of public figures and organisations. It urges governments to establish clear boundaries on surveillance and weapons systems, and calls for clear and enforceable rules, robust compliance mechanisms and a strong enforcement body. It offers an example of how civil society is taking the lead in shaping safeguards and standards.

Backward steps

A troubling development has, however, given repressive states a new weapon: the **UN Convention against Cybercrime**. Adopted in December 2024 and opened for signature in October, 74 states have already signed the treaty, suggesting it will pass the ratification threshold and enter into force. Civil society has consistently criticised the convention, which was proposed by Russia and backed by authoritarian states.

Although civil society engaged with the process, the treaty lacks adequate rights safeguards, and its broad scope gives states ample room for abuse. It may help combat harmful cybercrimes such as the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, but could intensify the use of cybercrime laws to suppress dissent or facilitate the extradition of dissidents in exile. How states incorporate the treaty's provisions into their criminal justice systems will be crucial. Civil society needs a strong voice in reviewing implementation.

Regulation can have unintended consequences. When the EU adopted its Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising regulation in 2024, it aimed to safeguard democratic processes from disinformation through **stricter rules** on political ad targeting. But in July, Meta claimed it couldn't distinguish between political and non-political ads and announced it would no longer allow any advertising on electoral, political and social issues in the EU. This includes advocacy ads, meaning civil society groups risk losing a crucial channel. In comparison, well-resourced anti-rights forces and states that spread disinformation have many other ways of shaping public debate. Meta's decision deepened this **inequality of communication**, demonstrating the power tech companies have over public discourse and their willingness to push back against regulations.

Meanwhile, Australia took a drastic step that others may follow, banning under-16s from using major social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. The measure is controversial: proponents, including the government and child safety campaigners, argue it will protect children from harmful content, safeguard their mental health and prevent bullying; those against see danger in the government deciding who can access information, and raise concerns that ID checks create privacy risks and could enable data misuse. They also argue the ban could isolate vulnerable young people, particularly young LGBTQI+ people. It will be vital to assess what works and what doesn't before others follow suit.



Philippine journalist and Nobel laureate Maria Ressa warns of 'extremely dangerous times ahead' following Meta's decision to end its fact-checking programme on Facebook and Instagram, on 8 January 2025.

Civil society response

Civil society is working to defend itself from online threats. Digital security practice is improving, and civil society organisations have developed support tools. Activists routinely use VPNs to evade censorship and are adopting more secure platforms.

Civil society is combatting disinformation through fact-checking initiatives in many countries, including **Argentina**, **Bolivia** and **Ecuador**. In **Malawi's** recent election, civil society used early warning systems to track online disinformation and hate speech, helping reduce tensions. In **Nigeria**, a civil society group has launched a WhatsApp chatbot allowing users to verify information.

Civil society is also working to hold tech companies to account, including through litigation. Meta and its outsourcing partners face three **court cases in Kenya** accusing them of promoting hate and incitement during Ethiopia's conflict. An Ethiopian man whose father was killed after being doxxed is among those accusing Meta of failing to prevent amplification of hate speech. The cases seek improved content moderation policies and a compensation fund.

Many more such actions can be expected. In a fast-evolving sphere that affects every aspect of human life, civil society must stay engaged, continually refreshing its understanding of and responses to technology. Civil society must keep exposing the unaccountable and irresponsible power of tech oligarchs and upholding the human rights standards states and tech companies evidently think aren't needed.



Photo by Eduardo Muñoz Alvarez/VIEWpress via Getty Images

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

POWER POLITICS TESTS GLOBAL RULES



Decades-old global governance rules and institutions are being tested as never before as the most powerful states assert naked self-interest and ride roughshod over international laws. Israel has consistently disregarded International Court of Justice orders to stop its genocide in Gaza. Russia has repeatedly violated international laws in its war in Ukraine, as has the USA in its military strikes on boats in the Caribbean and intervention in Venezuela. States are defying International Criminal Court warrants and ignoring the Refugee Convention.



Several states are undermining global governance by pulling out of international institutions they disagree with. The Trump administration leads the withdrawals, having quit over 60 bodies, including climate, democracy and women’s rights organisations. Many states are slashing financial support, causing a funding crisis that’s hitting the UN’s human rights functions hardest, deepening impunity. They’re pursuing selective rather than universal approaches, such as the Board of Peace, eroding the principle that global rules should apply to all states.



At this pivotal moment, the UN is selecting a new leader, but the opaque process favours powerful states whose veto power makes a weak compromise candidate more likely than someone who’ll confront their interests. Civil society is calling for a feminist female secretary-general committed to defending the UN Charter. It’s urging Security Council reform to expand membership and limit veto powers, alongside strengthening of the Human Rights Council and systematic rather than tokenistic civil society participation in UN processes.

The global system built following the Second World War and expanded after the Cold War is being eroded. The practice of global multilateralism, always contested and flawed, is giving way to one of great power competition, weakening international law and reducing accountability for the most powerful.

Donald Trump is leading the attack, dismantling the international order through withdrawal, funding cuts, transactional deal-making and the formation of new bodies to bypass the United Nations (UN). Other leaders are following suit. Israel and Russia are openly violating international law. As states assert their powers, civil society is being sidelined.

States quit the international system

In January 2026, Trump announced US withdrawal from 66 international bodies and processes, claiming they didn't serve US interests. These include the UN Democracy Fund, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and UN Women.

The exits began in 2025, when Trump renounced the Paris Agreement, withdrew the USA from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and ended cooperation with the Human Rights Council. The Trump administration has quit institutions that might seek to constrain its power or that it opposes ideologically, including those working to protect the climate, democracy and women's rights. The US government boycotted the **COP30** climate conference and the **G20 summit** and 'rejected and denounced' the **Sustainable Development Goals**.

Argentina, led by Trump ally Javier Milei, followed suit on the

WHO and refused to sign the G20 declaration. Israel announced it would boycott the Human Rights Council. Hungary's authoritarian leader Viktor Orbán committed to pulling the country out of the **International Criminal Court** (ICC) over its arrest warrant against Benjamin Netanyahu. Three West African states under military rule – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – also **declared their withdrawal**, having previously completed their departure from the Economic Community of West African States to form a rival body. Before **US intervention**, Venezuela's congress voted to leave the ICC.

States quit for different reasons. Trump aims to assert US supremacy and weaken bodies that challenge him. Trump allies signal alignment. Others seek to shield themselves from accountability. For instance, Nicaragua's authoritarian government **pulled out** of the Food and Agriculture Organization, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration and UNESCO and ended its Human Rights Council cooperation in reaction to criticism and scrutiny.

Even with states that have long failed to cooperate with human rights bodies, such as Israel, withdrawals deepen impunity by removing states from institutional scrutiny and reducing civil society's opportunities to expose violations. They fragment the international system, creating spaces of impunity for powerful states that fail to respect global rules.

Funding in crisis

Withdrawal undermines international organisations by shrinking their funding base. The WHO has been left scrambling because the USA provided around 15 per cent of its funding, although before leaving it withheld its 2024 and 2025 dues, already forcing the organisation to cut jobs.

The defunding of multilateralism extends beyond US withdrawal. The USA made headlines by **dismantling USAID**, the world's biggest aid agency, but other major donors, including France, Germany and the UK, are slashing aid, including multilateral support, while increasing defence spending.

The UN's 2026 core budget cuts spending by 15 per cent and staff numbers by around 19 per cent. The UN80 efficiency drive is reviewing potential merger of some mandates and exploring relocation of staff from expensive cities to cheaper ones. One proposed merger is between UN Women and the UN Population Fund, a move that would threaten gender equality and reproductive rights commitments precisely when they're under attack.

US cuts hit hard because it's the UN's biggest funder, expected to provide 22 per cent of the regular budget. The USA also habitually pays late, along with many others. In 2025, arrears stood at record levels, with **over US\$1.8 billion** of almost US\$3.5 billion unpaid. The biggest powers account for the largest share of non-payment: the USA tops the list, with arrears worsening under Trump, followed by China and Russia. In February 2026, Secretary-General António Guterres **warned** that late payments left the UN at risk of 'imminent financial collapse'.

Many crucial initiatives depend on voluntary rather than mandatory contributions, and shortfalls are leaving key humanitarian bodies struggling. Dependence gives states leverage, and as support becomes scarcer, they can dictate terms. In December, the USA pledged **US\$2 billion** in humanitarian support but restricted it to 17 countries aligned with its priorities, excluding others with acute needs. It specified how funds should be spent and made support conditional on the UN making efficiency reforms that meet its expectations. This had little to do with humanitarian principles.



People gather outside the USAID headquarters in Washington, DC, USA on 3 February 2025 to protest against a directive suspending the agency's core operations.

Photo by Kent Nishimura/Reuters via Galo Images

Human rights functions **suffer most** from deteriorating funding. Human rights is one of the UN's three pillars, alongside peace and security and sustainable development, but receives only around five per cent of the regular budget. The loss of US support and voluntary funding cutbacks from several European states have forced the **Human Rights Council** to merge some mandates, terminate others and shorten sessions, reducing opportunities for civil society participation. At its July session, it announced the cancellation of 18 activities due to shortfalls.

Funding for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights dropped by **around US\$90 million** in 2025, causing around 300 job losses, with another 110 positions set to go. Its Myanmar programme



People gather at Place de la République in Paris, France to demand an international fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty on 23 June 2023.

and work to protect LGBTQI+ rights and prevent gender-based violence are **among activities** that have suffered, meaning less protection for survivors and more impunity for perpetrators.

The UN system could be more efficient, and relocating functions to global south countries could bring benefits for civil society. But more ambitious ideas about reforming UN funding – such as **proposals** to require states to contribute a fairer share of national income, which would broaden the funding base and reduce vulnerability to shocks from the most powerful states – haven't been considered. If the UN pursues more voluntary support, it increases the risk of undue influence by states and billionaire philanthropists. Human rights and civil society access suffer when a small group of funders can call the shots.

Selective multilateralism

States are increasingly bypassing formal UN processes to form ad hoc coalitions. This has become necessary on climate and environmental issues. At **COP30**, major commitments were left voluntary, delegated to coalitions led by willing states, and the same may happen with **plastics treaty** negotiations. The consensus requirement allows states opposed to action to block progress, forcing those that want change to work without them. Some progress may result, but it creates a regulatory patchwork.

International agreements have always begun with coalitions. Civil society-backed campaigns, taken up by groups of committed states, led to landmines and nuclear weapons treaties. Similar hopes inspire the campaign to develop a **fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty**. But building coalitions is getting harder. On **AI governance**, for example, three camps currently advance incompatible visions, and it's unlikely they'll reach consensus to develop the regulations required.

The Trump administration refuses to cooperate when international processes don't serve its agenda. At its insistence, major US corporations **won exemption** from the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development tax agreement.

Repressive states are collaborating to make the global system even less democratic and rights-oriented. In December, China launched the Friends of Global Governance, a UN bloc of 43 states that includes many notorious human rights offenders. The group claims to uphold UN principles and correct global south under-representation in decision-making, but advances an entirely state-centric vision of cooperation. It aims to implement China's Global Governance Initiative, which asserts the protection of domestic affairs from what it calls 'external interference', leaving no space for international-level human rights accountability.

States are also forming more selective organisations that sidestep the UN. The BRICS group, founded by Brazil, China, India and Russia in 2009, consists largely of repressive states, with authoritarian Indonesia joining in 2025. BRICS positions itself as a response to global south under-representation but functions largely as an autocrats' club with no meaningful civil society engagement or human rights accountability.

The G20 is more established and made headlines because of the USA's boycott of the South Africa-hosted meeting, but that didn't prompt discussion about whether it, rather than the UN, should lead global economic decision-making. That Trump will host the next meeting at his private Miami club speaks volumes about the forum's exclusionary nature.

Selective multilateralism has reached a new level with the Board of Peace. This body originated in a Security Council resolution that agreed to subject Gaza to external governance. The vague and

controversial resolution was seen as the only way of securing Trump's support. But what was launched at the January 2026 **World Economic Forum(A)** goes much further. Trump appears to envision a permanent body with a wider brief under his chairmanship, with personal power to veto decisions, issue resolutions, set agendas and invite and dismiss members. Its executive board is stacked with his allies.

Permanent membership costs US\$1 billion, and it isn't clear where the money goes, although Trump has routinely **exploited** his presidency for personal gain. The body's draft charter makes no mention of human rights or civil society access. As it stands, this looks like another autocrats' club, overwhelmingly convening states responsible for serious human rights violations. Its credibility was further undermined when Israel joined in February 2026. Several democracies have refused to join, often citing concerns about the body's relationship with the UN.

The Board of Peace appears to be an attempt to supplant the UN, particularly the dysfunctional Security Council, positioning Trump as the international dealmaker who'll bring leaders together. The move should prompt fresh debate about long-stalled **Security Council reform** proposals on expanding membership and, above all, limiting veto powers. What's needed isn't a Trump-dominated club but a functional Security Council capable of maintaining peace and security.

At the World Economic Forum, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney staked his claim to lead the global governance debate. Speaking from the perspective of a relatively powerful global north state no longer able to rely on the old order, he admitted what many in civil society have long known: the concept of a rules-based international order was always something of a fiction, maintained by global north states that benefited from power asymmetries until the USA threatened to use its greater power against them.

Carney's speech won international acclaim because he stood up to Trump and championed multilateralism rather than isolationist responses to changing dynamics. But what he offered instead was a vision of selective multilateralism, with coalitions forming around shared interests and relatively powerful states cooperating to defend themselves. This defensive vision of cooperation marks a retreat from the principle of global rules that apply to all states. It also implies states may buffer US pressure by forging warmer relations with China, a process evidently underway, which means further limiting accountability for China's appalling human rights record.

Carney's speech came in response to Trump's threats to annex **Greenland** and unravel **NATO**, rather than to Israel's violations of international law. He said nothing about global south states or civil society, even though both have vital contributions to make on issues from climate financing to accountability for conflict atrocities.

Selective multilateralism may open some opportunities for civil society but can't uphold universal standards. The established system, despite many problems, provides institutionalised structures and procedures that enable a degree of accountability and gives civil society opportunities to influence decisions through sustained engagement. Declarations, resolutions and treaties provide standards to measure states by. A more ad hoc approach where rules are unclear and backroom deals prevail means reduced civil society access.

International law flouted

International humanitarian law is increasingly disregarded, including in Israel's genocide in Gaza, Russia's attacks on Ukrainian civilians, **Sudan's disastrous conflict** and wars worldwide. The global legal regime has always faced the challenge that the most powerful states



US President Donald Trump, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto take part in the launch the Board of Peace at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on 22 January 2026.

face less accountability than weaker ones. But international laws used to be viewed as lines that most states, most of the time, wouldn't cross. The alternative is anarchy.

Israel has systematically targeted UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestine, killing hundreds of its staff and banning it from operating. Russia has violated international law by abducting children and torturing civilians and prisoners of war. The USA has violated international law through airstrikes on boats in the Caribbean and its **intervention in Venezuela**. Israel and the USA have **continuously vilified** the UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, Francesca Albanese, with Trump imposing sanctions. Israel has repeatedly



Mothers and other relatives of drug war victims react to the International Criminal Court's decision to reject former president Rodrigo Duterte's appeal for interim release in Quezon City, Philippines, on 28 November 2025.

ignored International Court of Justice orders to halt its genocide, aware that the world's highest court lacks enforcement powers and the USA will shield it from consequences. Global north states disregard the Refugee Convention through deportation deals to send migrants to unsafe countries.

The ICC faces sustained attacks. It demonstrated its value in 2025, when it **sentenced** two militia leaders from the Central African Republic and **arrested** former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte. Civil society played a vital role in collecting evidence: Filipino women-led groups documented thousands of extrajudicial killings.

But states are intensifying pressure on the court. The UK government threatened to withdraw funding over the arrest warrant against Netanyahu. The Trump administration sanctioned numerous ICC officials and reportedly threatened further action unless the ICC revises its founding treaty, the Rome Statute, to explicitly exclude jurisdiction over non-member states, presumably to protect itself from prosecution. Hungary defied the rules when it hosted Netanyahu despite being required to arrest him. Italy released a wanted Libyan warlord.

The European Convention on Human Rights and its court are under fire for defending the rights of migrants and refugees. In December, **27 states** called for a reinterpretation of the convention to redefine degrading and inhuman treatment and make deportation easier. Such actions are increasingly fraying international law.

Facing the future

At this pivotal moment, states must choose a new UN secretary-general, as Guterres' second term expires at the end of 2026. The process is opaque and the five permanent Security Council members

hold veto power, making any candidate who might challenge their interests unlikely to prevail. The likely outcome is a compromise candidate all can tolerate: potentially someone who flatters Trump, doesn't stand up to China and Russia and promises more cost-cutting, further limiting the UN's human rights functions.

Civil society is **pushing for ambition**. The 1 for 8 billion campaign demands a transparent selection process and a leader committed to upholding the UN Charter. It urges the UN General Assembly, where all states have an equal vote and none have a veto, to push back if the Security Council imposes a candidate many oppose. And as all nine previous appointees have been men, it calls for a feminist woman to lead the UN.

More broadly, civil society continues to propose UN reform but remains unheard. Participation is often tokenistic, and when the UN holds its high-profile annual event, the **high-level General Assembly opening week**, even accredited civil society organisations are locked out. Straightforward reform proposals, such as establishing an international civil society day to recognise civil society's contribution and offer a rallying point for advocacy, have yet to be taken up.

The current system has major deficiencies of accountability, democracy, effectiveness, efficiency and transparency. Change is needed, but it must be democratic, inclusive and rights-oriented. Instead, things are moving in the opposite direction. Today's attempts to weaken the global system aren't temporary disruptions. Trump's funding cuts and other actions won't be quickly reversed. Even if he respects US term limits, the Board of Peace shows he intends to keep dominating the global arena beyond his presidency. Neither Vladimir Putin nor Xi Jinping plans to vacate the stage either.



Activists from the 1 for 8 Billion campaign call for the appointment of the first female UN Secretary-General during the 69th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, USA, on 17 March 2025.

Photo by UNA-JK

The growing global governance emergency demands urgent dialogue about what kind of architecture is needed to protect human rights and address the many problems that cross borders. The crisis also offers an opportunity to decolonise global governance and make the international order fairer and more representative. Multilateralism must mean more than states negotiating over their interests. Civil society's vision deserves a fair hearing.



Majid Asgaripour/WANA via Reuters/Gallo Images

CONFLICT

IMPUNITY UNCHECKED



Civilians, including civil society activists, humanitarian workers and journalists, are being targeted in conflicts. This reflects a broader breakdown of international humanitarian law driven by entrenched impunity. Impunity is evident in Israel’s genocide in Gaza, Russia’s attacks on civilians in Ukraine, ethnic cleansing by Sudanese militias supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Myanmar’s military junta waging war against its people.



Contemporary peace agreements are mostly superficial, leaving perpetrators unpunished and root causes unaddressed. This is exemplified by Donald Trump’s peace-as-PR approach, in which headline-making deals serve his interests and often appear motivated by hopes of material gains, including property speculation in Gaza, mineral concessions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and oil access in Venezuela. Combined with rising military spending, superficial deals make renewed conflict more likely.



Despite facing grave risks, civil society is responding by delivering grassroots humanitarian aid and documenting rights violations in conflict zones around the world. The genocide in Gaza has sparked an unprecedented global resistance movement, with many people compelled to protest and speak out, and human rights groups, students and unions pursuing strategies such as boycotts and litigation while facing escalating state repression.

A deadly new phase of conflict has begun in the Middle East, with Israel and the USA bombing Iran in pursuit of regime change and Iran retaliating by striking neighbouring states. This is the latest war in a world of spiralling conflict that makes violence the daily reality for vast numbers of people. Conservative estimates suggest that at least **240,000 people** were killed in conflicts between December 2024 and November 2025. For many millions more, armed conflict dominates daily life. In a **growing trend**, many of those killed are civilians, including large numbers of women and children, while activists, humanitarian workers and journalists are often deliberately targeted. A **recent study** suggests atrocity crimes are being normalised because perpetrators see others commit them with impunity. As violations go unpunished, international humanitarian law is breaking down under the weight of repeated infractions.

Impunity enables the best-documented genocide in human history. Israel has killed at least **70,000 people** in Gaza, including many hundreds since the October ceasefire, and this figure may be an underestimate. Israel's impunity has exposed the inadequacy of an international architecture that's designed to prevent genocide, while also sparking an extraordinary global outpouring of empathy, solidarity and resistance.

Other conflicts risk being overshadowed by the atrocities in Gaza and now the war in Iran. Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine is in its fourth year, with Russia deliberately bombing civilians, forcibly transferring tens of thousands of Ukrainian children to areas it controls and torturing people in detention. Conflicts continue in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Myanmar, while between 150,000 and 250,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Sudan since April 2023 by government armed forces and insurgent militias backed by the UAE. With 15 million people forced to flee their homes,

Sudan is the world's largest displacement crisis, yet it receives little sustained attention.

Civil society is sounding the alarm, working to expose violations, help people in need and demand genuine peace that protects human rights and delivers justice. But it operates in a volatile global context characterised by thriving impunity, tightening civic space, collapsing funding and the assertion of global power politics.

Civil society in the firing line

Israel has killed hundreds of humanitarian workers and journalists, with clear evidence of deliberate targeting. The risks are great in **Sudan**, where humanitarian efforts are further hindered by restrictive emergency orders. In the DRC, civil society **faces threats** of abduction, murder, sexual violence and torture from militias. Myanmar's junta, at war with pro-democracy forces and ethnic militias, has **arrested** over 27,000 activists and protesters, systematically torturing them in detention.

Civil society now faces a funding crisis. The Trump administration's **destruction of USAID** and cutbacks by several European states have hit conflict response and peacebuilding efforts hard. Ukraine's civil society and independent media are **struggling for funding** as war fatigue sets in and Russia shows no signs of genuinely wanting peace. Loss of US support for independent media in Myanmar threatens to stifle a vital counter to junta propaganda. Loss of funding has forced many humanitarian initiatives to close in Sudan. In **Colombia**, where violence has resurged, cuts have hampered groups helping implement the 2016 peace agreement.

In Gaza, the Israeli government has systematically blocked aid as part of its strategy of weaponising hunger and chronic scarcity. In February 2025, it gave an obscure US body, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, a monopoly on aid supply. Its insistence that aid be provided at only a few points created death traps, as desperate people who converged on aid posts were shot dead by Israeli forces. The organisation shut down following the October ceasefire.

In December, Israel **banned** 37 international civil society organisations from working in Palestine, including ActionAid, Doctors Without Borders and the International Rescue Committee. According to new regulations, the government can refuse registration on grounds such as supporting boycotts and prosecutions of armed forces personnel.

Military spending soars

As aid declines, military spending soars. Global military spending stood at **US\$2.7 trillion** in 2024, around 13 times what states provide in aid. It would take a fraction, US\$300 billion, to eliminate extreme poverty, while US\$1 trillion would close the annual funding gap for climate transition and adaptation.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine drove European states to increase defence spending. Trump demands they pay still more, insisting the USA carries too much of NATO's burden. He's bullying states into compliance, threatening to make NATO's Article 5, the collective defence provision, conditional on defence spending levels. The pressure was evident at the **2025 NATO summit**, where most members committed to increasing military spending to five per cent of GDP by 2035. States that refuse, like Spain, may face US retaliation.



At the NATO summit in The Hague, The Netherlands, in June 2025, US President Donald Trump extracted a promise from European allies to raise their defense spending to 5 per cent of their GDP.

The money has to come from somewhere, and further aid and social spending cuts seem inevitable, resulting in a huge transfer of wealth from people in need to arms companies. UK aid, for example, will fall by **27 per cent** in the next financial year to enable increased military spending.

This brings two challenges for civil society. The first is to advocate for social spending, domestically and internationally, which means winning public arguments about how resources should be used. The second is to scrutinise defence spending and expose **corruption**. The defence industry has vast lobbying power. Procurement is secretive, supply chains are complex, people routinely rotate between arms company



An Indian soldier stands guard outside the Haj House in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, on 14 May 2025, as pilgrims resume their journey to Mecca following a ceasefire that reopened the region's airspace.

and government jobs and politicians benefit from connections, with the defence industry among the US Republican Party's **biggest donors**. Big spending increases mean more corruption.

States must commit to transparency. Defence departments and NATO rarely engage with civil society. They must recognise civil society's role in scrutinising military spending and work with it to develop stronger accountability standards.

In Ukraine, the world's highest per capita defence spender, the **first major protests** since Russia's full-scale invasion came when parliament weakened anti-corruption bodies. People protested even in frontline cities and despite martial law. It's encouraging that authorities didn't repress protests, and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy acknowledged the pressure and reversed the changes, a response unimaginable in Russia.

Peace as PR

While forcing up military spending, Trump also exemplifies a growing trend of superficial peacemaking. His claim to have ended eight wars doesn't withstand scrutiny. Two patterns recur. The first is ceasefire as spectacle, with killing continuing after supposed peace agreements are signed. The October Gaza **ceasefire** allowed Israel to **contain** public outrage and international pressure while continuing to kill people. Fighting **continues** in the DRC after a December **ceasefire** brokered by Qatar and the USA. The Cambodia-Thailand border conflict **flared up again** despite two agreements involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China and the USA.

The second pattern is peacemaking without justice. Rapid recognition of the transitional government that **triumphed** in Syria's civil war left major questions of justice unaddressed, and Kurdish and Syrian state forces continued fighting until a January 2026 ceasefire. US intervention paused hostilities between India and Pakistan over **Kashmir**, a dispute that dates back to the 1947 partition. But lasting peace **remains distant**, human rights abuses continue in Kashmir and, since both countries have nuclear weapons and their leaders show no sign of abandoning their belligerent rhetoric, there's potential for further war with global repercussions.

In contrast, the decades-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region may have ended with a US government-brokered **peace agreement**. While Trump talked up the trade opportunities, civil society continues to shoulder the real work of peacebuilding, helping ethnic Armenians forced to flee by Azerbaijan's decisive intervention and working to defuse decades of distrust.

Rather than peace, what's on offer is PR, with causes of conflict left unresolved and perpetrators free to enjoy impunity. The personalised approach Trump exemplifies fills the vacuum left by the **paralysed UN Security Council**, deadlocked by the veto powers of China, Russia and the USA. Regional organisations such as the African Union and ASEAN do little when their member states have stakes in conflicts. The field is clear for powerful states to advance their interests by involving themselves in conflicts and peace processes.

Contemporary peacemaking is often closely linked to the pursuit of material interests. China, Russia and the USA all seek access to resources such as fossil fuels and minerals. Trump's real estate friends are set to profit from Gaza reconstruction, while **US intervention**

in Venezuela opened opportunities for the oil and gas industry, key Trump campaign financiers. The DRC deal brought **mineral concessions**, and access to rare earth metals is a key US priority in Ukraine and may help explain a US shift towards Myanmar's junta.

Powerful states continue to use violence to pursue their interests. Russia is doing so in Ukraine, while the US government is asserting its aerial supremacy wherever it sees fit. Airstrikes branded as surgical kill civilians. Hundreds have died in Iran, including as a result of the bombing of a school. Other US targets have included Islamic State-aligned militants in Nigeria and alleged drug boats in the Caribbean ahead of its Venezuelan intervention. It killed at least 125 people in some 36 strikes, constituting multiple international law violations.

Denial of self-determination is a recurring theme. 2026 brought renewed US threats to annex **Greenland**. Defence, economic and strategic interests lie in shipping routes unlocked by climate change, contested by China, Russia and the USA, while the country has abundant rare earth minerals. US threats left NATO in disarray until a behind-closed-doors deal started negotiations, but notably absent from discussions is the right of Greenland's people to determine their own futures.

Israel's policies also deny Palestinians ownership of their future. When the genocide became impossible to ignore, **several global north states** belatedly recognised Palestinian **statehood**, a necessary step towards a two-state solution. In January, a group of global south states **formed the Hague Group**, committing to end arms transfers and financial involvement with Israel. But the plan that's prevailed, endorsed by a vague UN Security Council resolution, is one of **technocratic external governance**.

Gaza will be run by a committee of Trump's **Board of Peace**, packed with his allies but including no Palestinians. The reconstruction plan unveiled in January 2026 presents a futuristic social engineering experiment, envisaging a permanent Israeli buffer zone and the construction of new cities, watched over by high-tech surveillance. A proposed Palestinian-led National Committee for the Administration of Gaza would play a subservient role, denying Palestinians any real say and leaving Israel's occupation unchallenged.

States involved in conflicts are also protecting each other from accountability. The USA shields Israel. The UAE fuels **Sudan's civil war** for regional positioning and economic gain, extensively backing brutal militias while buffered from pressure by strong ties with global north states such as the UK and USA. **Rwanda** benefits from similar international relationships to reap mineral rewards from its support for rebel forces slaughtering civilians in eastern DRC. Military-led Myanmar has cultivated economic, military and political links with authoritarian states, notably **China**, India and Russia, while its recent **sham election** gave the US government a pretext to drop sanctions.

What results is peace only on the surface. The deals struck don't do anything to hold perpetrators of atrocities to account or address the deep roots of conflict, making further violence and human rights crimes highly likely. Near certainty of impunity, soaring military spending and the division of the world into spheres of influence by China, Russia and the USA almost guarantee more conflict. This has now materialised in the Middle East. A new **nuclear arms race** may be underway in Europe, while future conflicts could include strategic border incursions by Russia to test NATO's resolve, forced annexation of Taiwan by China and a catastrophic confrontation between India and Pakistan.



Protesters gather in London, UK on 15 April 2025, to mark the two-year anniversary of the conflict in Sudan as the city hosts an international conference on the crisis.

Photo by Isabel Infantes/Reuters via Gallo Images

Civil society action

In contrast to peace as PR, local civil society groups are playing a vital role in responding to conflict on the ground. In Gaza, where life is a daily struggle for survival and dignity, people **support each other** by sharing supplies while local groups distribute aid and provide psychological support. **Palestinian artists** document destruction, asserting the humanity of a dehumanised people.

In the DRC, local groups distribute necessities while others work to



People gather for the 'Gaza is hungry' emergency rally in Edmonton, Canada, on 20 July 2025.

improve transparency in mineral mining, the main conflict driver. In Haiti, as rampant gang violence continues, **civil society groups help** people forced to flee their homes by providing temporary shelters, food and psychosocial support. In Sudan, local groups document violations, counter disinformation and support displaced people and sexual violence survivors. Some use **artistic expression and storytelling** techniques to start conversations about peace and justice.

Diaspora communities can be crucial. Activists from Myanmar based in Thailand **use food** to build connections between the two communities, holding events in restaurants where exiles teach young Thai people about the struggles in Myanmar.

Campaigners use international business, cultural, diplomatic and sporting links to focus attention on conflicts. For instance, they're calling for an end to the UAE's extensive basketball sponsorship as a way of focusing attention on its role in Sudan.

Women-led civil society is vital, recognising that conflicts disproportionately affect women and girls, including as a result of gender-based and sexual violence. For instance, in Ukraine, **women's human rights organisations** provide humanitarian relief and work with law enforcement bodies to ensure proper documentation of sexual violence and responses that centre survivors and reduce stigma.

An unprecedented resistance movement

Israel's genocide is a generational moment. Many people understand that neutrality equals complicity. While resistance inside Israel has been

rare, people around the world, including many never previously active, are mobilising to show solidarity and demand an end to impunity.

Civil society action has shaped how people understand and respond to the genocide. Young people are taking the lead, connecting demands for Palestinian rights with struggles for economic, racial and social justice. Human rights organisations, labour movements and students have come together to expose the role of governments, defence contractors and technology companies, calling on them to cut ties with Israel and pressure it to respect international law.

Tactics include protests, direct action, boycotts, online campaigns and litigation. In one example, four Belgian civil society organisations won a **court ruling** ordering the Flemish government to halt all shipments of military goods. The court found these violated the Arms Trade Treaty, which bans arms exports where there's a serious risk of rights violations. Civil society in countries including Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK has also taken legal action.

In Italy, hundreds of thousands joined **general strikes** that blocked roads and transport hubs to call for protection for those involved in the Global Sumud Flotilla that was trying to bring aid to Gaza, and for the government to impose sanctions on Israel. Public pressure forced the government to send a ship to support the flotilla and speak out against Israel's attempts to deny Palestinian statehood.

Despite its more positive international image, Spain retains numerous ties with Israel, including military cooperation. Civil society has mobilised general strikes, mass protests and direct action. In September, **direct action** triggered by the participation of an Israeli team forced the cancellation of the final stage of the Vuelta cycling race, raising awareness of demands for an arms embargo and an end to trade agreements with Israel. A general strike brought cities to a halt in October.

But the movement to resist genocide has provoked severe repression. At least 17 European states have imposed restrictions on Palestine solidarity protesters, unleashing violence and equating dissent with terrorism.

In July, the UK government listed direct action group Palestine Action as a **banned terrorist organisation** following a civil disobedience action at an airbase to protest against military cooperation with Israel. Being listed means members or supporters may face jail sentences of up to 14 years. Thousands have been arrested for holding signs reading: 'I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action'. A February 2026 court ruling overturned the ban, but the government will appeal. German authorities have **banned** two groups that campaign on Palestine, and thousands of people have **faced charges** for participating in protests.

US authorities have responded with mass arrests of peaceful protesters, while Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents have arrested, detained and deported US foreign residents, trawling social media accounts for evidence. Campus activism has been **suppressed** through suspension of student groups, punitive disciplinary measures, revocation of visas and threats to withdraw funding. In Australia, the University of Melbourne **breached** privacy laws by tracking students involved in a Palestine protest.

Despite the obstacles, people will keep taking action, because change doesn't happen without organised pressure from below. Reform of a paralysed UN Security Council, enforcement of arms trade human rights obligations and sustained funding for peacebuilding won't come unless civil society sustains the pressure. Ultimately, it's civil society and not leaders like Trump that makes peace possible, because there's no sustainable peace without accountability, justice and human rights.



CLIMATE

BETWEEN BREAKDOWN AND BREAKTHROUGH

Photo by Marcelo Del Pozo/Reuters via Gallo Images



The world is in a race between two competing tipping points: accelerating climate breakdown, with 2025 among the hottest years on record and extreme weather intensifying, versus an accelerating renewable energy transition, with sources such as solar and wind now providing over 30 per cent of global electricity and investments in renewable energy more than double those in fossil fuels.



Delay is the new climate denial. Fossil fuel corporations and petrostates, threatened by transition, are using their vast lobbying power to obstruct change, including at the latest global climate summit, COP30. Every day of delay adds to their profits while worsening climate impacts.



Civil society is demanding urgent climate action and providing solutions. It's achieving critical victories, including through climate litigation, with a landmark International Court of Justice ruling establishing that states have a legal duty to prevent climate harm. But activists face escalating repression, as states and corporations are reacting with vilification campaigns, lawsuits designed to silence criticism, arrests and violence, all diverting civil society energies and further delaying climate action.

2025 was one of the hottest years on record, alongside 2023 and 2024. In October, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres **acknowledged** that global temperature rises of over 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels – the threshold the Paris Agreement aimed to limit global heating to – are inevitable. The year was marked by extreme weather events such as droughts, floods and wildfires. As the world warms, it edges closer to thresholds that would likely accelerate climate breakdown and magnify its impacts.

Tuvalu, a low-lying island country losing land to rising seas, has made **plans** to preserve its identity and statehood if its territory disappears. This is climate injustice: the tiny nation has contributed virtually none of the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change, yet faces existential repercussions. In December, its first climate migrants arrived in Australia.

Two potential futures

At the same time, a renewable energy revolution is underway. Solar and wind power are becoming cheaper to generate and more widely adopted. Renewables now provide over 30 per cent of global electricity. Investments in renewables more than double those in fossil fuels. Asian countries are at the forefront, with China making huge investments in renewables, electric vehicles and high-speed railways. Countries are turning away from coal: in November, South Korea, the world's fourth-largest thermal coal importer, announced plans to phase out coal-fired power plants. Countries such as Costa Rica, Iceland and Uruguay generate almost all their electricity from renewable sources.

Of course, the picture is complex. Greenhouse gas emissions from electricity generation are only part of the story; there's also a pressing need to tackle emissions from sources including agriculture, industry and transport. Demand for electricity is rising, with insufficient attention paid to managing consumption and improving efficiency. The huge data centres being built for AI demand massive amounts of electricity and water, with impacts falling disproportionately on global south countries where many are located. Global heating is driving soaring air-conditioning demand. Some states are switching from coal to natural gas, primarily composed of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, and prioritising big projects such as Ethiopia's **controversial dam** without paying enough attention to environmental impacts.

Renewable technologies need rare earth minerals, a driver of competition between the major powers of China, Russia and the USA. Extraction brings environmental and human rights costs. Civil society is spreading awareness of systematic abuses in supply chains, including in African countries, **Eastern Europe and Central Asia**. Communities in Portugal are among those **resisting lithium mining**, crucial for batteries but impossible to extract without major impacts, and proposing alternatives such as improved recycling.

The trend is no straight line and the fossil fuel industry draws succour from disruptive events such as Russia's war on Ukraine and Donald Trump's return to power. Having helped finance Trump's campaign, fossil fuel companies are reaping the rewards of his shuttering of renewable energy projects and will profit from his **intervention in Venezuela**.

But the economics are shifting: the business case for fossil fuel extraction is becoming untenable, while the case for renewables is strengthening. Civil society is playing a key role, including through

shareholder advocacy. But the switch to renewables threatens fossil fuel firms, so they're fighting to delay transition for as long as possible. Delay is the new denial, because every day of delay means more profit for fossil fuel corporations – but worse climate impacts for the world's most vulnerable people.

Global summit fails to deliver

The fossil fuel industry left **COP30**, the latest global climate summit, untroubled. Once again, states didn't commit to speeding up fossil fuel phaseout. Held in Brazil, the summit exemplified the deteriorating state of multilateralism. The Trump administration, in the process of exiting the Paris Agreement, stayed away, creating a leadership vacuum China and the European Union (EU) failed to fill.

Fractious negotiations led to a compromise that took key responses – a fossil fuel phaseout roadmap, a deforestation plan, an initiative to accelerate implementation of commitments – out of official procedures and into voluntary processes led by willing states. This might yield some progress, but it exposes how broken COP procedures are. Consensus decision-making means a single state can block action, and petrostates such as Saudi Arabia routinely do. When willing states act, unwilling ones can simply opt out, despite being bound by the Paris Agreement.

Another fundamental flaw is the access granted to fossil fuel lobbyists: over 1,600 attended COP30, outnumbering almost all state delegations. In contrast, civil society and Indigenous voices struggle to be heard. COP30 offered **more participation** opportunities than its last three predecessors, hosted by states with closed civic



Indigenous people call for climate justice and territorial protection at COP30 in Belem, Brazil, 17 November 2025.

space, and saw some formal recognition of the rights and roles of Indigenous peoples, but civil society remained largely sidelined and faced militarised security.

COP30's biggest achievement reflected civil society's efforts to place social justice at the heart of climate response. The summit approved the Belém Action Mechanism, a work programme on just transition, which civil society has demanded for years. A just transition means fossil fuel phaseout must respect human rights, including labour rights for workers in fossil fuel and transition-related industries. A coordination platform will be created, and civil society is demanding ambition, resources and space for participation.



Activists gather outside the United Nations in Geneva on the eve of Plastics Treaty negotiations, 4 August 2025.

But progress on the key issue of climate financing fell short. Although European states finally dropped their opposition to tripling annual funding for global south countries to adapt to climate change, the promise remains vague, the 2035 deadline is too distant and the US\$120 billion yearly amount falls short of estimated needs. International climate and environmental agreements are hard to forge and harder still to enforce – but funding them may be the hardest thing of all.

Progress and setbacks for environmental agreements

News is mixed on other key international environmental protection agreements. A treaty to address the plastics pollution crisis seems no nearer. Ubiquitous plastic waste is a growing environmental disaster and, since plastics are made from fossil fuels, helps drive the climate crisis. The treaty was supposed to be finalised by the end of 2024, but the August 2025 **round of talks** broke up with no agreement. Progress remains blocked by major oil producers, including Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia and now the USA, which want a weak treaty that focuses only on managing waste. Civil society and more ambitious states insist the whole of the plastics cycle must be addressed, including limits on production and consumption.

Civil society is documenting the problem, providing legal and scientific expertise, advocating with governments and campaigning to raise public awareness. It would rather keep alive hopes of a more **ambitious agreement** than accept a hurriedly agreed weak treaty. As with COP30, willing states may ultimately proceed on their own, offering progress but potentially creating a regulatory patchwork that lets major polluters escape binding limits.

Civil society is also working with supportive governments to develop a **fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty**[Ⓞ]. This would support the Paris Agreement by banning new oil, gas and coal projects and phasing out existing production. Since the initiative was launched in 2020, two civil society organisations, Carbon Tracker and Global Energy Monitor, have developed a Global Registry of Fossil Fuels, a vital step to track the infrastructure the treaty would cover. In 2025, Cambodia and St Kitts and Nevis joined the campaign, bringing the number of supportive states to 18.

A currently stalled initiative however exposes the challenges of contemporary multilateralism. In April, the International Maritime Organization **announced** an agreement to cut greenhouse gas emissions from shipping through new global fuel standards and charges on high-polluting ships. The deal was due for signature in September, but the Trump administration called it an international tax and threatened treaty supporters with sanctions, causing the vote to be postponed until October 2026. At best, action on a major source of emissions has been delayed; at worst, US threats could kill the agreement.

The EU has also weakened its commitments. Reflecting the growing influence of right-wing parties opposed to climate action, visible also in the EU's diminished ambition at COP30, the European Parliament has watered down its Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. The directive, which came after extensive civil society advocacy, originally required large companies to align with the Paris Agreement. It now applies only to the biggest corporations, with reduced reporting requirements.

At least some progress came in September, when the High Seas Treaty **passed the threshold**[Ⓞ] of 60 ratifications needed to enter into force.

Agreed in 2023 following years of civil society campaigning, the treaty recognises that high seas – the two-thirds of waters beyond national jurisdiction – have virtually no protection and face rising threats such as **deep-sea mineral mining**[Ⓞ]. It aims to reverse environmental degradation, destruction of sea life and loss of livelihoods.

The treaty entered into force in January 2026, but some maritime powers and fossil fuel giants haven't ratified it, creating another patchwork of protection. Civil society is calling for wider ratification and strong enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.

Civil society takes to the courts

Civil society continues to pressure states and corporations and has achieved some wins. Thanks to campaigning, in 2025 it was **revealed** that Swedbank, a major banking group, has almost entirely stopped lending to fossil fuel companies.

Climate and environmental litigation has become a powerful tactic. Previously concentrated in the USA, it is now being pursued worldwide. July brought a milestone when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) **issued an unprecedented advisory opinion**[Ⓞ], ruling that states have a legal duty to prevent environmental harm, which requires them to mitigate emissions and adapt to climate change. While the government of Vanuatu brought the case with the backing of other Pacific Island states, **it originated in civil society**[Ⓞ]: in 2019, student groups from eight countries formed the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change network to persuade their governments to seek an ICJ ruling.

The ruling rejected arguments by powerful global north states and obstructive petrostates that individual countries can't be held responsible for their contributions to climate harm. It reaffirmed the importance of the Paris Agreement but also drew from the wider body of international law to make clear that climate change is a human rights issue.

Following extensive civil society engagement, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a **similar ruling**🔗. It determined that people in the Americas have a right to a healthy and stable climate, meaning states must prevent and adapt to climate change, provide reparations and regulate climate-harming companies. In March, the court also **ruled** against the government of Ecuador in a case brought by Indigenous groups, ordering it to cease extractive activities in an area where Indigenous people live in voluntary isolation. The African Court for Human and Peoples' Rights is **set to issue**🔗 an advisory opinion following a petition brought by the African Climate Platform, a civil society coalition.

These rulings can seem symbolic, and COP30 largely overlooked the ICJ's decision, while the Trump administration is **pressuring** Vanuatu to drop a UN resolution following up the ruling. But international judgments strengthen national-level legal arguments to hold states and corporations accountable, bolstering civil society's litigation efforts.

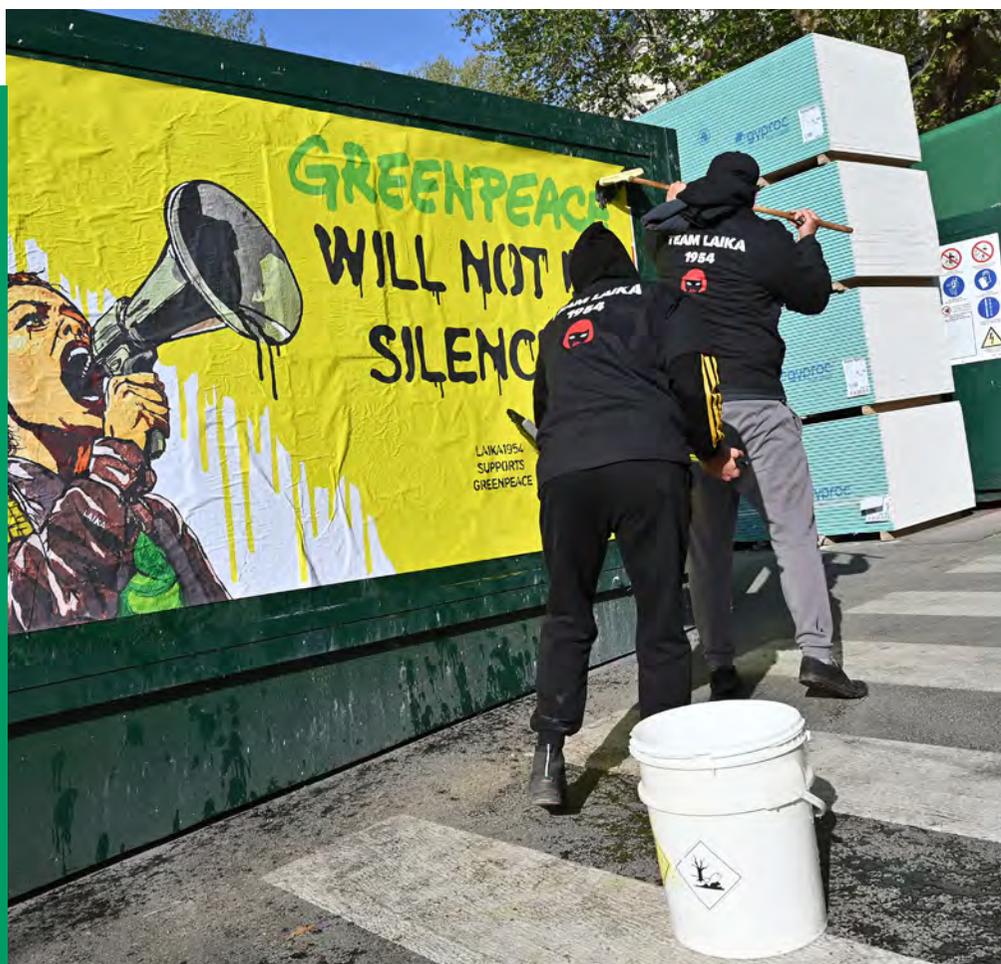
These actions continue to bring important wins. Two South African civil society organisations secured a **landmark victory**🔗, halting an offshore oil project by Shell and TotalEnergies. The court ruled that the companies' environmental impact assessments were deeply flawed, having failed to assess the effects of drilling on coastal communities and small-scale fishers. The companies can't proceed



Climate activists gather outside the International Court of Justice ahead of the reading of its advisory opinion on states' obligations to protect the climate, The Hague, The Netherlands, 23 July 2025.

until they've completed new, inclusive and comprehensive studies, giving affected communities a chance to keep resisting.

More litigation is coming. In New Zealand, the Environmental Law Initiative **filed a lawsuit**🔗 after the government weakened its emissions reduction plan without proper consultation, prioritising questionable forest offsets over real cuts. Nigerian communities are **suing Shell in UK courts**🔗 over decades of oil spills in the Niger Delta. Zambian farmers **have brought a case against**🔗 a Chinese mining company after a dam collapsed, releasing mining waste that contaminated water sources thousands depend on.



Italian activists paste a banner in support of Greenpeace outside the US Embassy in Rome, Italy on 9 April 2025.

But civil society is also being targeted. In March, a court in North Dakota, USA, **awarded damages** of over US\$660 million to fossil fuel company Energy Transfer against three Greenpeace organisations. Following a trial international observers condemned as unfair, the court wrongly concluded that Greenpeace orchestrated Indigenous peoples' protests against pipeline construction on their land.

This was clearly a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP), a legal action designed to silence legitimate criticism. Greenpeace Romania **faces another SLAPP** seeking its dissolution, filed by state-owned energy corporation Romgaz in retaliation for its campaign against a gas project. Romania's energy minister has **urged** companies to sue environmental groups. But Greenpeace International is fighting back, taking **legal action** in the Netherlands under the EU's anti-SLAPP directive, seeking to have the Energy Transfer lawsuit dismissed. Unfair attacks by powerful corporations are helping recruit public support.

Escalating repression

Climate and environmental activists and Indigenous and land rights defenders are keeping up the pressure, including through advocacy, campaigns and protests, but they face severe state and corporate repression, including criminalisation and violence.

2025 provides many examples. In **Cambodia**, journalists were shot at and assaulted for documenting illegal logging. An **Indonesian** court jailed 11 Indigenous community members for obstructing nickel mining. **Mexican** activist Cristino Castro Perea, who worked to protect beaches and mangroves, was shot dead. In **Chile**, where the government



Police officers arrest people protesting against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline Project in Kampala, Uganda, 26 August 2024.

weakened environmental laws, Indigenous women activists experienced intimidation, judicial harassment and violent attacks for opposing large-scale development projects. In **Peru**, police used teargas and non-lethal weapons against people blocking a road to protest against a mine. In **Uganda**, authorities arrested 11 activists for protesting against the construction of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline.

The **French** government has repeatedly vilified environmental campaigners and deployed police violence against protests, while the **German** government launched an inquiry into public funding of environmental groups and other organisations. In January, the **Dutch** parliament adopted a motion declaring Extinction Rebellion an ‘unlawful, society-disrupting and vandalistic organisation’, urging the removal of its tax-exempt status. The **Portuguese** government named environmental groups in a section on terrorism of its annual security report. **New Zealand authorities** arrested numerous people at climate and environmental protests.

Civil society is resisting repression and adapting. Australia has become a world leader in arresting climate and environmental protesters, with extensive anti-protest laws introduced in recent years. Responses include the establishment of **Climate Defenders Australia**¹, the country’s first not-for-profit legal service that defends climate protesters, counters corporate SLAPPs and sues police for overreach.

Adaptation to repression, however, brings costs. Civil society must invest time and money in defensive measures. This diverts energy from demanding states and corporations cut emissions and fund the transition. At a time when every day of delay matters, civil society restrictions will worsen climate impacts. States and corporations must at a minimum respect civil society’s right to demand the climate action so urgently needed.



MIGRATION

CRUELTY AS POLICY

Photo by David Peinado/Anadolu via Getty Images



States are increasingly deploying mass deportation operations, outsourcing migration management and blocking asylum access. The USA is undertaking its largest-ever removal operation through quota-driven arrests. Iran and Pakistan have expelled 2.8 million Afghans to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. European states are outsourcing border enforcement and asylum processing, sending people to unsafe countries. Political expediency is driving much of the hostility towards migrants and refugees.



Civil society is mounting coordinated resistance through advocacy, humanitarian action, litigation and mass mobilisation. Following sustained advocacy, Spain regularised undocumented migrants and Thailand granted work rights to Myanmar refugees. Courts in several countries have blocked fast-track deportations, protected asylum seekers and vindicated criminalised humanitarian workers. Protests have mobilised millions worldwide, and in the USA community networks have physically obstructed arrests and deportations.



Restrictive policies are gaining ground, with the once unthinkable becoming commonplace. But civil society's resistance is preventing further regression and contesting the normalisation of the extreme. The struggle continues over whether states comply with their binding obligations to protect migrants and refugees or discard them with impunity when politically convenient.

Multiple crises mean growing numbers of people are on the move. By mid-2025, **117.3 million people** were displaced, including 67.8 million within their countries. The world's largest displacement crisis has resulted from **war in Sudan**, forcing **over 15 million people** from their homes, including four million in surrounding countries. An estimated **eight million Venezuelans** are scattered across the Americas and beyond due to economic and political strife.

Seventy-one per cent of the world's refugees are hosted in low-income and middle-income countries, and two thirds in countries neighbouring their own. Wealthy states whose foreign policies, military interventions, economic exploitation and greenhouse gas emissions have contributed to making people refugees are showing little responsibility for protecting and supporting them. Instead, many are militarising borders and criminalising solidarity.

In 2025, the crisis was compounded by the **defunding of the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency**, forcing it to cut 5,000 staff, **close 185 field offices** and suspend US\$1.4 billion in assistance programmes, leaving **11.6 million refugees** without aid. The International Organization for Migration, which has a mandate to assist all migrants, was forced to restructure after losing **30 per cent** of its donor support.

In the USA's biggest-ever deportation operation, authorities are systematically removing foreign-born people who fall outside an **increasingly restrictive** and racially defined conception of national identity. Some have been sent to **distant countries** they have no connection to and that have poor human rights records.

Across Europe, states and the European Union (EU) are challenging fundamental principles of refugee protection and the European legal order, **outsourcing border enforcement** to authoritarian partner

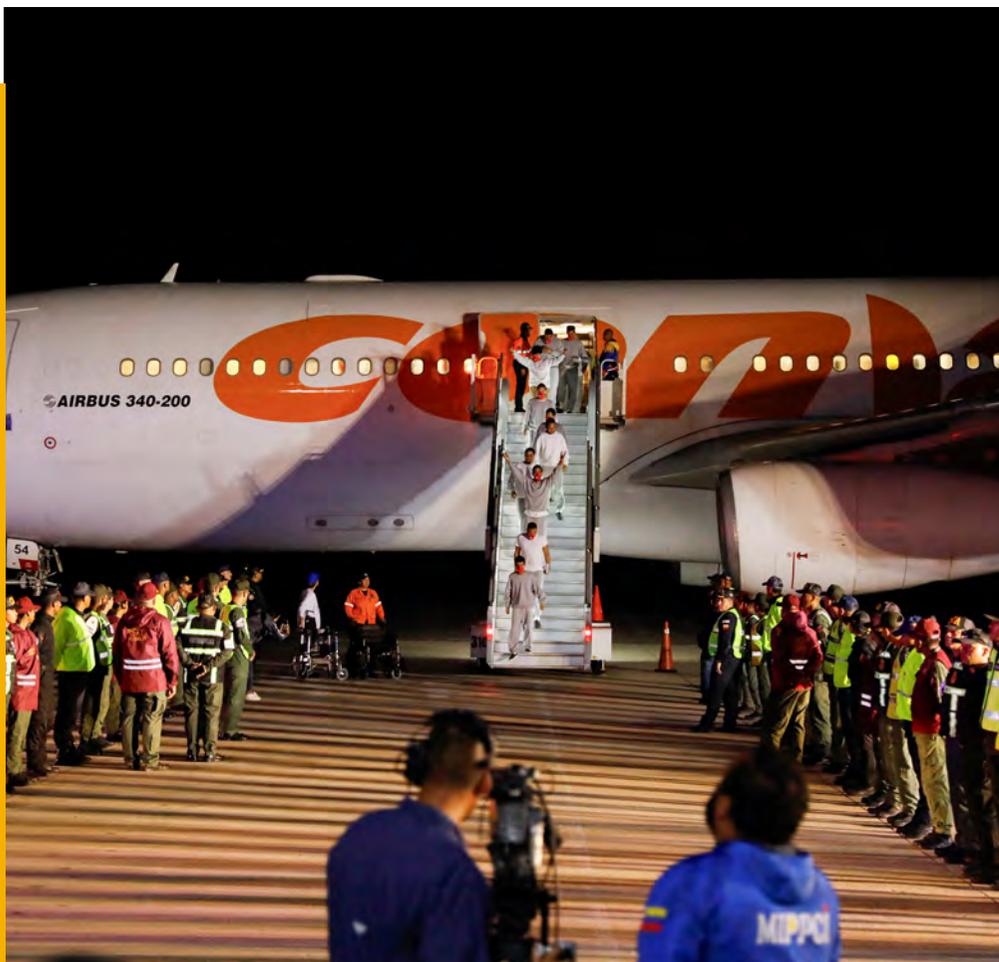
states, paying them to intercept migrants and prevent them reaching Europe, while obstructing search-and-rescue operations at sea. **Over 3,000 people** died trying to reach Spain and 1,340 perished in the Central Mediterranean heading to Italy in 2025.

Current migration responses are defined by deliberate cruelty in the face of need, but they're being met with determined civil society resistance.

The architecture of exclusion

Mobility is inherent to the human condition and has shaped civilisations for millennia, but contemporary political discourse frames it as an unprecedented threat. Across regions and political contexts, politicians deploy similar narratives that portray migrants and refugees as welfare dependants, labour market threats, dangers to national cohesion, criminals and terrorists. This enables them to redirect public economic and political frustration away from their failures and onto the most vulnerable.

During the 2024 election campaign, Donald Trump **promised** to launch the largest deportation in US history. He's done so through legal, institutional and operational changes that have dismantled the refugee and migrant protection system. On his **first day in office**, he **suspended refugee admissions and resettlement** and **ended protections** from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids for churches, hospitals and schools. His government went on to **set the 2026 refugee admissions ceiling** ridiculously low, at 7,500, with priority for white South Africans, justified by false claims that they're the victims of 'white genocide', a narrative Trump has long promoted that Elon Musk has amplified.



Venezuelan migrants arrive at the Simón Bolívar International Airport in Maiquetía, Venezuela, on a deportation flight from Guantánamo Bay on 20 February 2025.

The Trump administration ended Temporary Protected Status for over a million people from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua and Venezuela. It made a deal with El Salvador's authoritarian President Nayib Bukele to transfer deportees to a massive high-security prison housing alleged gang members, for an annual payment of US\$6 million. In March it invoked the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to deport **around 250 Venezuelans** to El Salvador without due process. Overall, it stripped legal status from **over 1.6 million people** who entered the USA through humanitarian programmes.

The 'Big Beautiful Bill' Trump signed on 4 July allocated around US\$171 billion for immigration enforcement, including US\$47 billion for border wall construction, US\$45 billion for detention and US\$15 billion for deportations. His government **expanded** its travel ban from 19 countries in June to 39 by December, and in January it **froze visa processing** for 75 countries.

To enforce restrictions, the government hired over 12,000 additional ICE agents, lowering entry requirements and slashing training time. The hastily deployed, ill-trained officers were **instructed** to be 'creative' and arrest 'collaterals' to meet a 3,000 daily arrest quota.

ICE has conducted mass raids across the USA, including at workplaces and outside schools. Arrests have been largely arbitrary: **95 per cent** of detained people have no convictions for violent offences and **73 per cent** have no criminal convictions at all. **Hundreds** of US citizens and legal residents have been wrongfully arrested and some deported, including in direct violation of court orders. Agents have been recorded shattering car windows, punching people, using battering rams on front doors and deploying banned arrest manoeuvres such as chokeholds. ICE and Customs and Border

Protection agents have so far shot at people in **17 incidents**, killing five, including **two anti-ICE protesters**, and injuring seven.

In Europe, a key strategy is the **outsourcing of migration enforcement** by paying other states to intercept boats and prevent departures, and establishing offshore processing centres in other countries.

The EU now has border enforcement agreements with Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania and Tunisia. EU funding enables the Libyan coastguard to intercept migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean and take them to Libya, where they're held in camps in **conditions** UN experts have described as **likely amounting** to crimes against humanity. In August, the Libyan coastguard **opened fire** on an SOS Méditerranée rescue ship in international waters, using a vessel provided by Italy under an EU-funded programme.

The Italian government continues its policy of holding civil society-run rescue ships in port and assigning them distant disembarkation ports to keep them away from the places they're needed. Between February 2023 and June 2025, authorities **held back** ships 29 times. In July 2025, Italy's Constitutional Court declared these orders illegal, **ruling** that the international Law of the Sea can't be circumvented by punitive national legislation.

Under Giorgia Meloni's far-right government, **Italy** became Europe's pioneer in external processing through an agreement with Albania, which opened detention centres in October 2024. A court, however, ruled the detention of migrants for processing in a non-EU country illegal, forcing their return to Italy; the government repurposed the centres to detain migrants with no permission to stay in Italy, while introducing a **stricter immigration bill**. The EU's **Migration**

Management Regulation, coming into force in June 2026, may allow it to resume its Albania scheme.

The European Commission has also proposed a sweeping new **Return Regulation**, intended to create an EU-wide system to speed up deportations. The proposal, currently subject to negotiation in the European Parliament, introduces mutual recognition of return decisions across member states, longer detention periods and the possibility of so-called 'return hubs' in non-EU countries. Civil society **warns** that it risks normalising illegal returns, expanding arbitrary detention and undermining access to legal remedies.

European states are following the path laid down by Australia, which first set up a **scheme** to detain asylum seekers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea in 2001, and revived it in 2012. In 2025, it struck a **further deal** to deport to Nauru people previously released from indefinite detention by a court order.

States are systematically denying asylum claims, with Greece going further with a **new law** to punish 'illegal stay' and 'illegal entry' with prison sentences of at least two years. In February 2026, the European Parliament approved the **first EU-wide list** of supposedly safe countries of origin to accelerate deportations. Civil society has **rejected** this for placing an unfair burden on asylum seekers to prove why they shouldn't be deported.

Other approaches are possible: over a dozen Latin American and Caribbean states, with far fewer resources than Europe, have recently **agreed** to strengthen protection, regularisation and integration for asylum seekers, migrants, refugees and returnees.



A protester holds a sign reading 'They flee poverty and death while we discuss identity papers' at an International Migrants Day demonstration in Paris, France, on 18 December 2025.

Political drivers

Much of Europe's regression is driven by electoral politics. Its rightward shift on immigration policy results from far-right parties gaining power and mainstream parties embracing restrictive policies to limit their appeal. In Austria, where the far-right Freedom Party **came first** in the 2024 election, the centrist government formed to exclude it from office nonetheless adopted parts of its agenda. In 2025, it **halted family reunification** for asylum seekers, despite minimal application numbers, claiming pressure on education, housing and healthcare systems, and banned young girls from wearing headscarves in schools. In the first half of the year, Austria forcibly returned 3,188 people.

Immigration was one of the central issues in Germany's **February 2025 election**, when the far-right Alternative for Germany party secured its highest-ever vote after campaigning on mass deportations. The mainstream conservative ruling party has cooperated with it on parliamentary votes on immigration and promised stricter policies. Germany's **new government** has substantially increased deportations, suspended family reunification and reduced social assistance and integration programmes.

In the Netherlands, immigration **remained a key issue** in a snap election held in October after the government collapsed when the far-right Party for Freedom withdrew over **disagreements about immigration**. During the campaign, the centre-left D66 party **promised immigration restrictions**, including the processing of asylum claims in migrants' countries of origin.

Some global south states have hardened their policies too. **India**

expelled hundreds of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh. **Egypt** returned hundreds of Sudanese refugees as part of a supposedly voluntary scheme jointly administered with Sudan. **Thailand** deported Uyghur refugees to China, despite the obvious risks of persecution. The **Dominican Republic** deported over 310,000 Haitians. Following the **end of Syria's civil war** in December 2024, **Lebanon's** government launched a return plan for Syrians and intensified pressure on people without legal status to regularise their paperwork or join state-led return programmes. By the end of the year, **over half a million** had left.

Iran and **Pakistan** carried out the year's largest mass deportation campaign, expelling around **2.8 million Afghans**, thrusting them into Taliban territory. Pakistan ordered the deportation of 1.4 million registered refugees holding UN-issued cards, bypassing judicial oversight and detaining people from their homes, marketplaces and schools. Following its **conflict with Israel**, Iran accused Afghans of spying for Israel and broadcast forced confessions. Expulsions rose to **between 30,000 and 51,000 a day**.

The resistance

Civil society is mounting coordinated resistance, with advocacy coalitions seeking legal and policy reforms, groups taking legal action to block regressive policies, grassroots organisers sustaining essential services, people mobilising in solidarity and community networks physically obstructing deportation operations. It has secured significant victories despite the hostile political climate.

Two notable policy reforms were won in Spain and Thailand in 2025. Spain's **regularisation of 500,000 undocumented migrants** resulted



Protesters gather outside the Court of First Instance in Tunis, Tunisia, on 22 December 2025 to support detained anti-racism activist Saadia Mosbah, accused of money laundering and facilitating the illegal entry of migrants.

from a campaign that collected over 700,000 signatures to propose changes to regulations. In Thailand, the decision to recognise the **right to work for Myanmar refugees**, with around 80,000 people becoming eligible for work permits, followed years of civil society groundwork.

Courts have provided critical checks on restrictive policies. The US Supreme Court **ordered** the government to facilitate the return of a wrongfully deported Salvadoran man and **ruled** that deporting Venezuelan migrants under the 1798 Alien Enemies Act violated constitutional due process guarantees. Civil society secured further victories when judges **blocked fast-track deportations**, halted use



Crew members of the Ocean Viking, a rescue ship operated by SOS Méditerranée, evacuate a child from an oil tanker in international waters between Malta and Tunisia on 31 December 2025.

of the Alien Enemies Act and declared **Trump's deployment of the National Guard** against Los Angeles protesters illegal.

In South Africa, a court **struck down** policies that denied asylum seekers access to the asylum system, leading to their arrest and deportation without due process, while another court **ordered** the anti-migrant group Operation Dudula to stop blocking migrants from accessing public health facilities and schools. **Australia's** High Court ruled that imposing strict curfews and ankle bracelets on released refugees without individual judicial risk assessment is unconstitutional.

Courts also vindicated criminalised humanitarian workers. In Greece, 24 aid workers were **acquitted** of human trafficking charges in January 2026, after seven years in legal limbo. The European Court of Human Rights also **ruled against Greece** over systematic illegal deportations. In Italy, the Constitutional Court **ruled** that any order conflicting with the duty to save lives isn't legally binding, and people can't be penalised for refusing to comply. Other Italian courts found seizure of rescue ships unlawful.

Despite criminalisation, civil society continues providing life-saving assistance on migration routes, including through search-and-rescue operations. In November, Doctors Without Borders **relaunched its activities** with a new ship after Italy's restrictions forced the old one out of service. Civil society organisations are supporting education, food and health initiatives in camps and offering legal counselling, psychosocial programmes and employment support in host communities, with many focusing on the risks and needs of particularly vulnerable groups of refugees, including children, **LGBTQI+ people and women**🗳️.

A growing number of groups are providing comprehensive legal aid, with the **International Refugee Assistance Project** offering legal services to displaced people in over a hundred countries and US groups mobilising thousands of volunteer lawyers to provide free representation for asylum seekers and people in detention. They face risks: in the UK, lawyers and activists working with refugees **reported** receiving rape and death threats from far-right anti-migrant protesters. Threats forced at least two organisations to close, while others must spend more of their limited resources on **safety**.

Many people are taking to the streets in solidarity with migrants and refugees. In Europe, protests are seeking to counter rising anti-migrant sentiment that comes with growing far-right influence. In January, Italians took to the streets of Palermo alongside migrants to **call for policy changes** to make it easier to get residence permits and citizenship. In February, **at least 160,000 people** marched in Berlin against the ruling party's cooperation with the far right, and **over 220,000** protested in other German cities. In June, civil society groups organised a **Stand Up to Racism** rally in Belfast, UK, following a spate of racist attacks. In August, the UK saw mobilisations **in response** to anti-migrant protests. In October, **thousands marched in solidarity** through Dublin, Ireland.

In the USA, mass mobilisation against immigration enforcement has reached **record levels**, with hundreds of protests across all states in the first months of 2025. The **Day Without Immigrants** on 3 February saw people stay home from school and work in protest against the Trump administration's immigration policies, while **No Kings Day protests** on 14 June drew over five million people nationwide, and **over seven million**(1) took part in the second edition in October. Faith-based groups coordinated court observation events, marches and vigils during **National Migration Week** in September. **Students**

protested against ICE during the February 2026 Winter Olympics opening ceremony in Italy.

Early on, people held protests at **ICE detention facilities** and **ICE recruitment events**, and **at airports** to target deportation flights, with activists launching **boycott campaigns** against airlines providing planes and **logistics companies** servicing flights. But as ICE moved into neighbourhoods, protests have increasingly focused on community defence, with people creating early warning systems and physically intervening to stop arrests. People have formed ICE-watch groups to document agents' actions and alert migrant neighbours. They've organised know-your rights training, established community hotlines to report ICE activity and, in some cases, defence hubs with a steady presence at key locations to disrupt ICE operations. They've advised businesses what to do if ICE appears and trained volunteers to identify undercover agents and vehicles, document raids and locate detained people. They've coordinated rapid response, organising food and financial support for detained workers, translating legal documents and providing legal aid. Some have blocked ICE raids and chased officers away.

The US government has responded to resistance with criminalisation and violence. Authorities have labelled protesters extremists, violent anarchists and domestic terrorists. The Department of Justice has brought criminal cases against hundreds of protesters, charging many with felony assault. Yet this criminalisation campaign has largely failed: most charges have been reduced or dismissed, and the few trials held have resulted in acquittals.

State violence has had more enduring effects. Federal agents have **deployed** pepper balls and pepper spray, stun grenades and teargas against protesters, inflicting **serious injuries**. The most severe



People march against ICE raids in New York, USA, on 13 February 2025.

violence has come in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where federal agents killed **two protesters**, Renee Good and Alex Pretti, during Operation Metro Surge in January 2026. UN human rights experts **warned** the killings could constitute extrajudicial executions. Days later in Hartford, Connecticut, an ICE van **knocked down** a protester at a vigil for Renee Good.

Contesting the normalisation of the extreme

The forces of restriction are gaining ground. Policies once considered unthinkable – mass deportations, offshore processing in authoritarian states, systematic denial of legal representation – have become a reality. Anti-migrant rhetoric has proved highly effective in justifying measures that violate international law.

Yet civil society's resistance shows that regression can be reversed. Resistance must remain strong, for at stake are binding legal obligations under international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention, its principle of non-refoulement and due process guarantees aren't optional. By insisting on their enforcement, civil society contests the normalisation of the extreme and asserts that migration isn't a modern crisis to be tackled through exclusion, but a permanent feature of the human story that must be met with humanity.



GENDER RIGHTS

ROLLBACK AND RESISTANCE

Photo by Sean Drakes/Getty Images



Many states are attacking women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights by framing them as threats to families, tradition and national identity. The USA has set the global narrative and slashed funding worldwide. Burkina Faso and Trinidad and Tobago criminalised same-sex relations; Slovakia and the UK legally defined sex as a biological binary; Hungary banned Pride events. Global-level backlash resulted in the UN Commission on the Status of Women removing references to sexual and reproductive health and rights.



Civil society is resisting regression, including through protests and litigation. Civil society pressure forced South Africa to declare gender-based violence a national disaster, while Denmark and Norway amended their laws to expand abortion access. Courts decriminalised homosexuality in St Lucia and marriage equality came into effect in Liechtenstein and Thailand.



As politicised attacks intensify, some of civil society’s most important victories are invisible. Civil society has blocked attempts to repeal The Gambia’s ban on female genital mutilation, put Latvia’s withdrawal from a convention on violence against women on pause and stalled Kenya’s anti-LGBTQI+ Family Protection Bill. Without sustained resistance, regression would have advanced much further.

Women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights are under the most coordinated and wide-ranging attack in decades. Anti-rights forces are trying to roll back protections secured after decades of struggle while women's and LGBTQI+ movements and their allies are pushing back. The struggle is taking place at national and international levels, with attacks on rights driven by ideology and political expediency.

Yet what defines this moment is resistance. Regression isn't going uncontested: even in cities in Iran, where the theocratic regime has **crushed recent protests** with unprecedented ferocity, women have continued to walk around defiantly unveiled, and under Afghanistan's gender apartheid system, they've maintained underground schools, documented abuses and kept solidarity networks alive. In Hungary, tens of thousands risked prosecution to defy the government's Pride ban. In the USA, where federal protections have been stripped back faster than anywhere else in the global north, people are resisting through mass protests, ballot measures to enshrine abortion rights in state constitutions and strategic litigation in state courts. Resistance takes different forms in different contexts, and is proving harder to extinguish than regressive forces must have expected.

A global tug-of-war

The tone of the global struggle was set in January 2025, when Donald Trump signed a series of executive orders that imposed a strictly binary biological classification of sex, restricted funding for gender-affirming healthcare, ended the recognition of self-identified gender on federal documents, rescinded non-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people in healthcare and housing and **banned diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies**. The Trump administration has



Protesters gather in Washington, DC, USA on 18 January 2025, for a feminist-led weekend of action ahead of Donald Trump's second inauguration.

Photo by Aashish Kiplayter/NurPhoto via AFP

pressured businesses to follow suit. Trump-aligned US states have focused on banning the mailing of abortion pills.

Because of the USA's global influence, this has provided a blueprint for other leaders who seek to roll back recognition of rights. And because the US government used to be the world's largest bilateral donor, its **axing of foreign aid** had immediate global impacts. The dismantling of USAID and the expansion of the global gag rule, which blocks US funding to organisations that perform abortions or advocate for abortion rights, disproportionately affected women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, particularly in **conflict zones**, rural areas and the world's poorest countries.



Members of feminist and women's rights groups take part in the annual CSW69 townhall with the UN Secretary-General on 11 March 2025 at UN Headquarters in New York, USA.

The United Nations' (UN) **Gender Snapshot 2025** sounded the alarm, reporting that the world is badly off-track for every target of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality. It projects that despite women's unpaid care and domestic work contributing US\$10.8 trillion a year to the global economy, 351 million women and girls will remain in extreme poverty by 2030. This setback will likely be invisible to many policymakers due to the slashing of funding for gender-specific data collection in around 70 per cent of national statistical offices.

New technologies compound these challenges. AI systems are embedding and amplifying **gender bias**, from discriminatory algorithms in hiring tools to chatbots that generate non-consensual intimate imagery at scale. Deepfakes are enabling **new forms of abuse** and extortion targeting women in public life. Social media platforms are failing to moderate harassment, creating hostile environments that drive women out of public discourse. Weak regulatory frameworks are allowing tech corporations to profit from these harms and evade accountability.

Institutional strain showed at the UN's 69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) meeting in March 2025. Under pressure from a well-organised anti-rights bloc, the meeting's Political Declaration stripped out **longstanding references** to sexual and reproductive health and rights, a move that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

Amid regression, civil society has continued to adapt and innovate, often under direct threat, securing tangible results. While some states rolled back recognition of abortion rights, criminalised homosexuality and axed funding, others recognised marriage equality and introduced consent-based definitions of rape. Rights champions



A record-breaking crowd marches in defiance of a government ban during the 30th annual Budapest Pride parade on 28 June 2025 in downtown Budapest, Hungary.

also defended progress in global spaces. The launch of the **Beijing+30 Action Agenda** saw over 100 states renew their commitments to gender justice. At CSW69, activists successfully advocated for the **first explicit recognition** of gender-based violence (GBV) in the political declaration.

Regression takes many forms

Across countries and political systems, attacks on gender rights are driven by a strikingly consistent discourse that frames equality as a dangerous ideology and depicts feminist and LGBTQI+ struggles as threats to children, national identities and traditional family values. Politicians weaponise gender issues to refocus people's economic and political anger on easy targets. As a consequence, human rights are increasingly treated as conditional privileges rather than universal protections.

Some states are criminalising the visibility of LGBTQI+ people. In 2025, Hungary **passed a law** banning Pride marches and other LGBTQI+ public events, authorising surveillance to enforce compliance. This restricted the right to protest while redefining LGBTQI+ visibility as a crime. The law led to the **prosecution** of Budapest's mayor for his role in arranging a Pride event in defiance of the ban. Meanwhile the Turkish government **declared 2025 the 'Year of the Family'** and **introduced a draft bill** to severely curtail LGBTQI+ rights, criminalise advocacy efforts and restrict healthcare access for transgender people. Authorities **repressed** Istanbul's Pride and Trans Pride marches, detaining dozens of activists, journalists and lawyers.

Other states are dismantling equality infrastructure and narrowing

legal concepts to exclude transgender people. In the UK, a Supreme Court ruling **enabled the legal exclusion** of transgender women from single-sex spaces on the grounds that, under the Equality Act, the terms ‘woman’ and ‘sex’ refer exclusively to biological sex. Slovakia’s parliament passed **sweeping constitutional amendments** that defined sex as exclusively biological, banned legal gender recognition for non-binary and transgender people, restricted adoption to married heterosexual couples, prohibited surrogacy and required parental approval for children to access comprehensive sexuality education. This was a clear attempt to override European Union (EU) directives on non-discrimination and human rights.

Reversing an earlier trend, a wave of criminalisation of same-sex relations has swept Africa, often fuelled by a mix of religious moralising and nationalistic discourse depicting LGBTQI+ rights as foreign impositions. In Burkina Faso, the military junta revised the criminal code to **criminalise same-sex relations** and their ‘promotion’, punishable by two-to-five-year prison terms. In Kenya, where homosexual acts are illegal under colonial-era laws, the **Family Protection Bill 2023**, currently stalled in pre-publication stage, seeks to define the family as strictly heterosexual and would introduce severe criminal penalties, including the death penalty, for performing or ‘promoting’ same-sex acts.

Regression has also come in **Trinidad and Tobago**, where a Court of Appeal ruling reversed the decriminalisation of same-sex relations and reinstated **colonial-era penalties** of up to 25 years in prison. In many other countries where being homosexual is illegal, such as **Senegal** and **Tunisia**, crackdowns have intensified, with people arrested under indecency and morality laws and subjected to forced examinations on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

In Central Asia, 2025 concluded with Kazakhstan’s president signing into law a Russian-style **‘gay propaganda’ ban** prohibiting positive LGBTQI+ representation in education, media and online platforms, enforced through fines and detentions.

Several states are also restricting reproductive rights and asserting control over women’s bodies. In Russia, the government launched a campaign against ‘child-free propaganda’, **enforcing a new law** that prohibits the promotion of so-called child-free lifestyles in advertising, films, media and online content. This forms part of a wider trend among right-wing populist and nationalist governments seeking to counter falling birth rates, often accompanied by racist narratives rooted in white supremacist conspiracy theories about the replacement of established population groups.

Basic protections of physical integrity such as bans on female genital mutilation (FGM) have come under attack. An attempt to repeal The Gambia’s FGM ban was **successfully resisted** in late 2024, but the legal battle continues, having now **shifted to the Supreme Court**.

States beyond the USA are dismantling the infrastructure meant to protect rights under an ‘anti-woke’ narrative. In **Argentina**, far-right libertarian President Javier Milei withdrew programmes for GBV survivors and is intent on removing femicide from the Penal Code as an aggravating factor in homicide sentences, arguing that gender-specific categories confer privilege.

The situation has deteriorated further in the two countries with gender apartheid systems: Afghanistan and Iran. In Afghanistan, Taliban authorities **followed through** on decrees aimed at erasing women from public life and restricting their freedom of movement, including by **refusing to allow** female Afghan staff and contractors

to enter UN compounds. In September, the Taliban **shut down nationwide internet access** on the basis of preventing immorality, effectively closing avenues for education, work and resistance.

In Iran, two and a half years after the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, the government **intensified its crackdown** on those who supported the movement. 2025 saw a dramatic spike in executions, with **at least 1,922 people executed**, more than double the number in 2024 and the highest in 15 years. As sustained defiance forced authorities to tolerate unveiled women in major urban centres, they **changed enforcement tactics**, replacing visible street patrols with bureaucratic and administrative measures and expanding surveillance through drones, facial recognition systems, licence-plate recognition cameras and a government-backed app encouraging people to report hijab violations.

Coordinated civil society resistance

Across the world, civil society is mobilising resistance, blocking, delaying or weakening regressive measures and scoring victories despite hostile conditions.

Resistance is highly visible on the streets, particularly around two annual focal points: **International Women’s Day** and **Pride season**. On 8 March 2025, women all over the world protested against intensifying attacks on rights, denouncing GBV, demanding reproductive rights and voicing solidarity with oppressed communities. Women **mobilised against GBV** all year long, in response to femicide cases and around 25 November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Feminist movements achieved a historic victory in South Africa, where the



Activists march in Pretoria, South Africa to demand that gender-based violence and femicide be declared a national disaster on 11 April 2025.

Photo by Marco Longari/AF

government **declared GBV and femicide a national disaster**.

In Latvia, civil society fended off a backlash. The state ratified the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – in 2023, and the treaty entered into force in May 2024. But in October 2025, conservative forces held a parliamentary vote on withdrawal, and it took **intense pressure from civil society**, including large-scale protests and a petition, to pause the withdrawal process until a decision is made after the next election in 2026.

Pride 2025 mobilised resistance: tens of thousands defied the ban in



People participate in the Bangkok Pride parade during the opening of Pride Month on 1 June 2025 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Budapest, braved repression in **Istanbul** and flocked to **WorldPride in Washington DC**, refusing to be intimidated by Trump, while **Puerto Rico's Pride** turned into an act of civic resistance against the Religious Freedom Act, which allows denial of services to LGBTQI+ people. In another show of resistance, over 100,000 attended London's Trans+ Pride. People flooded Bangkok's streets in **Asia's largest Pride**, celebrating marriage equality. While the retreat of corporations from DEI policies caused funding challenges for Pride organisers in some global north countries, it offered opportunities to liberate Pride from the private sector's sanitising influence and rediscover its radical protest roots.

Courts remain crucial battlegrounds, with strategic litigation securing tangible gains. In Poland, a Supreme Court ruling **eased barriers to legal gender recognition** by removing the requirement that transgender people sue their parents. The Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court **struck down St Lucia's colonial-era laws** that criminalised same-sex relations, making it the fifth Caribbean country where homosexuality has been decriminalised in recent years.

At the regional level, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights **issued an advisory opinion** recognising **care as a fundamental human right** and urging states to create universal care systems, redistribute care responsibilities more fairly and integrate care into national policies. The decision validated longstanding feminist arguments that care work, often invisible and undervalued, has immense economic and social worth, and provides a legal framework for building fairer societies where care is a shared responsibility.

Courts also advanced women's bodily integrity and autonomy. The Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States delivered a **landmark ruling** against Sierra Leone, stating that FGM

constitutes torture and finding the state had violated its human rights obligations by failing to criminalise it. In **Malawi** and **Nigeria**, courts issued rulings that recognised the right to safe abortion for sexual violence survivors, setting significant regional precedents. In the UK, parliament finally **repealed a Victorian-era law** that criminalised abortion in England and Wales.

Civil society secured legislative and policy victories beyond the courtroom. Persistent civil society and European institutional pressure led Poland to **repeal its final ‘LGBT-free zone’**¹⁰, completing the reversal of a campaign that had seen around 100 municipalities declare themselves hostile to LGBTQI+ people since 2019. Marriage equality laws came into effect in **Liechtenstein** and **Thailand**¹¹.

Following years of feminist advocacy, at least three additional EU countries – the **Czech Republic**, **France** and **Poland** – adopted consent-based definitions of rape, understood as any sexual act committed without free and explicit consent. A similar bill passed **Italy’s** lower house only to be **undermined** by the Senate, which removed consent as a defining element and reverted to the requirement that victims demonstrate explicit refusal.

Civil society advocacy brought progress in **Kazakhstan**, where a law criminalised forced marriage and eliminated a loophole that allowed perpetrators of bride kidnapping to avoid punishment, and **Somalia**, where Jubaland state’s new anti-FGM law created momentum that could lead to a comprehensive national law.

Despite the US-driven anti-abortion wave, reproductive rights advanced in Europe. The **Faroe Islands**, an autonomous territory of Denmark, legalised abortion on request up to 12 weeks, while **Denmark** and **Norway** raised the limit from 12 to 18 weeks. **The**



Activists protest a proposed bill that would require victims to prove they physically resisted sexual assault in Rome, Italy on 15 February 2026.

Netherlands authorised general practitioners to prescribe medication abortion up to nine weeks, moving care out of specialised clinics, while lawmakers in **Luxembourg** abolished a mandatory three-day waiting period and reached an **agreement** to enshrine ‘abortion freedom’ in the constitution.

In the USA, anti-trafficking coalition World Without Exploitation mobilised to demand passage of the Epstein Files Transparency Act, signed into law in November, with over 20 women sexually exploited by Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell **speaking publicly**, many for the first time. The campaign included nationwide billboards, a primetime television ad and direct advocacy, building pressure for

legislators to pass the law. Women’s rights activists **continue to denounce** the protection of wealthy men, whose names are redacted in the released files, while women survivors are re-traumatised through exposure of their identities.

Globally, feminist and women’s rights organisations are campaigning for the **election of a feminist woman UN secretary-general** and **continue to set progressive policy agendas at the CSW and UN High-Level Political Forum**, tasked with reviewing progress on the SDGs. At the regional level, they helped shape the **Tlatelolco Commitment**, adopted at the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, which set a decade-long regional agenda focused on gender equality and the care economy, and the European Commission’s **Roadmap for Women’s Rights**, which established a new legal framework to combat technology-facilitated violence and ensure equal pay across member states by 2030.

International mechanisms brought a promise of accountability for the most severe abuses. Amid an ongoing **civil society campaign** to have gender apartheid recognised as an international crime, in January 2025 the International Criminal Court **issued arrest warrants** for Afghanistan’s Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and his chief justice over persecution on gender grounds.

The struggle continues

These victories and setbacks demonstrate that recognition of rights isn’t guaranteed or permanent; rights require constant defence against those seeking to deny them.

Struggles take place within broader structures of democratic erosion.

Intensified attacks on women’s and LGBTQI+ rights are part of a deliberate political strategy where gender serves as a battleground for deeper contests over power, authority and the boundaries of democracy. Anti-gender rhetoric is particularly effective in contexts of economic insecurity and political polarisation, where culture war issues can mobilise support and deflect attention from economic and governance failures.

Resistance can take many forms: advocacy, campaigning, litigation, street mobilisation, public defiance and quiet persistence. Each approach responds to different contexts and builds different kinds of power. Resistance is happening , where women continue to organise under the most repressive conditions.

Legal victories matter, but activists who’ve secured them also understand the limits. Laws decriminalising homosexuality and recognising transgender rights establish foundations, but alone they can’t dismantle the deeply entrenched prejudices that sustain discrimination and violence. Deeper work of political and social change remains necessary.

Some of civil society’s most important recent victories have been invisible, more about preventing regression than winning progress: stalled laws, softened provisions, uneven enforcement, redirected agendas. Defensive victories rarely make headlines, but they result from sustained advocacy and coalition-building. Without this, the most extreme proposals would advance much further and faster.

Women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights remain contested terrain, shaped by the uncertain results of political struggles. Victory isn’t assured, but neither is defeat. The backlash is organised, but so is the resistance. The path forward is being actively forged by those who refuse to accept the unacceptable.



Photo by Zo Andrianjafy/Reuters via Gallo Images

GEN Z PROTESTS

NEW RESISTANCE RISES



Young people are leading a new wave of civil society in resistance to unaccountable economic and political power. Protest uprisings are being driven by collective anger at economic hardship, lack of opportunities and corrupt and out-of-touch elites. Recent trigger events include electricity and water cuts in Madagascar, a social media ban in Nepal and useless flood control projects in the Philippines.



Gen Z protesters are mobilising with remarkable resilience and innovation, taking decentralised approaches to organising that enable collective leadership, making strategic use of social media platforms and sharing tactics internationally to achieve tangible victories. Governments quit in Bulgaria, Madagascar and Nepal, and had to reverse unpopular policies in Indonesia and Timor-Leste.



Violence has been the prevailing state response to Gen Z-led protests, including beatings, lethal force, mass arrests and torture. But repression has sometimes proved counterproductive, intensifying movements rather than suppressing them, as seen in Indonesia, Madagascar and Nepal.

In numerous countries, people from Generation Z have risen up in mass protests. This isn't the first time young people have taken to the streets, and Gen Z-led protests aren't the only mass mobilisations of these times, as shown by recent protests against corruption in **Angola**, Immigration, Customs and Enforcement agency violence in the USA and the **theocratic regime in Iran** – a broad movement with **extensive Gen Z involvement**. But across very different countries there are striking commonalities in Gen Z resistance to unaccountable economic and political power, offering compelling evidence that a new civic generation is finding its voice.

Economic and political anger

Gen Z-led protests have recently mobilised across a wide range of countries, including Bulgaria, Greece, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Morocco, Nepal, North Macedonia, Philippines, Serbia, Peru, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Togo and Turkey.

Gen Z's anger has built up over time, with protests typically triggered when governments impose a new policy that adversely impacts young people or exposes how out of touch they are. In **Nepal**, it was the government's banning of 26 social media platforms, a move seemingly made because young people used social media to mock the lavish lifestyles of politicians' children. The **Bulgarian** government tried to pass a budget with increased social security contributions and taxes, crystallising concerns about its undemocratic decision-making. Parliament in **Peru** approved pension system changes, mandating contributions from the age of 18. In **Indonesia** and **Timor-Leste**, politicians approved generous benefits for themselves: allowance increases in Indonesia and luxury cars in Timor-Leste.



Young protesters march outside the Parliament in Kathmandu, Nepal on 8 September 2025 to demand the lifting of a social media ban and an end to corruption.

The trigger can be a **disaster** that exposes systemic corruption. Severe storms in the **Philippines** made it impossible to ignore how useless many flood control projects were, despite vast sums supposedly spent on them. In **Serbia**, the collapse of a railway station canopy in November 2024, causing 16 deaths, triggered ongoing anger at corruption. In **North Macedonia**, it was the loss of 59 young lives in a nightclub fire. In **Morocco**, when eight women died in childbirth at a single hospital in under three weeks, it laid bare the failure of essential services against the backdrop of an expensive new stadium built for the World Cup. Madagascar's protests arose when electricity and water cuts became unbearable.



Young Tanzanians living in South Africa denounce Tanzania's election results in Cape Town, South Africa, on 5 November 2025.

In some countries, protests expressed fundamental democratic demands denied by those in power, rising in response to a blatantly undemocratic election in **Tanzania**, manoeuvres to extend dynastic rule in **Togo** and the arrest of the Mayor of Istanbul, the opposition frontrunner in the presidential race, in **Turkey**.

Several common protest triggers emerge across diverse contexts. Many countries where people have protested have large youth populations, and economies are failing them. Young people are well educated but unemployment is high, the cost of essentials has soared and poor public services have deteriorated further. Economic inequality is growing and prospects of social mobility have receded.

Economic and political elites overlap, and many young people are angry with out-of-touch and manifestly self-serving politicians, the flaunting of elite wealth and highly visible corruption. In some countries – including **several in Africa** – a generational gulf between national leaders and Gen Z deepens the disconnect.

Many Gen Z-led movements are making economically populist and redistributive demands, seeking curbs on elite wealth, investment that creates jobs, spending on education and health and an end to corruption.

Common tactics

Gen Z protesters are showing remarkable resilience. In Serbia, they've sustained protests for over a year, modelling new ways of working and enabling people to develop participation and organisation skills that could underpin a lifetime of activism. Greece's movement,



Young protesters gather in front of the parliament building in Rabat, Morocco on 18 October 2025 to demand education and healthcare reform.

formed after a train crash that killed 57 people in 2023, **continues to mobilise**, returning to the streets on the 2025 anniversary.

Direct democracy has been a guiding principle in Serbia, where the movement organised open student assemblies, followed by citizen assemblies in cities and towns. Morocco's Gen Z 212 movement is purposefully decentralised and horizontal. But this doesn't mean movements are leaderless; they have many leaders.

Social media plays a central role in how Gen Z-led movements communicate, coordinate and make decisions, with people using VPNs and low-key platforms to circumvent restrictions. Discord, originally an app for gamers, was a key tool in Nepal, subsequently adopted by movements in Madagascar and Morocco. While Discord isn't immune from social media problems such as hate speech, it offers relative anonymity, isn't associated with right-wing tech oligarchs and tends to face less government restriction. In the Philippines, Reddit was a key platform where people exposed the lifestyles of corrupt elites. Gen Z isn't going to abandon social media, but activists are making strategic choices about which platforms they use and how they use them.

In Nepal, the movement used Discord for a groundbreaking exercise in democracy after the prime minister fled: 10,000 people in Nepal and among the diaspora used the platform to debate and choose a favoured candidate to serve as interim prime minister, who went on to take the role. Morocco's Gen Z movement used Discord to vote on its next actions, produced daily podcasts and held open meetings, shared on YouTube, to spread awareness of protest rights and non-violent strategies. The movement's online democracy enabled young women to play leading roles.

Technology enables rapid international sharing of inspiration. When social media first rose to prominence in a protest context, during the **2011 ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings**, connections across the Middle East and North Africa were aided by a shared language and relatively similar political regimes. Now, global connections are being made between movements using different languages in diverse contexts, with video content and AI-assisted translation a crucial factor.

Movements around the world openly acknowledge the inspiration they’ve taken from Nepal and other mobilisations that preceded theirs. Protesters in Madagascar signed up to Nepal’s Discord communities to learn about their tactics and challenges. Movements share symbols, notably from the One Piece manga, whose skull-and-straw-hat flag has been flown at protests from Nepal onwards.

Actions are distinctly Gen Z in style, making creative use of memes and mockery, along with symbolic and attention-grabbing actions. In Serbia, protesters cycled and ran to Brussels and Strasbourg to call for the European Union to pay attention, and held a symbolic 16-day walk – one day for each person killed in the railway station disaster.

Gen Z-led protest movements largely form outside existing structures, in some cases resisting co-optation attempts by opposition parties. They often draw support across party lines and divisions of ethnicity, gender and social class, as seen in North Macedonia. Some spread beyond their Gen Z instigators: in the Philippines, church groups, farmers, healthcare workers and teachers marched alongside young protesters.

Established civil society groups can play supporting roles. Serbia’s movement built its own structures and mobilised voluntary support, including food donations, but also found allies in existing groups

that assisted with logistics and helped detainees. In Indonesia, established civil society groups provided legal support to detained protesters, set up an initiative to investigate protest violence and helped develop a public list of demands. In Morocco, they documented protest rights violations. These intergenerational collaborations show the potential for emerging and established civil society to work with and learn from each other.

Impacts and repression

In some instances, protests have brought immediate results. Indonesia’s parliament dropped the new allowances and began dialogue with student leaders, while political parties dismissed several politicians singled out by protesters. The Moroccan government agreed to increase education and health budgets. In Timor-Leste, the government scrapped free cars for parliamentarians and abolished lifetime pensions for former politicians, a long-running activist demand.

Initial concessions often didn’t satisfy protesters. In Nepal, the government’s reversal of its social media ban wasn’t enough: protests continued until the prime minister quit and fled. In Madagascar, President Andry Rajoelina repeatedly gave ground, sacking the government and convening a national dialogue, but protesters persisted until the army switched sides and forced him out. The Bulgarian government withdrew its budget, but tens of thousands protested until the government resigned.

In many cases, authoritarian governments refused to concede any demands. And in almost all countries – whether governments

gave ground or not – the common state response was violence. In Tanzania, police fired live ammunition at crowds protesting against the blatantly undemocratic election, killing hundreds, while hundreds more were charged with treason. In Togo’s protests, security forces killed at least seven people. In Turkey, police responded to protests with widespread arrests, beatings, projectiles fired at close range, pepper spray and tear gas.

State violence reflects the threat Gen Z-led protests pose to established economic and political power. It tends to be fiercest where protesters demand democracy, entailing a fundamental redistribution of power. Before they switched sides and refused to fire on protesters, Madagascar’s security forces used live ammunition, fuelling a spiral of violence that killed at least 22 people. When protesters broke into Nepal’s parliamentary complex, police used military-grade ammunition, shooting people in the head. As is often the case, lethal responses failed to quell protests, instead recruiting more people who felt their country’s future was at stake.

Even where protest demands are more limited, state violence is the default. In Indonesia, authorities deployed military forces when police lost control amid the violence that spiralled when a young man was run over and killed by an armed vehicle. In Timor-Leste, police fired at protesters. Police violence caused many injuries in Morocco. In Peru, police used drones, laser lights and tear gas. In Serbia, they deployed a sonic weapon. Police in the Philippines beat, humiliated and psychologically tortured protesters in custody.



Photo by Luis Tato/AFP

The mother of a slain protester holds a portrait of her son at a civil society rally in Antananarivo, Madagascar on 13 October 2025.

Challenges

Context and history offer reasons for caution. When Gen Z-led protests arose in Kenya in 2024, triggered by a tax increase, the state unleashed lethal violence after protesters demanded deeper political reforms. The protests they inspired in Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda faced the same treatment, as did further Gen Z-led mobilisations **against Kenyan police brutality** in 2025. The price of protesting is high, and it’s unreasonable to expect young people to keep paying it.



Protesters gather at Baitul Mukarram National Mosque in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 19 December 2025 to demand justice for assassinated young protest leader Sharif Osman Hadi.

Gen Z anger isn't confined to countries where protests have erupted. Young people are expressing frustration wherever economies and politics fail them. But anger doesn't automatically spark progressive demands. In several European countries – including **Germany**, **Poland** and **Romania** – many young people have recently voted for right-wing populist and nationalist politicians who position themselves as anti-elite and speak to an appetite for some kind of change. The challenge for progressive movements is to channel anger towards alternatives that respect human rights and serve social justice, punching up at elites rather than down at targets such as LGBTQI+ people and migrants.

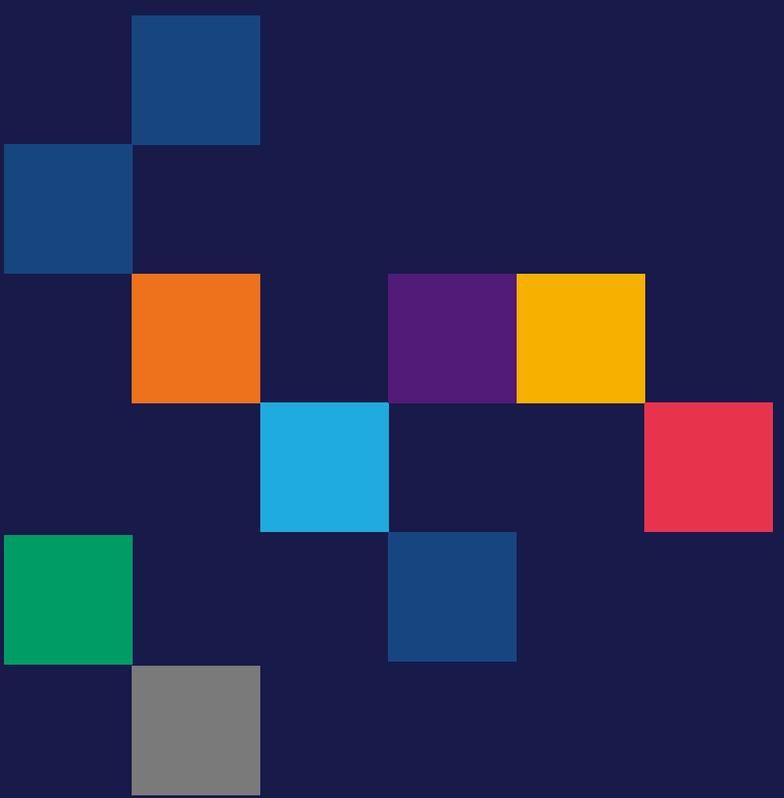
A further challenge awaits movements that succeed, of sustaining momentum when opportunities open up but political rivals jostle for power. The experience of **Bangladesh**, where a Gen Z-led movement ousted an authoritarian government in 2024, shows that meaningful change takes time. The party that formed out of the protest movement won only a handful of seats in the February 2026 election. Repressive laws and economic stagnation often outlast the governments that oversaw them.

But Gen Z anger isn't going away. There are **80 countries** with a median age of under 30. When governments heap further failure upon simmering economic and political grievances, more protests will follow.

For established civil society groups, the challenge is to support Gen Z-led resistance while respecting the autonomy and right to self-organise of emerging activists. For governments, the path is to listen, engage in real dialogue, commit to genuine change and, above all, respect the right to protest instead of meeting dissent with violence.

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 - › ANONYMOUS – PALESTINE
 - › ANONYMOUS – SOMALILAND
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