



# THE GLOBAL PROTEST GUIDE

A toolkit to help you plan, coordinate and  
effectively execute peaceful protests



*This guide was produced by CIVICUS staff with input from the CIVICUS Protest Lab, a collective of activists from across the globe who came together to document, share and strengthen knowledge on the right to peaceful assembly. It draws on lived experience and is dedicated to all those who risk their safety to exercise this fundamental freedom.*



**AUTHORS:**

Juli López-Arenas  
Takaedza Tafirei  
Omhle Ntshingila  
Inés M. Pousadela  
Protest Lab Innovators

**COMMS SUPPORT:**

Lerato Pagiwa  
Silvia Puerto Aboy

**DESIGN:**

Keeke Art

**DATE OF  
PUBLICATION:**

June 2026

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	8
<b>Before the Protest.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Coordination Team.....	7
Protest Site.....	9
Organising Tools.....	10
Partner Mapping.....	14
Digital Safety.....	17
Communication with the Authorities.....	19
<b>During the Protest.....</b>	<b>20</b>
Safety.....	23
Wellbeing.....	26
Documentation Protocols.....	27
<b>After the Protest.....</b>	<b>28</b>
Immediate Steps (within 24 Hours).....	29
Further Steps: Accountability and Sustainability.....	30

# A NOTE FROM THE CIVICUS PROTEST LAB INNOVATORS

Freedom of peaceful assembly is a fundamental right that enables people to come together, express collective concerns and demand accountability. Across the world, this right is increasingly restricted, minimised and eroded through repression tactics designed to deter participation such as arrests, intimidation, surveillance and torture. Yet the ability to organise and gather remains essential to democratic life and social justice. Even in restrictive environments, people and communities continue to find safe and viable ways to assemble, recognising that collective action is both a right and a necessity. We gather not only to make our voices heard, but to honour those who struggled before us, to protect the present, and to safeguard the future. And at the heart of every act of assembly is hope, hope that change is possible, hope that solidarity can overcome fear, and hope, again and again, that collective courage can shape a more just and humane world.

This guide seeks to support planning of coordinated, effective and safe protest actions. It provides practical guidance for people who want to organise or participate in peaceful assemblies across diverse political and legal contexts. It is structured in three parts: before, during and after a protest. Each section contains practical guidance, case studies and exercises drawn from real-world scenarios. Each exercise includes instructions for individual or group use and can be adapted to different contexts.





**BEFORE  
THE  
PROTEST**

Effective protest begins long before the day of action. The preparation phase is where the foundations of an impactful action are laid, and where the most consequential decisions are made. Rushing or skipping this phase is one of the most common reasons actions fail, expose participants to unnecessary risk or are co-opted by others.

The first and most important question is also the simplest: Why are you protesting? Movements that have not agreed on what they stand for, what they are demanding, and what change they would consider a victory are easy targets for manipulation and division. With a shared purpose in place, work through the following questions together:

**What if the military or security forces attempt to take over or suppress our efforts?**

**What if I am injured or arrested during a protest?**

**Do I know my rights if detained? Have I identified legal support in advance in case of arrests?**

**What will my family say if I start or join a protest?**

**Are my ideas considered too radical for my hometown or community?**



## COORDINATION TEAM

Protest actions always require coordination. Concentrating leadership in a single person creates serious risks: one arrest, one absence, one moment of burnout can paralyse the whole action. Distributing responsibilities across a team makes the action more resilient, prevents any person from becoming a target whose removal disables the group, and ensures that diverse perspectives shape decisions.



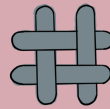
- **Convenor:** Oversees overall planning and execution, ensuring the protest meets its objectives. They will also be required to engage with local authorities when needed.
- **Deputy Convenor:** Supports the convenor and coordinates teams as needed.
- **Chief Marshall:** Manages on-the-ground logistics, including crowd movement, order and participant safety.
- **Communications Lead:** Handles messaging, media engagement and participant updates before, during and after the protest.
- **Safety Team Lead:** Ensures participants' safety and well-being, including first aid, conflict de-escalation and psychosocial support.
- **Legal observer:** Monitors the protest for rights violations, documents arrests or use of force and maintains communication with lawyers on standby.
- **Documentation lead:** Safely photographs or films the protest, preserving evidence of any abuses and ensuring footage is backed up securely and in real time.

In restricted or high-risk environments, it may be safer not to publicise these roles or the identities of those holding them. This helps protect people from harassment, targeting, intimidation or arrest. Consider using code names or role titles rather than personal names in communications, and store contact details only in secure, encrypted formats.

# TOOL SPOTLIGHT: SECURE COMMUNICATION TOOLS



**Psiphon:** tool for users in countries with filtered or restricted internet access



**Briar:** peer-to-peer secure messaging that works without internet



**ProtonVPN:** free VPN for privacy and access to blocked content



**Tor Browser:** anonymous browsing and access to blocked websites

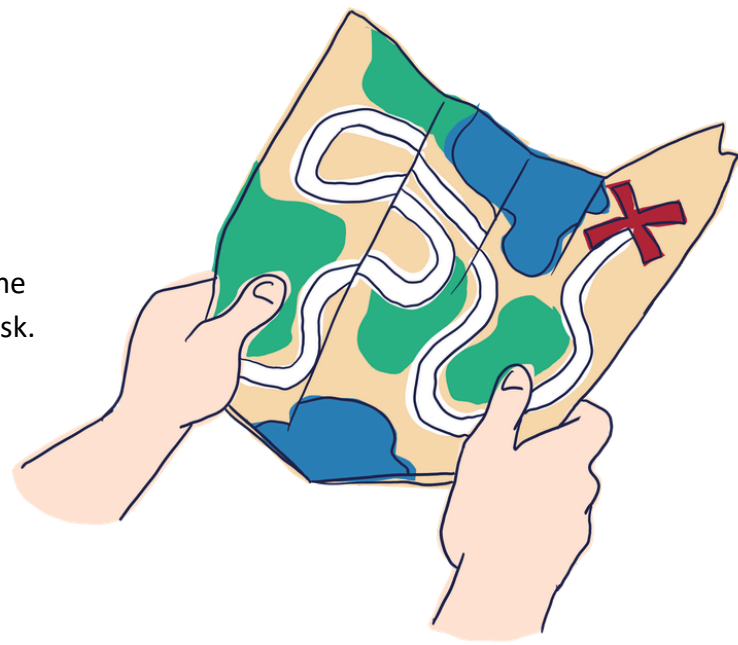


**Signal:** encrypted messaging, calls, and file transfer



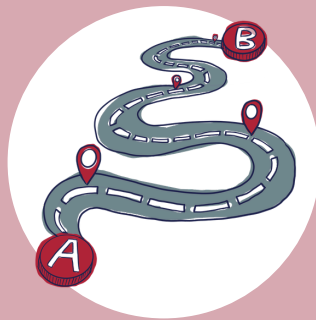
# PROTEST SITE

Choosing a place or platform is not just a logistical decision, it shapes who can participate, how visible the action will be, and how exposed participants are to risk. When choosing a location, balance strategic visibility against safety: symbolic locations (a parliament, a company headquarters, a central square) amplify a message, but in restrictive contexts a less prominent space may be safer and still effective.



## Static assembly

Assemble in publicly accessible areas where participants can enter and exit freely, and where basic facilities (restrooms, water, shade) are available. Plan for accessibility from the outset: are routes navigable for people with disabilities? Are there entry points that can be monitored by marshals? Are there areas of shade or shelter if the weather is extreme? Accessible design is not an afterthought; it determines who can actually participate.



## March or procession

If your protest moves from one location to another, plan and walk the route in advance as a coordination team. Identify the roads you will use, note distances so participants can prepare, locate restrooms and safe stopping points, and flag any potential chokepoints that could create crowd safety risks. In high-risk contexts, share the finalised route only with your core coordination team until the last possible moment, and identify at least one alternative route in case the primary one is blocked.



## Digital action

If your action is online, choose platforms that are accessible to your intended audience and not banned or restricted in your country. Establish a clear protest identity (a name, hashtag and schedule) and coordinate across multiple channels: no single platform reaches everyone, and accounts can be suspended or throttled without warning. Use different channels for public-facing communication and private coordination.

# ORGANISING TOOLS

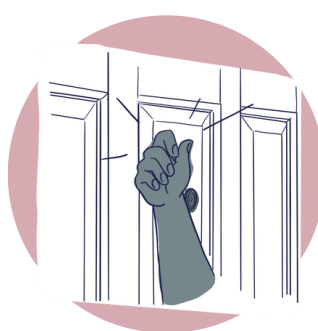
Before a protest can take place, people need to know about it, why it is happening, who it is directed at and how they can participate or support. In open environments, public-facing campaigns, events and media engagement can be used freely. In restricted or high-risk environments, priorities shift, and methods that protect the identity of organisers and participants, avoid traceable records and do not create visibility that invites repression become essential. Many actions combine several of the approaches below, calibrating each to the context and the audience:

## In-person



### Community meetings

In-person gatherings to build consensus, answer questions and develop collective ownership of the action. These can also serve as informal training sessions where information about safety and legal rights is shared.



### Door-to-Door

Directly informing community members in person to raise awareness and encourage participation. This method is particularly effective in communities with lower internet access and can build the personal trust that turns interest into commitment.



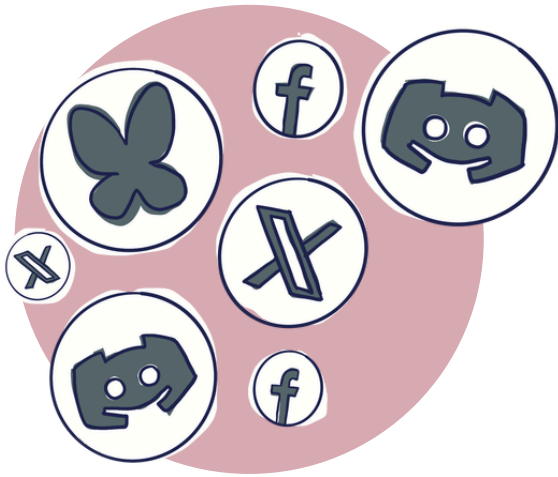
### Artivism

Using art or creative expression (poetry, street art, graffiti, live performances) to communicate the protest's message and inspire action. Artivism can reach audiences that conventional political messaging does not, and its ambiguity can make it harder for authorities to suppress or criminalise.



### Sporting events

Organising or participating in sporting events to engage communities and spread the protest message. Large gatherings around sport attract audiences that may not respond to explicitly political outreach, create space for visible solidarity (banners, colours, chants) and tend to attract less suspicion from authorities.



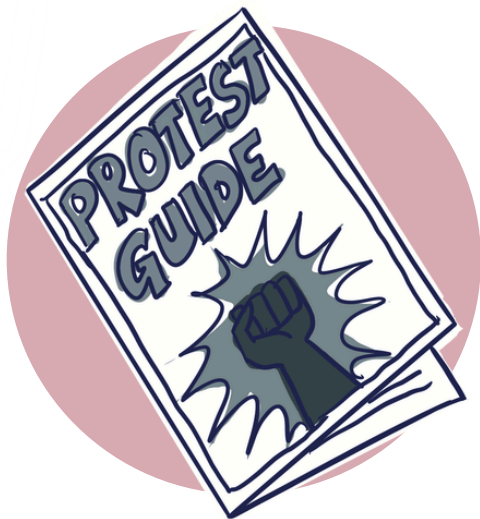
### Digital Campaign

Using social media, newsletters or online platforms such as Discord, Facebook or Bluesky to reach local and international audiences. Diversify across platforms to avoid over-reliance on any single channel that could be blocked or suspended. Use hashtags to aggregate and amplify content, but be aware that hashtags can also make participants vulnerable to monitoring.



### Webinars

Online sessions to educate, discuss and mobilise participants safely and widely. Webinars can reach people across geographic boundaries and allow anonymous or pseudonymous participation. Use end-to-end encrypted platforms where possible and avoid requiring participants to use their real names.



### Pamphlets

Printed materials that provide key information about the protest, its purpose and how to get involved. In restricted contexts, printed materials should not include the names or contact details of organisers. Consider using QR codes that link to encrypted channels rather than printing direct URLs.



### Solidarity statements and open letters

Inviting allied organisations, public figures or academics to sign statements of support. These can be particularly powerful in generating media attention and international pressure in high-risk contexts, signalling that the movement has allies who are watching and will speak out if participants are targeted.

## Exercise 1: Planning and Mobilisation

Working in small groups, read one of the scenarios, discuss the questions and take notes. Spend 20-25 minutes on the scenario, then reconvene for a 10-minute plenary in which groups compare their strategies: where did your approaches converge, and where did the different contexts force different choices?



### Scenario 1. Indigenous land rights protest in Honduras

In La Esperanza, an Indigenous Youth Committee is planning a protest to demand protection of their ancestral lands from illegal logging and mining activities. Organising openly carries significant risks, as activists face surveillance and intimidation from local authorities and private security actors linked to corporate interests.

Indigenous organising in Honduras takes place within a context marked by persistent impunity, structural discrimination against Indigenous communities, and overlapping relationships between economic actors, private security, and state institutions. While collective mobilisation is essential to defending land, territory, and cultural rights, visible activism may expose organisers and community members to harassment, criminalisation, or violence.

The committee must therefore consider how to mobilise community members effectively while protecting safety, anonymity, and long-term movement sustainability, balancing the need for visibility with strategies that reduce risk and strengthen collective protection.

#### Questions

- This committee is operating in a context where the danger comes not from the state alone but from a network of private and state actors with overlapping interests. How does that affect who the committee can safely approach for legal, medical or solidarity support — and how does it change its communication strategy?
- The community has strong in-person networks but limited digital infrastructure. What forms of mobilisation best fit this context, and what are the risks of each?
- If private security actors attempt to intimidate or disrupt the protest, the committee cannot assume that calling the police will help. What contingency measures should be in place, and who outside the immediate community should be informed in advance?





## Scenario 2. LGBTQI+ rights advocacy in Egypt

A small LGBTQI+ advocacy collective in Cairo is considering how to raise public awareness about discrimination and advocate for legal protections.

Organising any form of visible public action carries acute risk: same-sex conduct is criminalised under broadly framed morality laws, and authorities have systematically used social media platforms and online undercover operations to identify, entrap and arrest LGBTQI+ people. The risk is not only of being identified as a protester, it is of being identified as queer. Political repression, social stigma and limited funding significantly constrain options.

The collective must therefore think carefully not just about how to organise, but whether a conventional protest is a viable or appropriate form of action at all in this context and if not, what alternatives might achieve similar goals with less exposure for participants.

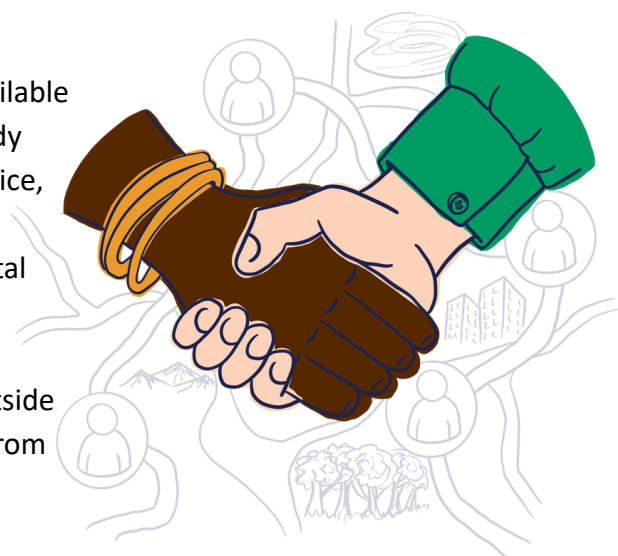
### Questions

- Given that participants face criminalisation not just for protesting but for their identity, is a visible public assembly the right form of action here? What alternatives (online campaigns, solidarity actions in other countries, documentation and reporting) might advance the same goals while better protecting participants?
- The Egyptian authorities have used digital platforms to identify and entrap LGBTQI+ people. What specific digital risks does this create for any form of online organising, and how should the collective approach communication, even among trusted members?
- If the collective decides to take some form of action, what does meaningful informed consent look like for participants who may not fully understand the legal risks they are taking on? Who bears responsibility for ensuring that consent is genuine?



## PARTNER MAPPING

Before protesting, it is crucial to know what resources are available in case of arrests, injuries or digital attacks, and to have already activated them, not to be looking for them mid-crisis. In practice, this means creating a printed reference card with emergency contact numbers that every participant can carry; storing digital contact lists in encrypted format; testing your communication channels with partners in advance; and, in high-risk contexts, establishing a check-in arrangement with trusted contacts outside the protest area who will raise the alarm if they do not hear from the team.



If a category of support is unavailable locally, identify the closest viable alternative (a lawyer in a neighbouring country, a diaspora contact, an international hotline) and make sure your whole team has those details. The following categories of support should be identified and confirmed in advance:



### Legal Support

Access to lawyers or legal aid to provide advice, representation, or emergency assistance in case of arrest or legal challenges.



### Medical Support

Availability of first aid, emergency medical care or health services during and after the protest. Identify at least one trained first aider in your team, establish the location of the nearest hospital or clinic, and note whether any participants have medical conditions that may require specific support.



### Psychosocial Support

Access to counselling or mental health services to help cope with trauma or emotional stress resulting from participation in protest.



### Digital Support:

Assistance with cybersecurity and protection against online surveillance or targeted digital attacks. There are external organisations you can contact if you believe your devices or networks have been compromised.

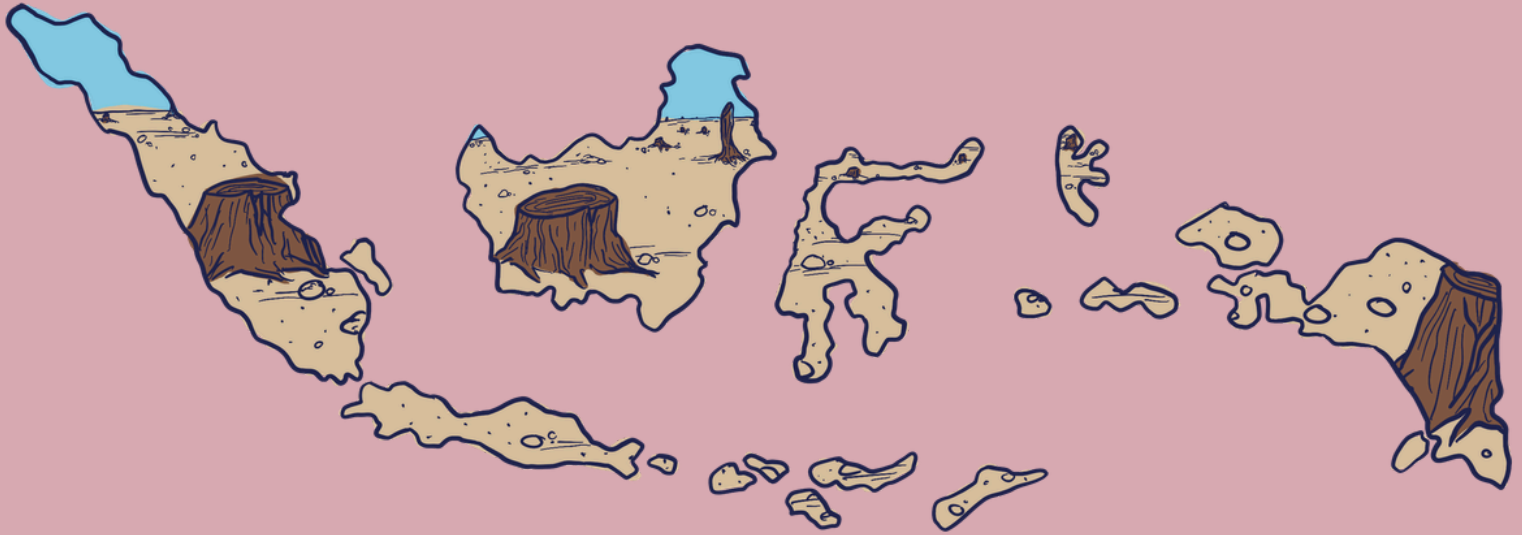


### International Solidarity Support

Networks of international allies who can amplify your cause, provide guidance and monitor human rights compliance from abroad. CIVICUS, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and regional coalitions can issue statements, apply diplomatic pressure and provide visibility when participants are detained.

## Exercise 2: Partner Mapping

Working in small groups, read one of the scenarios below and build a partner map. Identify the categories of support most urgently needed. Allow 15-20 minutes, then share your map with the group. In the plenary, focus on disagreements: where did groups identify different partners or reach different conclusions about which contacts are safe to approach?



### Scenario 1. Climate protest in Indonesia

A citizen-led group in Jakarta is planning a protest against deforestation and land-grabbing affecting Indigenous and rural communities. The group includes urban activists, journalists and representatives of affected communities.

Several environmental activists have faced criminal charges in recent years for organising protests against extractive industries, and at least one local civil society organisation supporting land rights defenders has had its permit revoked. Authorities have a track record of using administrative delays and permit denials to obstruct protests, and there are indications that the group's communications have been monitored.

#### Questions

- Given that local civil society groups have faced permit revocation for supporting land rights work, how do you assess which local partners are safe to approach openly, and which relationships need to be handled discreetly?
- The group wants international solidarity organisations to amplify their message. What is the risk that high-profile international attention increases rather than decreases pressure on participants? How should that trade-off shape which international partners they engage, and how?



## Scenario 2. Human rights protest in Zimbabwe

Activists in Harare are planning a protest to demand respect for human rights and political accountability ahead of a period of heightened political tension. Security forces have used force to disperse protests on multiple occasions, and several opposition leaders and civil society figures have been detained in recent months. The group is aware that at least one previous organising meeting was attended by a government informant.

The group has limited funds, no existing relationship with a lawyer, and is uncertain which local civil society organisations can be trusted given the infiltration of previous organising efforts.



### Questions

- The group has no existing relationship with a lawyer and suspects its networks have been infiltrated. How should it identify a trustworthy legal contact, and through what channels should it make that approach without alerting authorities or exposing the contact to risk?
- The group cannot rely on local partners alone. Which regional or international organisations have a specific track record in Zimbabwe, and what can they realistically provide?
- If several participants are arrested during the protest, what is the step-by-step response plan for the first two hours, and which partners need to have been briefed in advance for that plan to work?

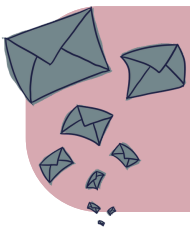


# DIGITAL SAFETY

Digital safety is a core component of protest planning in any context where surveillance is possible. The tools and habits described here should be implemented before the protest begins, not on the day itself.



**Social media and digital footprint:** Review your social media profiles and remove or make private any information that could identify you or your associates. ObscuraCam (by The Guardian Project) allows you to blur faces in images before publishing. On the day of the protest, avoid posting real-time location information.



**Secure messaging:** Install and test encrypted messaging apps. The most widely recommended option is Signal, which encrypts messages, calls and files end-to-end. Enable the disappearing messages feature to reduce your data trail. If Signal is restricted in your country, access it via a VPN.



**VPNs:** Download and configure a trusted VPN in advance. A VPN protects your location and internet activity, and is especially important in regions prone to monitoring or censorship. Recommended options include ProtonVPN (free tier available) and Psiphon, which is designed for users in countries where internet access is filtered or restricted.



**Device security:** Enable full-disk encryption on all devices. Set a strong password or PIN and avoid biometrics, which police can compel. Remove or log out of any unnecessary apps that could expose personal data if your device is seized.



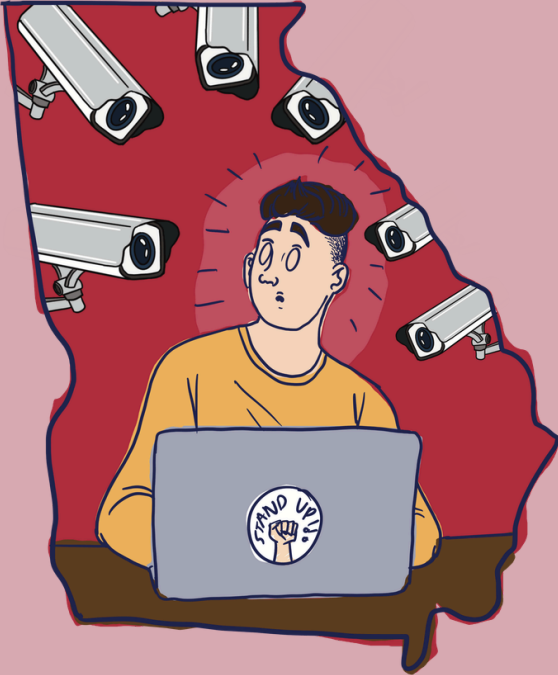
**Encrypted storage:** Store sensitive documents, evidence and personal information in encrypted digital storage. Options include VeraCrypt for files and folders, and Signal's Note to Self feature for quick storage of sensitive information. Back up important data to an encrypted external location.



**Threat detection:** Learn to recognise phishing attempts, malware and signs of device compromise, such as unexpected new apps, changed account settings and unfamiliar logins. Do not open unsolicited links or attachments from unknown sources.

## Exercise 3: Digital Safety

Working in small groups, identify all the digital risks described or implied in the scenario and propose a digital safety plan. Your plan should address communication tools, device security, social media practices and contingency planning for a potential shutdown. Allow 20 minutes, then share plans with the rest of the groups and identify gaps.



### Scenario. Protest against the Foreign Influence Law, Georgia, 2024

A civil society coalition in Tbilisi is organising a street protest against Georgia's Foreign Agents Law, which requires organisations receiving more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad to register as 'carrying the interests of a foreign power'. Critics argue the law is modelled on Russian legislation used to silence independent media and civil society, and its passage triggered some of the largest protests Georgia has seen in years.

The coalition includes civil society staff, student activists and independent journalists. Organisers have been coordinating primarily via a WhatsApp group with over 80 members. Several participants are employed by organisations that would be directly affected by the law and fear professional retaliation if identified at the protest. One organiser has already received anonymous threatening messages on social media. There are credible reports that authorities monitored participants' phones at previous protests and that footage from protests was used to identify and question protesters afterwards.

### Questions

- The coalition is currently coordinating via WhatsApp. What are the risks this creates, and what should they switch to? How should they manage the transition without losing participants?
- Several members are worried about being identified in protest footage. What steps can the group take before, during and immediately after the protest to reduce this risk?
- If digital networks are disrupted during the protest, what is the contingency plan for keeping the coordination team in contact with each other and with participants?



# COMMUNICATION WITH AUTHORITIES

In some countries, you may be required to inform authorities in advance about your intention to protest. This is a notification process, not a request for permission, but a formal communication that gives authorities the opportunity to facilitate safety and manage traffic or public order. However, authorities may misuse this process to obstruct, delay or suppress assemblies, and in heavily restricted environments, filing a notification may itself put organisers at risk by confirming their identities to security services or triggering pre-emptive arrests. Before taking any of the steps below, weigh the legal requirement against the personal risk and seek advice from a trusted local legal contact.

If you determine that notifying authorities is appropriate in your context, the following steps apply:



## Research local requirements:

Notification requirements vary widely: some countries require 48 to 72 hours' notice, others require only same-day notification, and others have no requirement at all. Understand what applies in your country or district and obtain the official notification form from local authorities.



## Seek legal guidance:

If your context requires a meeting with authorities, prepare with the support of a paralegal or legal practitioner. In countries with heavily restricted civic space, involve a pro-bono legal practitioner from the outset, ideally before any contact with authorities is made.



## Keep documentation:

Retain copies of all forms, communications and correspondence, and ensure your coordination team has copies. Store them in both encrypted digital and physical formats.



## Know your response if notification is refused or obstructed:

Authorities do not have the power to prohibit an assembly simply by refusing a notification or imposing conditions. If they attempt to do so, this may itself constitute a violation of your rights. Document the refusal in writing and consult a lawyer immediately.



**DURING  
THE  
PROTEST**

## Physical Protests Dos and Don'ts

### Do

- **Stay Peaceful:** Maintain non-violence at all times, even if provoked, to protect yourself and others and to ensure the legitimacy of your action.
- **Stick to the Planned Route:** Follow the pre-determined route or location to avoid unnecessary risks, facilitate coordination, and allow authorities to anticipate movements safely.
- **Know Your Rights:** Be aware of your legal rights, including the right to assemble, and understand local laws and regulations to protect yourself and fellow participants.
- **Document Events:** Record incidents safely (photos, videos, or written notes) to provide evidence of abuses or violations, while protecting your identity and that of others.
- **Follow Safety Protocols:** Use a buddy system, stay hydrated, take mental health breaks, and adhere to first aid and emergency procedures to ensure physical and emotional well-being.

### Don't

- **Provoke police or counter-protesters:** Stay calm and non-confrontational to prevent escalation and protect yourself and others.
- **Engage in unplanned activities:** Stick to the planned actions to maintain organisation, safety and effectiveness of the protest.
- **Ignore orders to disperse:** Follow lawful instructions while knowing your rights and exit safely if required to minimise harm and avoid unnecessary arrests.
- **Resist arrest with force:** Avoid physical resistance if detained as it can escalate danger and result in more severe legal consequences.



## Digital Protests Dos and Don'ts

### Do

- **Protect Identities:** Consider anonymous posting or pseudonyms to safeguard organizers and participants.
- **Verify Information:** Share only accurate and credible information to avoid spreading disinformation.
- **Monitor information:** Be prepared to correct false reports quickly and calmly.

### Don't

- **Share personal information publicly:** Avoid exposing names, addresses or other identifying details that could put participants at risk.
- **Engage in cyberattacks:** Avoid hacking, doxing or illegal digital actions that could undermine credibility or lead to legal consequences.
- **Respond to provocations:** Avoid online arguments with opponents that may escalate conflict or compromise safety.
- **Assume privacy:** Always operate under the assumption that digital activity may be monitored by authorities or hostile actors.



## SAFETY

Physical safety during a protest depends on what you carry, what you wear, how the group communicates, and how participants are supported if things go wrong. Collective safety means treating these not as individual responsibilities but as shared ones.

Before you leave, consider carefully what to bring and what to leave behind. Anything that identifies your home address and your associations or that could be misrepresented as a weapon should be left at home. If you carry a mobile phone, ensure it is encrypted and cannot be unlocked using biometrics, which police can compel.

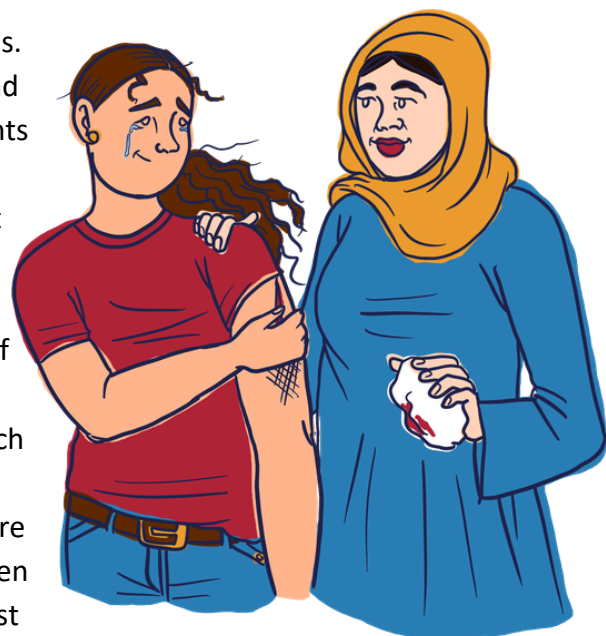
### What to bring and wear:



- Wear layers and clothing that does not restrict movement. Avoid clothing with identifiable logos, slogans or features that could make you easy to recognise in photographs or footage.
- Bring water (for both hydration and rinsing tear gas from eyes and skin), sunscreen and any medication you need.
- Carry copies of your notification form, emergency contacts and any health information relevant to your participation. Write key phone numbers on your arm in permanent marker; do not rely solely on a locked phone.
- If tear gas is likely, bring swimming goggles (not just sunglasses), a mask rated N95 or above and a small bottle of water and saline solution.
- Do not carry anything that police could misrepresent as a weapon.

### What to do as a team:

- Scout the route or protest site in advance. Identify safe entry and exit points, public facilities and potential hazards. Agree on a code word that signals the need to disperse and fix a post-dispersion meeting point known to all participants but not mentioned in any advance communications.
- Designate a base contact (someone not physically present at the protest) who monitors communications and coordinates support from outside. This person must have the legal support number, the medical contact and a list of all participants.
- Pair participants or form small groups to watch out for each other, maintain morale and provide immediate support if someone is in danger. Each pair needs a shared plan: where to meet if separated, who to call in an emergency and when to leave together. Never leave a buddy behind without first establishing that they are safe.



## First aid

The following guidance supplements, but does not replace, training by a qualified first aider. At least one trained first aider should be present at every protest action:



In hot conditions, watch for pale, clammy skin, dizziness, and nausea. Move the person to shade, give them water, and loosen tight clothing. If symptoms do not improve within 30 minutes or the person loses consciousness, seek emergency medical care.



If tear gas is used, move immediately upwind and away from the source. Do not rub your eyes. Rinse with large quantities of clean water. If available, saline solution provides more effective eye relief. Remove and bag contaminated clothing as soon as possible.



Treat rubber bullet injuries as you would blunt force trauma. Do not attempt to remove any embedded objects, stabilise the person and seek professional medical care immediately. Document the injury for accountability purposes.



Seek professional medical care for all wounds or injuries after the protest, including those that appear minor. Some injuries caused by crowd control weapons may not be immediately apparent in their full severity.



## Exercise 4: Physical Safety - Crisis Simulation

Working in groups, read the scenario below. Designate one person to take notes and one to present back to the full group. You have 25 minutes to develop a concrete response plan. Name specific roles, tools and actions, not just principles.



### Scenario. Cost-of-living protest in Uganda

A citizen-led group of around 40 activists has organised a peaceful protest in central Kampala to demand accountability for rising living costs. The group notified authorities in advance and appointed marshals and a documentation lead. They have one pre-arranged legal contact (a local lawyer who is not present at the protest) and no dedicated medical support beyond a first aider in the group.

Despite the notification, police arrive in large numbers shortly after the protest begins and declare the assembly unlawful. They deploy tear gas and fire live rounds in the direction of the crowd, a tactic Ugandan security forces have used on multiple occasions. Several participants are injured.

In the ensuing panic, participants scatter across multiple streets. At least four people are arrested and their whereabouts are unknown. The communications lead's phone is seized. Mobile networks are intermittent, possibly due to deliberate disruption. The lawyer has been contacted but has not yet responded. The group's marshals attempt to regroup, but participants are dispersed and some are injured.

### Questions

- Communication networks are unstable and the communications lead's phone has been seized. Using only the tools and contingency plans that could realistically have been prepared in advance, how does the group coordinate across scattered locations in the next 30 minutes?
- Four people have been arrested and their whereabouts are unknown. The lawyer has not yet responded. What are the immediate steps to locate them, and who takes each step, given that some team members are injured and others are still trying to reach safety?
- The group has no dedicated medical support and some participants are injured. How do they respond, and at what point does seeking formal medical care become a risk in itself in this context?

# WELLBEING

The wellbeing of protest participants is what sustains movements over time. Movements that neglect the emotional and physical health of their members end up losing them. This section covers in-action wellbeing practices; for post-protest recovery and collective care, see the After the protest section.

Stress and trauma responses are normal reactions to high-pressure or threatening situations. Common responses include hypervigilance, dissociation, numbness, irritability and difficulty concentrating, as well as physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat or shaking. Recognising these signs in yourself and others is the first step to addressing them.

- Check in on fellow participants regularly. Look for signs that someone is overwhelmed (withdrawal, silence, rigid posture, dissociation) and offer water, shade and a quieter space away from the crowd.
- Take breaks when you need them. Stay within the group's perimeter and let your buddy know where you are.
- If you feel overwhelmed, use the grounding technique below before deciding whether you need to step back further.
- If a participant is experiencing an acute anxiety response or is unable to continue safely, they should leave with their buddy, never alone. Alert the safety team lead before leaving if it is safe to do so.

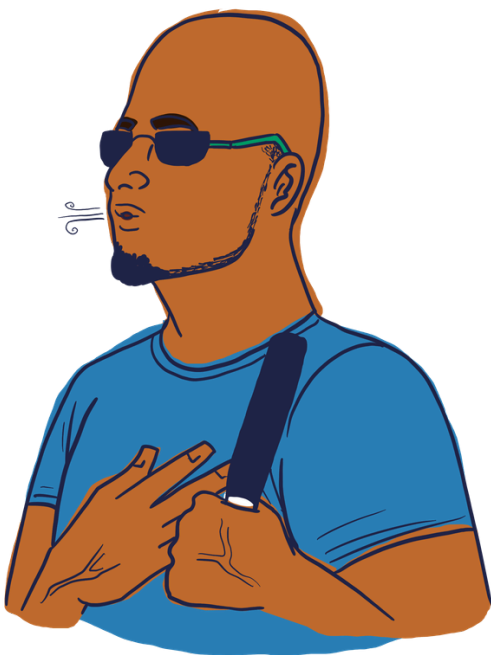


## The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

If you feel anxious and overwhelmed, this technique can help regulate your nervous system by anchoring your attention to immediate physical reality. Work through each sense in turn:

- **5 things you can see**
- **4 things you can touch**
- **3 things you can hear**
- **2 things you can smell**
- **1 thing you can taste**

Take your time with each step. The technique works best when done slowly and deliberately.



# DOCUMENTATION PROTOCOLS

The documentation lead should be briefed and equipped before the day of the protest, and the whole coordination team should understand the protocols in advance. Designate a deputy who can take over the documentation role if the lead is detained or separated from the group, and make sure that person is equally briefed.

1

**Choose and test your tools:** Download and test a documentation app before the protest. Confirm that automatic backup is working and that the backup location is secure and accessible to more than one person. The WITNESS Media Lab and Amnesty International's Citizen Evidence Lab provide guidance on choosing and using documentation tools safely and effectively.



2

**Agree on what to document:** Define in advance what counts as a documentable incident, such as use of force, unlawful orders, arrests, injuries, threats and surveillance. The documentation lead should not have to make this judgement in real time under pressure.



3

**Establish your backup and storage system:** Decide where footage will be stored, who can access it and how it will be transferred securely after the protest. Strip metadata from files before storing or sharing them to avoid exposing participants' locations or device information. Agree on file naming conventions so that records can be organised and cross-referenced easily.



4

**Decide what will be shared publicly, and when:** Raw footage should not be posted publicly before your legal team has reviewed it. Agree in advance on who makes the decision to release material and through which channels.





**AFTER  
THE  
PROTEST**

The protest does not end when participants disperse. The hours immediately after an action are often the most consequential: for people who have been arrested, the first few hours of detention are when legal intervention is most effective; for those who are injured, delays in care carry real risks; and documentation degrades quickly if not secured. This section covers the immediate priorities of the post-protest period, followed by the longer work of accountability, collective care and movement sustainability.

## IMMEDIATE STEPS (WITHIN 24 HOURS)

In the hours immediately after a protest, the coordination team should work through three priorities, in this order: accounting for everyone, responding to arrests and injuries, and securing documentation before it is lost or compromised.



### Accounting for all participants

Use your buddy network lists to confirm that everyone has dispersed safely. If any participants remain unaccounted notify the legal team immediately, because they may have been detained without your knowledge. Silence is the signal that something is wrong.

### Responding to arrests

Regroup as quickly as possible and establish the following:

- How many people have been arrested?
- Which police station or detention facility are they being held in?
- Have they been charged, and if so, with what?
- Have they been able to contact a lawyer?



Share this information with your legal support contact as soon as it is gathered; do not wait until everything is confirmed before making the call. Legal teams can intervene most effectively in the early hours of a detention, before charges are formalised or detention conditions worsen.

Stay in contact with detained participants' families and keep them informed. Uncertainty is one of the most distressing aspects of an arrest for families, so even a brief message confirming that you know where the person is and that legal support is on the way is meaningful.

### Responding to injuries

Check whether anyone is injured or unwell and prioritise those who need urgent medical attention. Do not leave injured people alone. Stay with the person until they are in professional care. If you pre-identified safe medical contacts during the planning phase (community health workers, sympathetic medical professionals or field medics), activate them now if formal care carries risk in your context.



## FURTHER STEPS: ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The work of the longer post-protest period falls into three areas: pursuing accountability for what happened, sustaining the wellbeing of those involved, and keeping the movement alive and coherent. Each is addressed in the sections below.

### Documenting violations

Documentation is an act of solidarity as much as a legal tool. It signals to detained or injured participants that their experiences have been witnessed and will not be forgotten. It can also create a historical record, support legal proceedings to hold perpetrators and institutions accountable, and deter future abuses.

The incident documentation exercise in this section provides a working framework. For each significant incident (use of force, unlawful arrest, surveillance, threats or any other potential rights violation), compile a written record that includes:

- **Date, time and precise location**
- **Names or descriptions of all parties involved, including officers where visible (badge numbers, unit insignia, vehicle plates)**
- **A factual description of what happened, in the order it happened**
- **Names and contact details of witnesses who consent to being identified**
- **Photographic or video evidence, with file names and storage location noted**
- **Any injuries or damage, with supporting documentation**

Use a consistent format across all reports so that incidents can be compared, aggregated and submitted to accountability bodies in a coherent form. Keep all original files intact. Do not edit or compress footage before sharing it with your legal team.

## Exercise 5: Incident Documentation

Working in small groups, use the table below to document a fictional incident: a police dispersal of a peaceful protest, an unlawful arrest or an injury caused by crowd control weapons. Fill in every field as specifically as possible; vague entries such as ‘morning’ or ‘near the square’ have no evidentiary value. In high-risk contexts, do not keep this record on an unencrypted device; instead, transfer it to a secure notes app or encrypted storage immediately.



When complete, swap tables with another group and review each other’s records against the checklist above. Are all required fields present? Is the information specific enough to support a legal complaint? What is missing or too vague to be useful? Then discuss as a group:

- What made certain fields difficult to fill in, and what could have been prepared in advance to make them easier to complete under pressure?
- Who in your group would be responsible for completing this record during an actual protest and what would happen to that responsibility if that person were detained or separated?

DATE AND TIME	10/5/2026 15:35				
PRECISE LOCATION	Street ABC				
DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT (IN SEQUENCE)	Physical assault				
PARTIES INVOLVED	Police				
WITNESSES (CONSENTING)	Other protesters				
INJURIES AND TREATMENT	Broken leg				
EVIDENCE (FILE NAMES AND STORAGE)	Phone pics				
REPORTED TO	Central police station				

## Reporting Violations

Documenting a violation is only the first step, the documentation needs to go somewhere. The appropriate reporting channel depends on your context: the severity of the violation, the degree of trust in national institutions and the resources your team can mobilise. The channels below are not mutually exclusive, and their combination is often more effective than any single channel alone. In all cases, coordinate with your legal team before releasing evidence or identifying information publicly, and prioritise your safety.

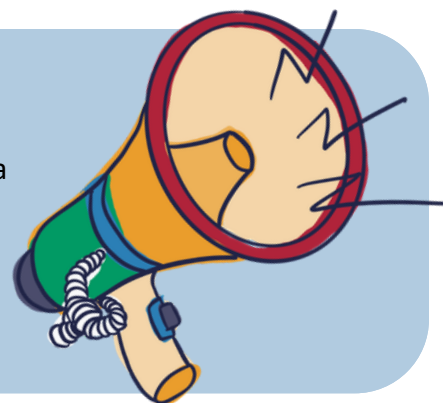


### Domestic mechanisms

If it is safe to do so, you may report an incident at a police station or to an internal police complaints body. Before doing so, consult a lawyer or trusted legal organisation: in some contexts, formal reporting can expose complainants to harassment or counter-accusations. Share evidence carefully and avoid posting it publicly until your legal team has advised on what is safe and strategically useful to disclose.

### Civil society monitoring

Submitting documented violations to civil society organisations that compile evidence and produce public reports contributes to a cumulative record that can support future legal and diplomatic action, even when immediate accountability is not achievable. In many contexts, this is the most realistic avenue for most violations.

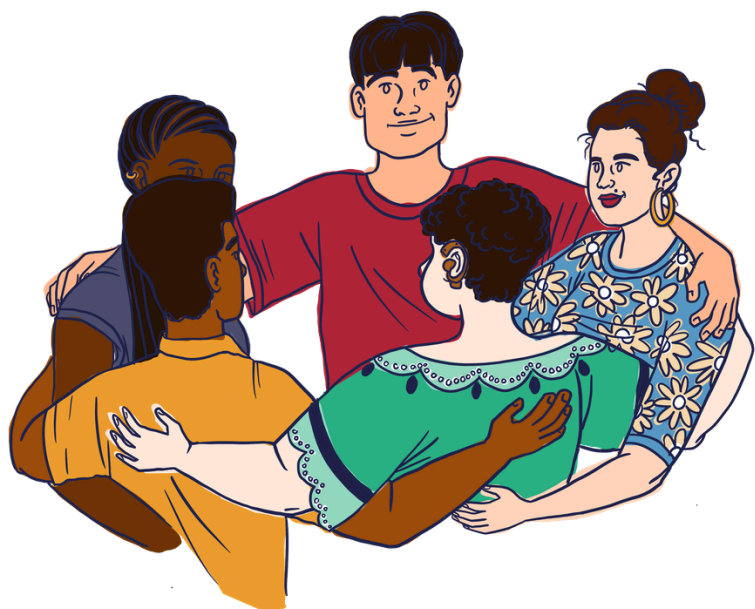


### Media engagement

Providing documentation to trusted journalists creates accountability pressure through public exposure. Through your communications lead, issue a post-protest statement that summarises key incidents, names documented violations and reiterates the movement's demands.

## Practicing Collective Care

Participation in protests, especially those involving violence, arrests or other traumatic events, places significant demands on people and communities. Normalising care and recovery as part of protest culture is what sustains movements over time. The steps below should be treated not as optional additions but as core components of post-protest coordination.



### Regroup and check in

Regroup after the protest to check on everyone's wellbeing. Check in individually with participants who experienced particularly difficult moments (those near violent incidents, those who were arrested, those who witnessed injuries). One-to-one contact signals that the collective cares for its members as people, not just as movement resources.

### Hold a participant debrief

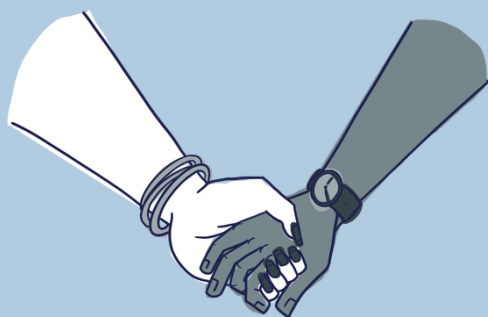
Where it is safe, organise a debrief session online or in-person with protest participants. Create space for people to share how they are feeling, what they observed, and what they would want to do differently. Acknowledge difficult experiences without minimising them. If participants are experiencing persistent symptoms of trauma (intrusive memories, nightmares, hyper-vigilance or emotional numbing) encourage them to access professional support.

### Care for the carers

Those in coordination roles (particularly the safety team lead and communications lead) are often the last to attend to their own wellbeing. Ensure that people in high-responsibility positions are actively supported by others in the team and are not expected to carry the emotional weight of the action alone. Rotate demanding roles across the team over time where possible.

### Affirm the long-term struggle

Burnout is one of the most common and most underacknowledged threats to social movements. Taking time after an action to acknowledge what was achieved, name what was difficult and recognise the contribution of every participant preserves movements' capacity to act again.



## Safeguarding the Movement

State actors have historically used infiltration, disinformation and manufactured division to neutralise effective social movements. Co-option by political parties, NGOs or media actors with competing agendas poses an equally serious threat. Safeguarding your movement's integrity is key to its long-term power.

The most effective safeguards are structural. Movements with transparent decision-making processes, distributed leadership and clear communication protocols are significantly harder to infiltrate or redirect than those built around personal authority or informal arrangements. Beyond structure, be alert to specific tactics. Agentsprovocateurs may attempt to incite violence to justify crackdowns or discredit the movement publicly. Disinformation may be seeded within participant networks to cause confusion or internal conflict. Awareness of these tactics, without tipping into paranoia, allows the group to recognise and name them when they occur.





**Every action, no matter how small, contributes to the longer journey toward justice.**





## CIVICUS

---

### **South Africa**

25 Owl Street, 6th Floor, Johannesburg,  
2092, South Africa

**Web:** [www .civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)

**e-mail:** [info@civicus.org](mailto:info@civicus.org)

### **Switzerland**

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

Published June 2026 by CIVICUS,  
Johannesburg, South Africa.

### **United States of America**

355 Lexington Ave, New York, NY 10017,  
United States

Creative Commons Attribution-  
NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0  
International Public License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

### **Disclaimer:**

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CIVICUS. The material and geographical designations in this report do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of CIVICUS concerning the legal status of any country, territory or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.