

CIVICUS PEOPLE POWER **UNDER ATTACK** 2020

A REPORT BASED ON DATA FROM THE CIVICUS MONITOR

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The CIVICUS Monitor is an ongoing research collaboration between global civil society alliance CIVICUS and over 20 research partner organisations that have contributed the bulk of the data upon which this report is based. A full list and description of our partners is [here](#).

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This report was researched and written by: Marianna Belalba Barreto, Josef Benedict, Débora Leão, Sylvia Mbataru, Aarti Narsee and Ine Van Severen. The report was edited by Andrew Firmin and Margaret Fish. Design and layout by [Diego López](#), Alan Zard and Matthew Reading-Smith.

CIVICUS team: Amal Atrakouti, Suhani Bhushan, Kgalalelo Gaebee, Natalia Gomez Peña, Tor Hodenfield, David Kode, Masana Ndinga Kanga, Mawethu Nkolomba, Paul Mulindwa, Lisa Majumdar, Nina Teggarty, Emily Standfield, Mandeep Tiwana and Sibahle Zuma. The CIVICUS Monitor Team would like to thank Dominic Perera and Bobbie Jo Traut for their support and guidance.

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Morocco | Photo by Frédéric Soltan/Corbis via Getty Images



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METHODOLOGY

The goal of the CIVICUS Monitor is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the conditions for civil society within countries and over time. Civic space is defined as the respect in policy and practice for the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. The state has a fundamental duty to protect these rights. The CIVICUS Monitor conceptualises the conditions for civil society as the respect for these four indicators.

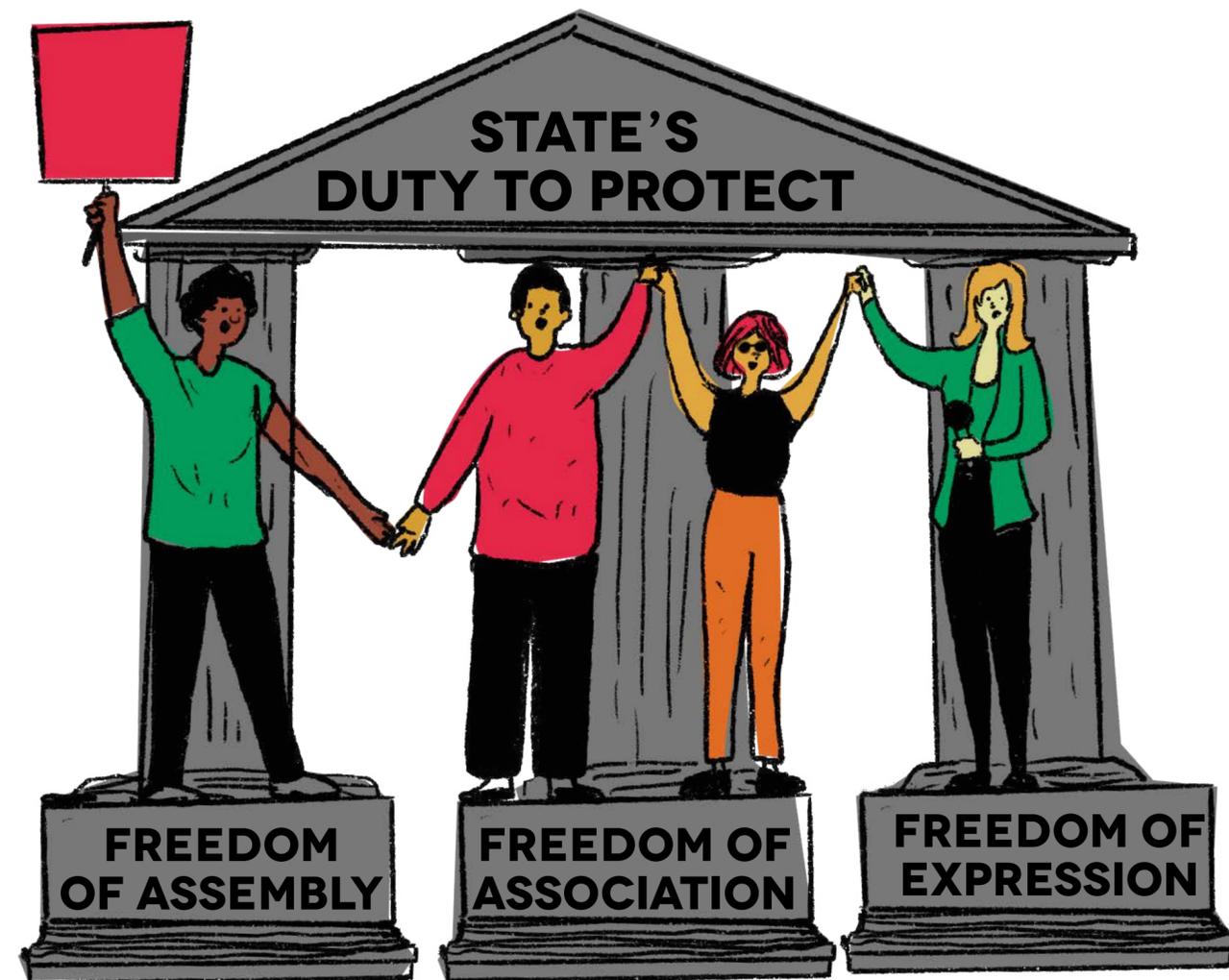
In an attempt to capture these dynamics on a global scale, **over 20 organisations** from around the world have joined forces on the CIVICUS Monitor to provide an evidence base for action to improve civic space. In order to draw comparisons at the global level and track trends over time, the CIVICUS Monitor produces civic space ratings for 196 countries. Each country's civic space is rated in one of five categories – open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed – based on a **methodology** that combines several sources of data on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.



Civic space updates from CIVICUS Monitor research partners contain qualitative, narrative information related to the situation for civil society in a country. This qualitative information is directed by a set of **guiding questions** and the resulting data is gathered from a variety of primary and secondary sources. In many cases, country-specific updates come directly from national civil society themselves. In countries where we do not have a research partner, the CIVICUS Monitor relies on a variety of other sources produced at the national, regional and international levels to arrive at country ratings. These civic space updates are then triangulated, verified and **tagged** by the CIVICUS team.

Together, the research partners posted 516 **civic space updates** from 12 November 2019 to 31 October 2020, which form the basis for the analysis presented in this report. For the time period assessed, these civic space updates cover 153 countries.

This report analyses trends and developments since our previous **report**, published in December 2019. As well as global-level trends, it analyses trends in five regions: Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).





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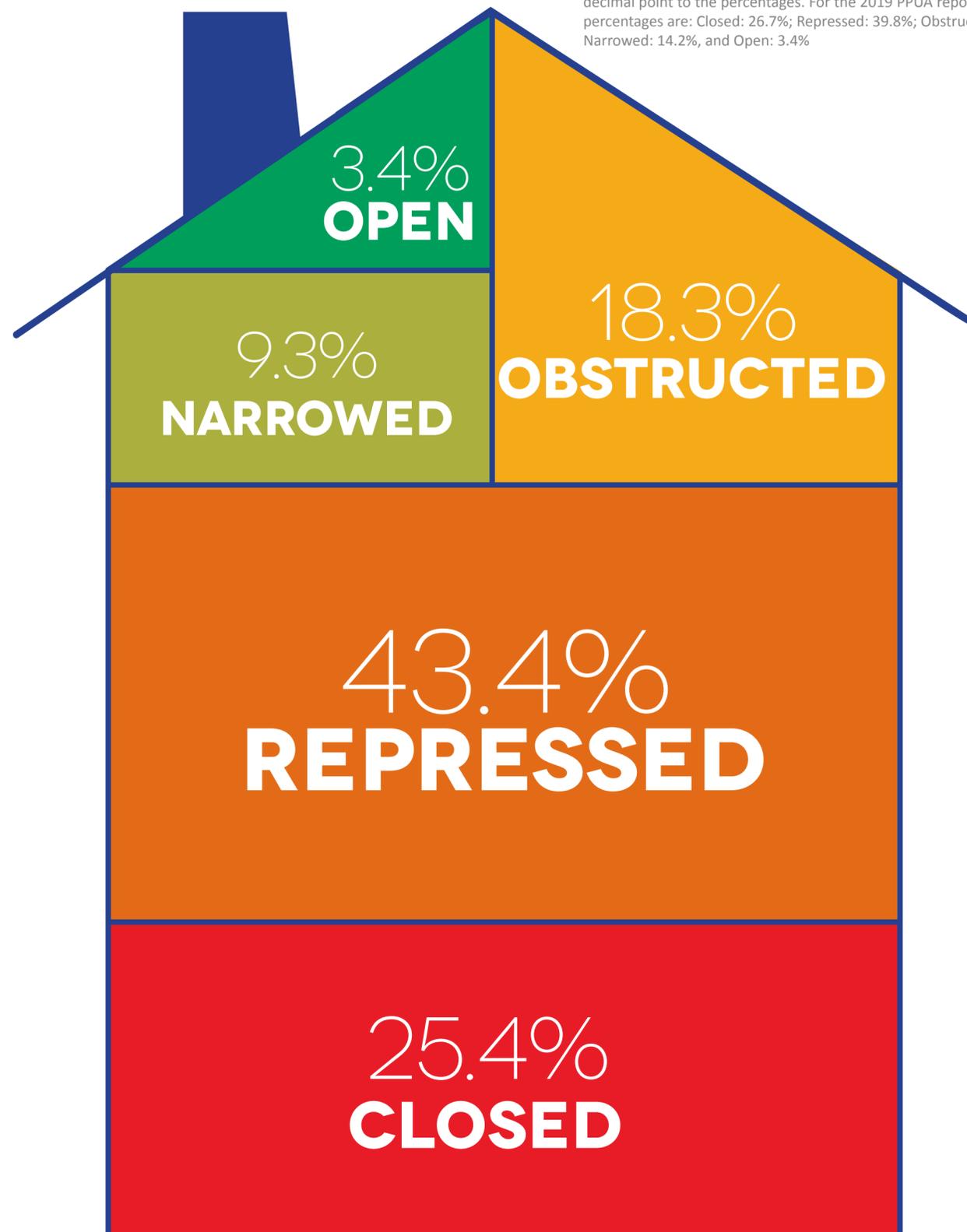
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WHERE DO PEOPLE LIVE?

BASED ON WORLD BANK POPULATION DATA 2019

For better accuracy and comparison over time, this year we added a decimal point to the percentages. For the 2019 PPUA report, the exact percentages are: Closed: 26.7%; Repressed: 39.8%; Obstructed: 15.8%, Narrowed: 14.2%, and Open: 3.4%



CIVIC SPACE ON A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Civic space conditions are declining year on year. In 2020, 43.4 per cent of people now live in countries rated as having repressed civic space while the percentage of people living in countries with obstructed civic space jumped from 15.8 per cent to 18.3 per cent.

While the number of people living in conditions of closed civic space has lessened, due in large part to some welcome but limited improvements in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, the number of people living in countries with serious restrictions has increased as now 87 per cent of the world's population lives in countries rated as closed, repressed or obstructed.

In 2020, only 12.7 per cent of people around the world live in countries with an open or narrowed civic space rating, a significant decline from the 17.6 per cent who did so in 2019.

The latest update of CIVICUS Monitor ratings in November 2020 indicates that civil society continues to work and operate in an increasingly hostile environment. Our data shows that there are 23 countries with closed civic space, 44 countries with repressed space and 47 with obstructed space, meaning that 114 countries are assessed as having serious civic space restrictions. In comparison, 40 countries are rated as having narrowed civic space and just 42 countries receive an open rating. Since our previous report, published in December 2019, the story is one of further regression: more countries have moved towards the obstructed and repressed categories and there are few where civic space conditions have improved.

Civic space ratings have changed for 13 countries since our December 2019 update: ratings have improved in only two, while in 11 they have worsened.

In the Americas, our latest analysis shows respect for civic space declining in countries that had previously prided themselves on their performance in upholding fundamental freedoms, or where there had been improvements in previous years. Costa Rica's



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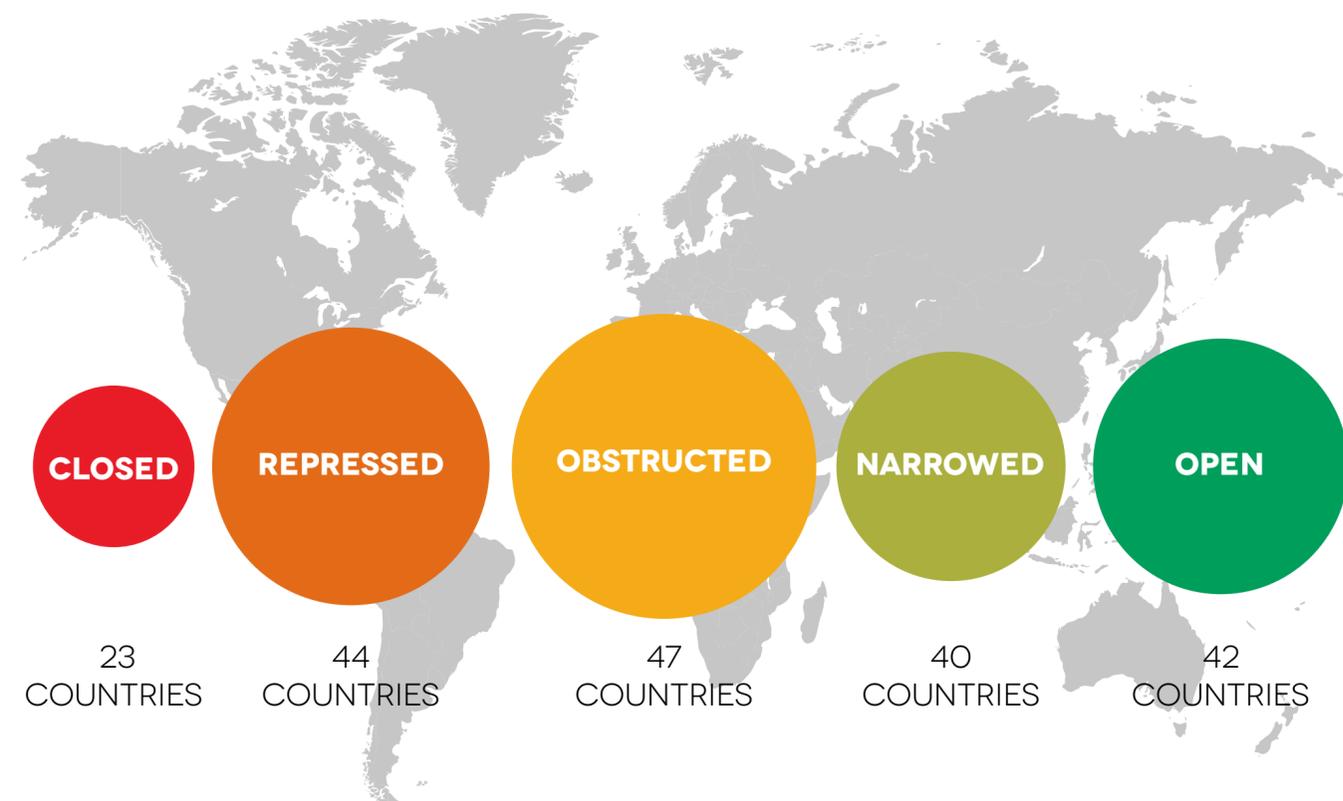


civic space rating goes from open to narrowed, while three countries in the narrowed category – Chile, Ecuador and the USA – are downgraded to obstructed.

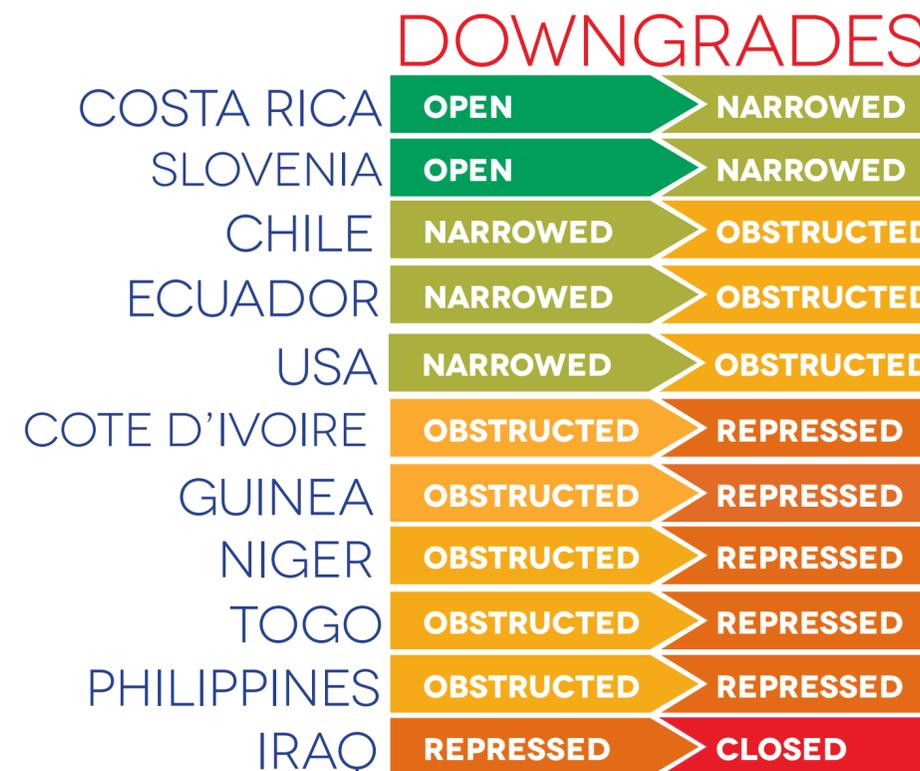
The decline in civic space conditions in Asia remains a cause of concern. The Philippines moves down from obstructed to repressed, due in particular to the vilification of activists and targeting of human rights defenders and journalists.

In Africa, and particularly in West Africa, civic space continues to decline, with four countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger and Togo – moving from obstructed to repressed. In the DRC, some positive steps have been taken since President Félix Tshisekedi took office in January 2019. Although much still needs to be done to break with the systematic human rights violations that characterised the previous administration, some positive steps move the DRC's civic space rating from closed to repressed. Sudan is also upgraded from the closed category to repressed, as the formation of the transitional government in 2019 and initial reform efforts have improved the civic space situation.

COUNTRIES PER RATING CATEGORY



COUNTRY RATING CHANGES



Europe is the region with the most open countries, but the situation still shows decline as Slovenia moves from an open to narrowed rating. In more positive news, following a change of government, which led to more improved relations with civil society, Austria's rating moved from narrowed to open in October 2020.

MENA, the region with the most countries in the closed category, adds one more to the list, with Iraq moving from repressed to closed as the country continues to experience an extensive crackdown on the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression in reaction to the ongoing popular protest movement.



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Hong Kong | Photo by Roy Liu/Bloomberg via Getty Images

COVID-19: A PRETEXT FOR REPRESSION

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization **declared** COVID-19 to be a pandemic. Governments across the world began taking extraordinary measures and enacting emergency legislation, with the stated aim of protecting people's health and lives. While limitation on certain rights are allowed by international law in response to health emergencies, international law is clear that those limitations must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory. However, our research suggests that repressive

governments used the pandemic as an opportunity to introduce or implement additional restrictions on civic freedoms.

2019 had been a year of protests as growing inequality, dire economic conditions and the urgent need to demand fundamental rights led people across the world to the streets. In 2020, people continued to **mobilise**, using creative and alternative forms of protest, including online and masked and distanced protests. Despite the pandemic, urgent demands for rights brought people onto the streets to demand political and structural change, including in **Chile**, **Hong Kong** and **Nigeria**. In the **USA**, massive protests to demand racial justice and police accountability **erupted** across the country following the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by a Minneapolis police officer;



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many others around the world joined their cause and drew attention to their own issues of racial injustice. In **Belarus** and **Kyrgyzstan** people joined protests for free and transparent elections after their democratic freedoms were denied. As the pandemic further exacerbated already dire economic conditions in many countries, people raised their voices to demand food, basic services and better working conditions in many countries, including **Venezuela** and **Zimbabwe**.

Rather than addressing the root causes of people's discontent, governments often focused on curtailing rights and meting out repression. According to the 516 CIVICUS Monitor updates over the period covered by this report, the fundamental right to peaceful assembly continues to be under attack. Our data shows that the detention of protesters and the excessive use of force against them are the most common tactics being used by governing authorities to restrict the right to peaceful assembly. This is not a new trend; it was consistently seen during 2019, but what changed in 2020 was that multiple governments used the pandemic as an excuse to restrict democratic activities and challenge civic freedoms.

It was ironic, given the pandemic, that the main tactic governments used to discourage and punish people who took to the streets was detention, meaning that they often took people from open public spaces and locked them in closed and frequently overcrowded prisons, conditions that could only exacerbate the spread of the virus. International mechanisms have **consistently advised** that any penalties applied to people who challenge restrictions should not contribute to the further spread of infections. The use of detention as a widespread tactic calls into question whether governments were always genuinely motivated by a need to ensure public health or if instead COVID-19 was used as a pretence to crack down on protests.

The protests triggered by the killing of George Floyd in the USA were met with excessive force by militarised police and security forces. The authorities, including President Donald Trump, **fuelled** the violence by encouraging law enforcement officers to respond forcefully. In a particularly notorious case, the Attorney General **ordered** the use of teargas against peaceful protesters with the sole purpose of allowing the President to take a picture near a local church. The use of teargas has led health experts to note that these chemicals **compromise** people's health at a time when the world is dealing with a respiratory virus.

In France, in May 2020, the government **enacted a ban** on peaceful assembly as a result of sanitary emergency measures to tackle the pandemic. While the Council of State limited the ban to protests of over 5,000 people a month later, the authorities used teargas to disperse protests. Even before the pandemic had been declared, excessive force was **used** by the authorities against feminist protesters who were teargassed and beaten by police.

In Thailand, since the beginning of 2020, thousands of people **have marched** to demand the dissolution of Thailand's military-backed government, the drafting of a new constitution and an end to the harassment of activists and government critics. The authorities responded by harassing and detaining protesters, physically blocking access to protest sites, shutting down transportation and in some instances dispersing protests with excessive force.

In Guinea, **protests** and activism against the replacement of the 2010 Constitution were met with excessive use of force. Dozens of protesters were killed. There were also extensive arbitrary arrests and prosecution of human rights defenders and protesters.

Repression of protests took place regardless of the underlying level of freedom experienced by civil society. The CIVICUS Monitor documented the detention of protesters and the use of excessive force to disperse and disrupt protests in countries with closed or repressed ratings, such as **Azerbaijan**, **Belarus**, **Djibouti** and **Uganda**, but also in countries where people typically have been able to exercise their freedoms without major hindrance, such as **Belgium** and **Sweden**. The detention of protesters was one of the main tactics used in countries classed as having open civic space.



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AN INFORMATION BLOCKADE

“Censorship can kill, by design or by negligence,” stated the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Opinion and Expression in her [latest report](#), emphasising the importance of the free flow of information for the protection of life and health.



Turkey | Photo by Chris McGrath/ Getty Images

However, the expression of dissent, work to hold decision-makers accountable and the ability to share and disseminate information freely continue to be the enemy of many governments: censorship features prominently in the 516 civic space reports published in this period. This tactic is commonly associated with the harassment and intimidation of activists and attacks on journalists, which also rank among the top violations documented. This trend confirms the worrying developments [reported](#) last year, when censorship flourished as the main tactic used by governments to stifle dissent.

Some governments used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to silence critical voices. The authorities in China, which for decades have targeted the freedom of expression, continued their path of repression, censoring numerous articles and social media posts about the pandemic, including those posted by families of infected people seeking help. In Turkey, where free speech was under siege before the pandemic, the government [inspected](#) over 6,000 social media accounts for COVID-19-related posts, detained hundreds of people and passed a restrictive law to censor social media. In Vanuatu, it [was announced](#) that it would be illegal for media outlets to publish any articles on COVID-19 without first receiving authorisation by the authorities. In Tanzania, multiple media outlets and journalists [faced](#) a backlash for reporting information challenging the official narrative on COVID-19, which consistently downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic.

Even before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, countries were passing legislation to criminalise speech under the guise of preventing the dissemination of ‘fake news’. In Vietnam, the government [announced](#) it had requested Facebook to ‘pre-censor’ online content and remove advertisements “that spread fake news related to political issues upon request from the government.” Similarly, in Singapore, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act is increasingly being [used to target](#) the opposition and critics.

Another common tactic the authorities use to prevent the dissemination of critical information is internet shutdowns or the blocking of access to social media, especially during elections or mass protests. In 2020 this tactic was used in [Bangladesh](#), [Chad](#), [Ethiopia](#), [India](#) and [Palestine](#), among other countries.



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TOP TEN VIOLATIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



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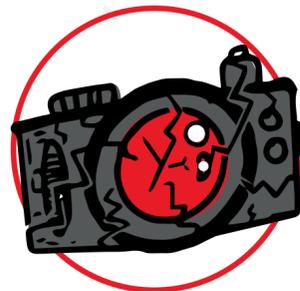
2. HARASSMENT



3. CENSORSHIP



4. INTIMIDATION



5. ATTACK ON JOURNALIST



6. PROTEST DISRUPTION



7. RESTRICTIVE LAW



8. JOURNALIST DETAINED



9. EXCESSIVE FORCE



10. HRD DETAINED



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REGIONAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Across the five regions covered by our analysis, we see common trends, but also some regional differences. For instance, in the Americas, intimidation and harassment are the most commonly reported violations. In Asia and the Pacific, the most common documented tactic is restrictive legislation. Detention of protesters tops the list in Europe and Central Asia. In MENA, the most frequently reported trend is censorship. In Africa, the detention of journalists is the most common civic space violation.



Philippines | Photo by Ezra Acayan/Getty Images



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GROUPS MOST COMMONLY INVOLVED IN CIVIC SPACE INCIDENTS

1. WOMEN



2. LABOUR RIGHTS



3. YOUTH



4. LGBTQI+



5. ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS



AN UNEVEN CRISIS

Our monitoring clearly shows that those leading protests on the ground are likely to bear the brunt of the assault on fundamental freedoms. Investigative journalists and critical human rights defenders are also commonly the targets of repression.

Groups advocating for women's rights and women human rights defenders continue to be frequently mentioned in CIVICUS Monitor reports, featuring in 25 per cent of updates. This includes incidents where women's rights are the major focus of protests, such as in [Guatemala](#), [Mexico](#), [Namibia](#) and [Poland](#), and those where women have been the target of violations, such as in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Iran](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Tunisia](#).

This holds true for all regions except Europe and Central Asia, where labour rights groups are referenced to the same extent as women, due to many protests against the economic impacts of COVID-19. LGBTQI+ groups also feature prominently. Globally, other groups regularly mentioned include labour rights groups and young people.



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Germany | Photo by Maja Hitij/Getty Images

BRIGHT SPOTS

Our monitoring also describes **improvements** in civic space conditions. The CIVICUS Monitor has documented many instances where civic space is opening up and states are making progress on improving their respect for fundamental freedoms.

Massive protests were often the key factor that led to positive changes. In Chile, mass protests forced the government to hold a referendum to change the constitution. In the USA, some states pledged to dismantle or undertake structural reform of their police forces. In Malawi, months of **protests** led to a historic rerun of the presidential elections and a transition of power.

The CIVICUS Monitor has also documented instances of court rulings that defended or expanded civic space. For example, on 27 March 2020, Uganda's Constitutional Court **ruled** that Section 8 of the 2013 Public Order Management Act was illegal and unconstitutional. Section 8 had given the police excessive powers to prohibit political gatherings and protests. In June 2020, the courts in Indonesia **ruled** that the government's decision to impose an internet blackout around protests in the West Papua region in 2019 violated the law. Further, the CIVICUS Monitor documented 61 instances where human rights defenders were released or acquitted after being detained or put on trial.



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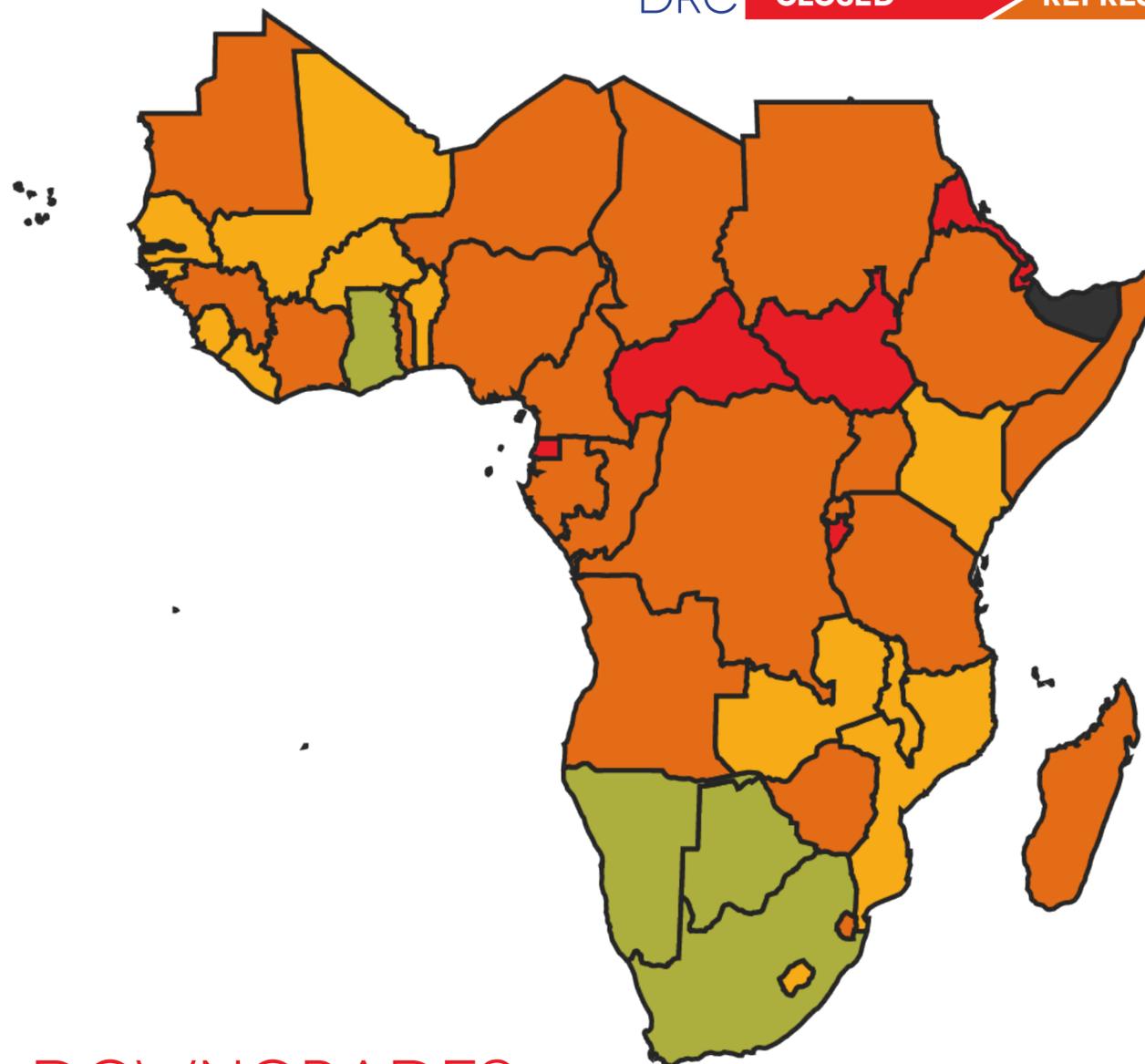
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AFRICA

UPGRADES

SUDAN	CLOSED	REPRESSED
DRC	CLOSED	REPRESSED



DOWNGRADES

COTE D'IVOIRE	OBSTRUCTED	REPRESSED
GUINEA	OBSTRUCTED	REPRESSED
NIGER	OBSTRUCTED	REPRESSED
TOGO	OBSTRUCTED	REPRESSED

RATINGS OVERVIEW

Of Africa's 49 countries, six are rated as closed, 21 as repressed and 14 as obstructed. Civic space is open in the island states of Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe and narrowed in six countries. Since the previous update, civic space ratings have deteriorated in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger and Togo and improved in the DRC and Sudan.

Civic space in Central Africa remains affected by armed conflict, weak rule of law, impunity and entrenched authoritarian governments. In **Cameroon**, where conflict in the Anglophone regions continues unabated with serious human rights abuses perpetrated both by armed separatist groups and the military, civic freedoms remain **severely restricted**. 2020 saw for example the ordering of closure of bank accounts of a COVID-19 solidarity fund initiative set up by opposition leader Maurice Kamto, the arrest of some of its volunteers who were handing out masks and sanitisers and accusations by the Minister of Territorial Administration that some CSOs are 'destabilising the country'. An improved rating in the **DRC** reflects initial steps under the administration of President Tshisekedi to open democratic space, although much more must be done to fulfil the president's **promises** made in his inauguration speech in January 2019 to respect the fundamental freedom of people and media freedom.

As the decline in ratings for Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger and Togo indicates, civic space continues to decline in West Africa, where several countries held disputed elections. Pro-democracy and anti-corruption groups and activists have increasingly been targeted and protests have been met with excessive force. In Benin, the 2018 Digital Code has increasingly been **used** against people expressing critical views. Following mass anti-government protests in June and July 2020, in which at least 11 protesters were **killed**, Mali's military toppled the government in a coup. A transitional government, appointed in October 2020, will rule for 18 months until elections take place in 2022. Attacks and threats against journalists have become commonplace in **Ghana**, **Liberia**, **Nigeria** and **Sierra Leone**.

In Southern Africa, protests – on issues of labour rights, service delivery and gender-based violence – were dispersed by force, including in **Lesotho**, **Namibia** and **South Africa**. In **Eswatini** (Swaziland) and **Zambia**, the freedom of expression continues to face



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severe constraints, with the authorities targeting media outlets with suspension and their employees with arrest. Protesters advocating for good governance and democracy in Zambia were **intimidated** by the authorities, while those in Eswatini were **harassed** with house raids. In Zimbabwe, amid a declining economy and regular workers' strikes and boycotts, the government has **continued** to restrict the freedoms of association and peaceful assembly.

In the East and Horn of Africa, the authorities in **Tanzania** continued to crack down on civic space ahead of the October 2020 elections, with harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrests and judicial prosecution of political opposition, human rights defenders and journalists. Media coverage on COVID-19 has been silenced and it has become increasingly difficult for human rights organisations to operate. Positive political changes in **Ethiopia** in 2018 have been undermined by a renewed clampdown on independent media and opposition and a violent response to protests amid worsening intercommunal and ethnic tensions. The improvement of **Sudan's** civic space rating reflects an opening up of space for activists and journalists following the formation of a transitional government and initial reforms, although much work, including the repeal of restrictive laws, still needs to be done.

In a negative development, individuals and CSOs in three countries will no longer be allowed to appeal directly to the African Court on Human and People's Rights: **Tanzania** withdrew this vital accountability route in December 2019, followed by **Benin** and **Côte d'Ivoire** in April 2020.

CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS

In Africa, the most common civic space violations registered by the CIVICUS Monitor in the reporting period were the detention of journalists, followed by protest disruption, censorship, intimidation and the detention of protesters.

TOP 5 VIOLATIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS FOR AFRICA REGION



1. JOURNALIST DETAINED



2. PROTEST DISRUPTION



3. CENSORSHIP



4. INTIMIDATION



5. PROTESTER(S) DETAINED

Based on 99 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020."



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Zimbabwe | Photo by Aaron Ufumeli/EPA

DETENTION OF JOURNALISTS

The detention of journalists has become more prominent in Africa, mentioned in almost half of CIVICUS Monitor updates during this period, in 28 different countries.

In **Somalia** and **South Sudan**, journalists are frequently subject to arbitrary arrests for reports that are critical of authorities. In Cameroon, one of the top jailers of journalists on the continent, the military admitted after 10 months in June 2020 that journalist Samuel Abuwe Ajieka, also known as Samuel Wazizi, had **died** on 17 August 2019, shortly after his arrest. In Burundi, four journalists of the independent newspaper Iwacu – Egide Harerimana, Christine Kamikazi, T rence Mpozenzi and Agn s Ndirubusa – were **convicted** in January 2020 on charges of attempting to threaten to destabilise the internal security of the state, and sentenced to two and a half years in prison, along with a fine. The four were **arrested** in October 2019 while reporting on unrest that erupted after armed people crossed into Burundi from the DRC and clashed with another armed group.

Despite President Tshisekedi’s **promise** to turn the media into a ‘real fourth estate’, several journalists were **detained** for criminal defamation or insulting the authorities. Prior to the decriminalisation of libel and sedition in Sierra Leone in July 2020, Sylvia Blyden, publisher of the Awareness Times newspaper, was **charged** on 22 May 2020 with sedition, defamation and perversion of justice for a Facebook post, spending 50 days in prison before being released on bail.

Journalists have also been detained while covering protests or reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption. In Benin, Ignace Sossou, investigative reporter and editor for the online news outlet Benin Web TV, was **sentenced** on 24 December 2020 to 18 months in prison, later **reduced**, for ‘harassment by means of electronic communication’ after having quoted the public prosecutor on Twitter. In Zimbabwe, journalist Hopewell Chin’ono was **arrested** on 20 July 2020 and charged with incitement to participate in public violence for having exposed corruption in the procurement of COVID-19 medical supplies. In Ethiopia, journalist Belay Menaye, news anchor Mulugeta Anberbir and camera operator Misganaw Kefelgn were **arrested** in August 2020 and rearrested in September 2020 on accusations of incitement to violence for their **reporting on** the protests and unrest that followed the killing of Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa on 29 June 2020. In Djibouti in June and July 2020, several journalists were **arrested** while covering protests, with others being forced into hiding, following the arrest of a military officer who released a video alleging corruption among high-level military officers and clan-based discrimination within the military. At least six journalists were **detained** while covering protests, organised to demand the holding of municipal elections and improved living conditions, on 24 October 2020 in Angola. Over 100 people were detained that day, while police officers used excessive force against protesters.

Foreign correspondents have also been targeted. In Guinea, Thomas Dietrich, Le M dia’s foreign correspondent, was assaulted and threatened by security forces after they noticed him filming them beating a protester. He was briefly **detained** and then deported to France with his accreditation withdrawn.

Journalists in several countries were also detained and arrested for reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic or for violating lockdown regulations, including in **Chad**, **C te d’Ivoire**, **Ghana**, **Niger**, **Nigeria**, **Rwanda** and **Somalia**.



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PROTEST DISRUPTION

Protest disruption was mentioned in 40 CIVICUS Monitor reports, covering 21 countries. The detention of protesters was reported in 33.3 per cent of updates, and the excessive use of force in 30.3 per cent. Protesters were killed during protests in the past year in several countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria and Mali.

Anti-corruption protests were dispersed by police in Niger in March 2020. Eight civil society leaders were arrested in relation to the protest. In Djibouti, where protests are rare due to the repressive environment, the protests that erupted in June and July 2020 were met with excessive police force. In Liberia, a protest against the dire state of the economy and government mismanagement of public funds on 6 January 2020 was dispersed by police officers using teargas and water cannon, injuring dozens of people. Following disputed legislative elections, mass anti-government protests broke out in Mali in June and July 2020. At least 11 protesters were killed in protests organised by the Mouvement du 5 juin – Rassemblement pour le Mali (5 June Movement - Rally for Mali) coalition between 10 and 12 July 2020. Underlying grievances of protesters included the failure of the government to respond to insecurity and stop violence, corruption and dire economic conditions. Zimbabwe's police dispersed a protest on 31 July 2020 against government corruption and the country's economic decline, arresting at least 20 protesters.

Service delivery, labour rights and student protests were also broken up in several countries. In Senegal, nine activists of the Noo Lank (We Refuse) movement were arrested during a November 2019 protest against an increase in electricity prices. These arrests prompted fresh civil society protests in December 2019 and January 2020, which were mostly banned by the local authorities, and some of them were dispersed. One person was killed and dozens injured in Kenya during protests in the Kasarani district of Nairobi against the poor state of the main road. In Benin, one student was killed on 24 March 2020 in clashes with police officers at the University of Abomey-Calavi. Students protested after three students were arrested for protest actions to demand the suspension of classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Eswatini, when thousands of civil servants gathered on 25 September 2020 to demand higher salaries, police used stun grenades, water cannon and teargas to disperse protesters. In Mali, a protest by teachers' unions to demand higher wages in March 2020 was dispersed.

Protests against increasing insecurity took place and were dispersed in Burkina Faso. In eastern DRC, at least 10 protesters were killed in protests against violence against civilians by rebel militia, denouncing the failure of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), the UN peacekeeping mission, to protect civilians.

In the Gambia, protests organised in January 2020 by the Three Years Jotna (three years enough) movement to demand that President Adama Barrow step down after a transitional three-year period, as he promised in his election campaign, were met with force. At least 137 protesters were arrested, dozens were injured, two radio stations were suspended and the movement banned. In Nigeria, the #EndSARS youth-led protests against police brutality across the country were met with excessive violence, with at least 12 people killed at the Lekki toll gate in Lagos on 20 October 2020.

In Liberia, Namibia and South Africa, protests against gender-based violence, including high rates of sexual violence and femicide, were dispersed and disrupted by police officers. Ghanaian police dispersed a Black Lives Matter protest in Accra and detained and charged the organiser, Ernesto Yeboah of the Economic Freedom League.



Côte d'Ivoire | Photo by Luc Gnago/REUTERS



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Protests in relation to COVID-19, such as protests against curfews, the closure of markets, delays in the delivery of food parcels during lockdowns and the placement of COVID-19 testing centres, took place in several countries, including **Burkina Faso**, **Côte d'Ivoire**, **Guinea**, **Senegal**, **South Africa** and **Uganda**. Some of those protests were dispersed or turned violent.

CENSORSHIP

As in previous years, censorship was reported as a major violation in the Africa region, mentioned in 39 updates in 22 countries.

The shutdown of internet access or access to social media has become a widespread tactic used by the authorities to quell protests, particularly ahead of and during elections. Known digital rights violator Chad again **blocked** access to social media in July 2020 as a 'temporary measure' to prevent 'the spread of messages of incitement to hatred and division' after a video was shared of an altercation between a military officer and a group of mechanics, one of whom was shot dead. Another regular violator, Ethiopia, **shut down** the internet, affecting most parts of the country, from 29 June to 16 July 2020 as protests erupted over the killing of Hachalu Hundessa. In Mali, access to social media was **partially disrupted** during the mass anti-government protests that started on 10 July 2020. In Somalia, internet connectivity **was cut** following the impeachment of Somalia's Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire after a vote of no confidence. Election-related shutdowns or disruptions occurred in **Burundi** and **Guinea**.

National media regulators have, as in previous years, suspended media outlets and journalists for their reporting. Tanzania's Communication Regulatory Authority continued to **suspend** and fine media outlets; the Mwananchi daily newspaper's online content licence was suspended, including for its COVID-19 coverage. The national media regulator in Gabon **ordered**, in January 2020, the confiscation of 7,000 copies of the Moutouki weekly over an article claiming that President Ali Bongo's son, Nouredin Bongo Valentin, was accused by civil society groups of corruption, misuse of public funds and money laundering. In Rwanda, censorship of media and self-censorship **remain** commonplace with pro-government views dominating domestic media and the increasing blocking of media sites from abroad. In Somaliland, on 18 November 2019

the Ministry of Information **suspended** Horn Cable TV while security agents detained its chief editor, Abdiqaadir Saleban Aseyr. In Togo, three media outlets – L'Alternative, Fraternité and Liberté – were **suspended** by the media regulator in March and April 2020; Fraternité was suspended for criticising the suspension of the other two outlets. In June 2020, provincial authorities in Mongala province, DRC, **ordered** the dismissal of six journalists and the suspension of several others, in addition to the suspension of several programmes, 'until further notice'.

Some newly adopted laws or draft laws curb the freedom of expression or attempt to increase censorship or self-censorship. Civil society in Nigeria has been **campaigning and mobilising** against the adoption of the 2019 Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation and Other Related Offences Bill and the Hate Speech Bill. The first



Ethiopia | Photo by Getty Images



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Based on 99 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020. Nigeria | Photo by Reuters

bill would make statements on social media that may ‘diminish public confidence’ in the government or compromise national security punishable by a three-year prison sentence and fine and would allow the authorities to order a shutdown of internet access and social media. A new amendment to Somalia’s Media Law **further restricts** the freedom of expression: confidentiality of sources is not protected and journalists are required to accredit and register on a government database. The law allows for fines for journalists, with no maximum limit on the size of the fine.

Censorship also occurred in the form of the intimidation and silencing of critics, including academics. In South Sudan, Taban Lo Liyong, a renowned University of Juba academic, was **suspended** over an opinion piece criticising the government. University students and staff in South Sudan require permission from the National Security Service (NSS) for planned activities and undercover NSS agents operate on campuses. In **Tanzania** and **Uganda**, comedians and musicians came under fire for criticising politicians and governance structures. In Niger, at least three people, including civil society personnel, were **arrested and charged** under the 2019 Law on Cybercrime for criticising the government’s COVID-19 response, including through private messages on WhatsApp.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

In Gabon, in June 2020, the National Assembly **adopted** an amendment to the Penal Code, decriminalising same-sex relations, a year after these were criminalised, potentially making safer the conditions for organisations defending LGBTQI+ rights. Sierra Leone’s parliament **repealed** Part Five of the 1965 Public Order Act, which criminalised sedition and libel, on 23 July 2020. **The Gambia** and **Namibia** moved closer to having access to information laws, as draft laws were tabled in both countries for consideration by the National Assembly in June 2020. After sustained efforts by media freedom organisations who petitioned the Ombudsperson, Mozambique **revoked** Executive Decree 40/2018 in May 2020, which **set** exorbitant fees for the registration, licensing and renewal of licences for media outlets and high fees for the accreditation of local and foreign journalists.



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CASE STUDIES

HOPE IN MALAWI AFTER SUSTAINED PROTESTS

Mass protests **broke out** against the results of Malawi's presidential, legislative and local elections, held on 21 May 2019. Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) claimed to have won, but the elections were disputed and marred by allegations of fraud. Protests, initially calling for the resignation of the Malawi Electoral Commission but later encompassing wider grievances, were sustained. The authorities, and particularly police officers, responded to the protests with violence, including sexual violence against women, and human rights defenders and protest leaders were threatened. After the Constitutional Court **nullified** the election results in March 2020, the authorities further cracked down on activists and dissenting voices as fresh elections approached. Human rights defenders and protest leaders Timothy Mtambo, Reverend McDonald Sembereka and Gift Trapence were arrested in March 2020, while members of the judiciary were persecuted. Despite these challenges, the rerun of the elections on 27 June 2020 saw a change in power as opposition leader Lazarus Chakwera won a majority of votes.

COUNTRIES OF CONCERN: CIVIC FREEDOMS IN THE BALANCE IN WEST AFRICA

The downgrading of four West Africa countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger and Togo – just a year after Nigeria's rating was **changed** to repressed and two years after Senegal's rating was **downgraded** to obstructed, indicates a downward trend in the region. In Côte d'Ivoire, protests and violence **broke out** in August 2020 following

President Alassane Ouattara's announcement that he would run for a third term in the 31 October 2020 election. Dozens were killed in unrest and protests that followed the announcement. The authorities in Côte d'Ivoire have in recent years adopted and **used** repressive provisions limiting the freedom of expression, targeted at activists, including online activists, and journalists. In Guinea, a country that featured on the CIVICUS Monitor's Watch List of countries where there is a serious and rapid decline in respect for civic space, mass protests **mobilised** from October 2019 against President Alpha Condé's decision to change the constitution to allow him to run for a third term in October 2020. Protesters were met with excessive violence, including live ammunition, with security forces **killing** dozens of people and **arresting** many more. Pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders were targeted and subjected to arbitrary arrests, judicial harassment and prosecution.

Civil society protests are almost systematically **banned** in Niger, which was placed on the CIVICUS Monitor Watch List in June 2020. 2020 was marked by the arbitrary arrest of several civil society leaders, journalists and bloggers. Eight civil society leaders were **arrested and prosecuted** following an anti-corruption protest in response to the exposure in March 2020 of corruption within the Ministry of Defence in the procurement of military material. The protest was banned and dispersed by security forces. Restrictive legislation such as the 2019 Law on Cybercrime is also being **used** against activists and journalists.

Togo's civic space rating has been backsliding since the **crackdown** on anti-government opposition protests against the continued control of power by the Gnassingbé family and to demand a return to a two-term limit for presidents. Civic space violations since 2017 include the killing of protesters, **arrest and prosecution** of human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists, **banning** of civil society and opposition protests, **suspension** of media outlets, judicial harassment of journalists, regular disruption of and shutting down of **access** to the internet and social media, **adoption** of restrictive legislation such as the 2018 Cybersecurity Law and the 2019 modification of the law on conditions and exercise of peaceful meetings and protest. For presidential **elections** held in February 2020 the accreditation of a civil society group to observe the elections was revoked, while access to social media was blocked on two networks.



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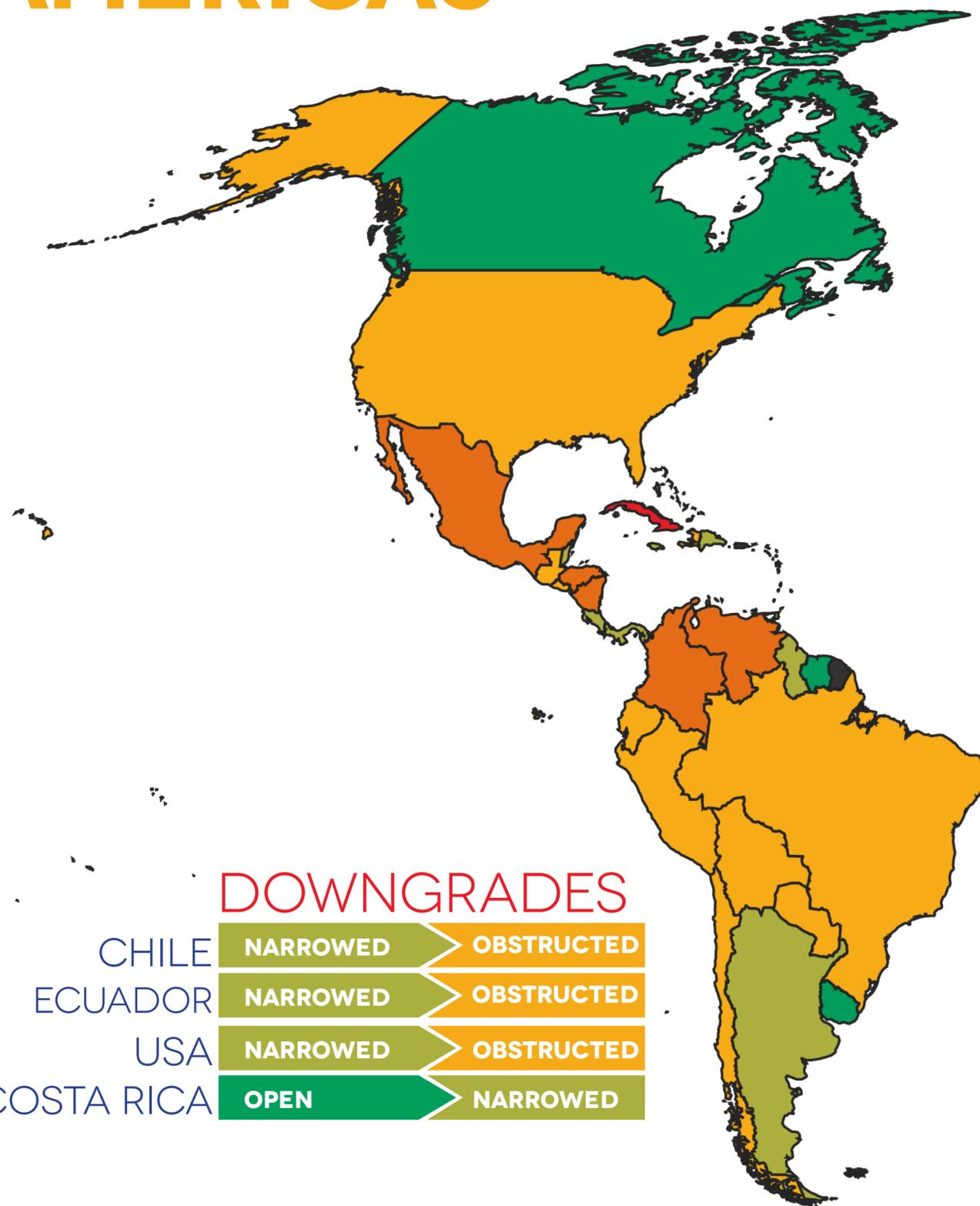
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RATINGS OVERVIEW

The year tested civil society in the Americas more fiercely than any in recent times. At the end of 2019, the region shook with the echoes of protesters flooding the streets. In Chile, which bewildered the world with a ferocious crackdown on demonstrators, there was a sense of growing momentum despite government repression. But by March 2020, movement restrictions and bans on public gatherings started to be implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On first sight, the overall picture looks bleak in the region, given significant declines in four countries where civic freedoms had previously been well respected, with Costa Rica’s rating moving from open to narrowed, and three countries – Chile, Ecuador and the USA – declining from narrowed to obstructed. The CIVICUS Monitor now rates civic space as open in only 10 of the 35 countries of the Americas, as narrowed in nine and as obstructed in another 10 countries. Civic space remains repressed in five countries of the region and closed in one, Cuba.

These ratings changes partly reflect the scale of repression as mass protest movements erupted. In the USA, militarised law enforcement officers **detained** thousands, fired teargas and projectiles **indiscriminately** and consistently **attacked** journalists during protests against racism and police brutality. The country’s downgrade also indicates a longer process of **sustained deterioration** in the freedom of expression and the chipping away at civil liberties by, for instance, the introduction of time and place **restrictions** to criminalise protests.

In **Chile** and **Ecuador**, the authorities failed to reckon with widespread violations committed by law enforcement officers during protests, with the government of Ecuador rejecting a report documenting hundreds of testimonies of violence experienced by protesters. Instead, Ecuador’s government has sought to **pass legislation** further enabling excessive force. Additionally, Ecuador’s **steps forward** in media freedom proved fragile, with stigmatisation and attacks on journalists increasing once again. Ecuadorian media freedom advocates **documented** that freedom of expression violations more than doubled in 2019 compared to 2018. In Chile, police continued to **repress** protests even as they became sporadic during the pandemic and tried to **criminalise** feminist activists. In the La Araucania region, Indigenous Mapuche peoples also reported increasing oppression against their communities.



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Indigenous rights defenders in Costa Rica also **faced** a surge in attacks, with a human rights defender **killed** and several others violently assaulted. Dozens of protesters were **detained** after protests against proposed new tax measures began in September, and the authorities have sought to persecute protest leaders. Early in 2020, Costa Rica also **enacted regulation** limiting strikes, approving a proposal introduced to curb demonstrations after mass mobilisations took place in 2018.

Yet even where a decline has taken place, civil society has reasserted itself. When governments attempted to enact overly broad legislation with the pandemic as a pretence, as in **Bolivia** and **Honduras**, civil society successfully **pushed back** against legislative abuses. In Chile, millions of people voted to launch a convention to draft a new, more democratic constitution. The period covered in this report has therefore been one of a constant battle for civic space in the Americas.

“THEY ARE KILLING US”: DEFENDERS LIVES AT RISK

As Colombia’s government **declared** a sanitary emergency and established a nationwide quarantine, human rights defenders found themselves at increased risk. Common security strategies, such as varying travel routes, became impossible, making social leaders and journalists more vulnerable. Meanwhile, territorial disputes between armed groups continued while the government stalled on the implementation of Colombia’s peace process. Rising **violence** has claimed the lives of dozens of human rights defenders.

While the Colombian situation is arguably the most extreme, the country is far from an isolated case. The CIVICUS Monitor documented cases of the **killing** of human rights defenders in 11 Latin American countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru. Taking a global perspective, the regional violence is even more shocking: the Americas accounted for over 60 per cent of all reports of killings of human rights defenders documented by the CIVICUS Monitor during the reporting period.

Indigenous leaders and land and environmental defenders continue to be particularly at risk in the Americas. In Honduras, a young environmental defender **was killed**

shortly after telling national protection authorities that he feared for his life. Garífuna communities in Honduras have repeatedly denounced the systematic killings of their leaders, which **continued** in 2020. Time and again, across the region in **Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua** and **Peru**, Indigenous leaders were killed after speaking up about threats to themselves and their communities.

Persistent impunity for these crimes, with those suspected of commissioning killings left untouched even in relatively high-profile cases such as that of the assassination of **Berta Cáceres**, continues to embolden violence against human rights defenders in the region.



Chile | Photo by Cristobal Olivares/Bloomberg



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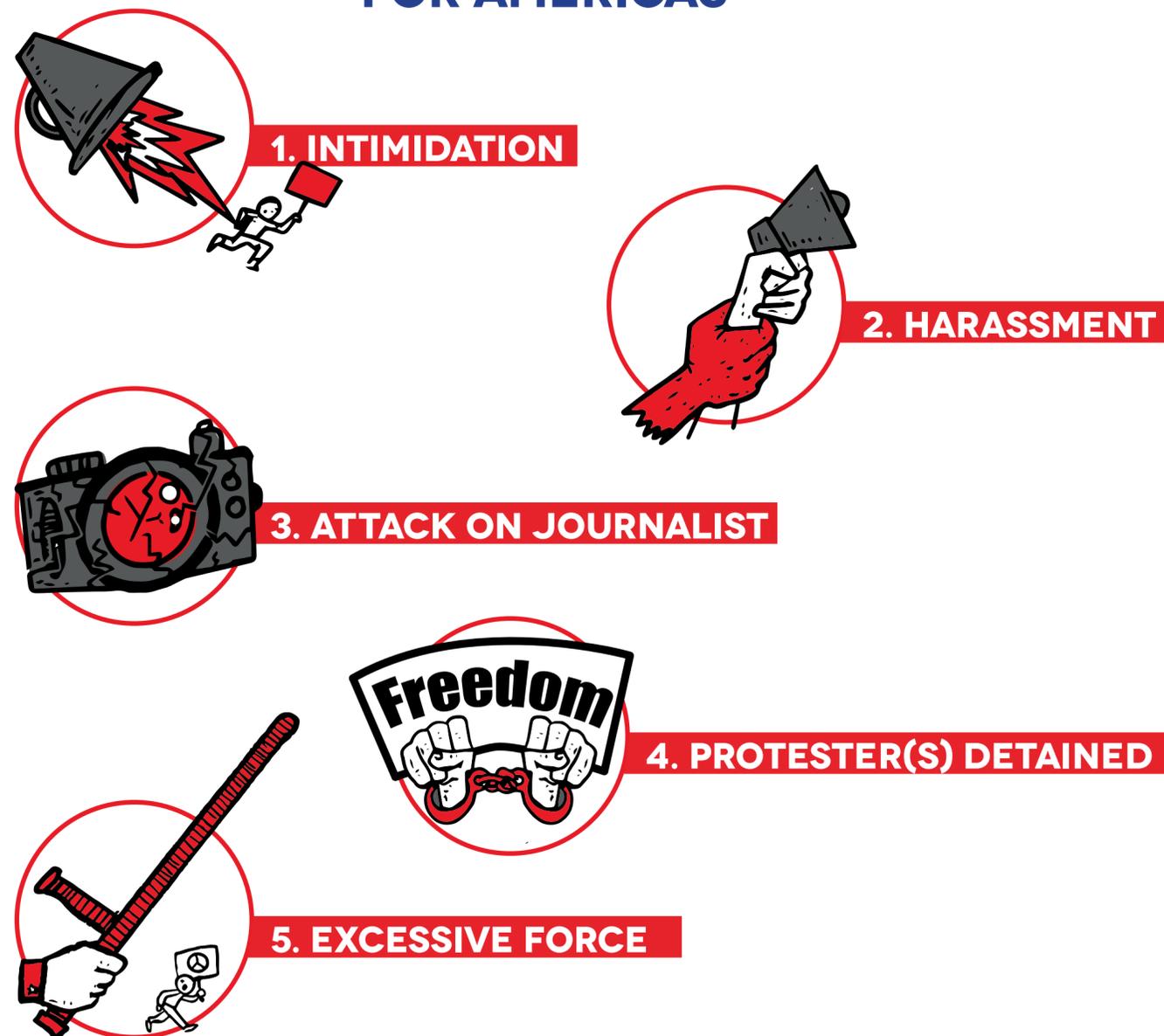
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CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS

In the Americas, the civic space violations most frequently documented by the CIVICUS Monitor in this period were intimidation, harassment, attacks on journalists, detention of protesters and the excessive use of force against protests.

TOP 5 VIOLATIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS FOR AMERICAS



Based on 109 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020.

INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT

Intimidation tactics use fear to deter human rights defenders and journalists from continuing their work. Harassment has the same strategy and goal but is characterised by the repeated targeting of a person. They often go hand in hand, encompassing a wide range of tactics such as threats, smear campaigns and recurrent police summonses. Between November 2019 and October 2020, intimidation and harassment took place in at least 22 of the 35 countries of the Americas.

These violations were particularly prevalent in Honduras and Nicaragua. Activists and government supporters were **besieged** in their homes by hostile civilian groups and police officers in Nicaragua. Critical journalists **faced** smear campaigns and even Nicaraguan journalists in exile experienced terrorisation through **threats** to family members who remained in the country. In Honduras, the CIVICUS Monitor **recorded** several cases of online and offline defamation campaigns and death threats against **journalists** and **human rights defenders**. In both countries, as well as in **Brazil**, **El Salvador** and **Guatemala**, CSOs highlighted a pattern of women human rights defenders and journalists being targeted by misogynistic smear campaigns in retaliation for their work.

Meanwhile in Cuba, new internet regulations were **instrumentalised** to intimidate dissidents and further curtail the freedom of expression. At least 30 people **reported** receiving police summonses from Cuban authorities, being subjected to interrogations and threatened with fines or detention if they did not stop their work. In Argentina, journalists **reported** facing stigmatisation by the new government just as investigations exposed the former government's extensive surveillance of critical voices, highlighting a lack of respect for media freedom that goes deeper than individual government administrations.



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ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

Assaults on communicators and media outlets were documented in 15 countries in the Americas, occurring in over 40 per cent of CIVICUS Monitor reports in this period. Such attacks were perpetrated by both state and non-state forces seeking to silence and inhibit the media.

These incidents often took place as journalists covered protests. In the USA, media freedom advocates **documented** over 100 cases of reporters being assaulted during mass protests against racism. In many cases these attacks were perpetrated by law enforcement officers using indiscriminate force, including cases of officers **shooting**, assaulting and **detaining** journalists wearing media credentials. In Bolivia, political polarisation meant local and international correspondents **endured** verbal and physical attacks from protesters across the political spectrum.

In addition, journalists in the Americas were subjected to attacks for speaking truth to power and reporting on corruption, crime and the COVID-19 pandemic. By May 2020, press associations in El Salvador had **registered** over 40 reports of journalists who had been attacked for seeking and sharing information on COVID-19. In Mexico, which remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, **attacks and killings** of journalists often took place in broad daylight. Worryingly, in 2020 at least two journalists **were killed** in Mexico while under police protection, in attacks that sometimes also claimed the lives of their bodyguards. This underscored the deficiency of the country's protection mechanism.

DETENTION OF PROTESTERS AND EXCESSIVE FORCE

Outrage at political and economic conditions and hope for change brought people to the streets across the Americas. During this research period, the CIVICUS Monitor documented protests in 25 countries of the region. Protests took place in both more open and more repressed conditions, often in defiance of the authorities' lack of respect for civic freedoms and brutal government responses.

Protests expressing anger at social conditions and lack of government support during the pandemic were frequently met with repression. In Venezuela, protesters **were detained** for demanding basic goods and public services in rural areas. In Paraguay, police **reportedly** used firearms against people demanding that quarantine measures be made more flexible. Peru's government **proposed** legislation to enable the use of force against protesters as officers teargassed and detained people who were asking that labour rights be respected during the crisis.

In 2020, some leaders used sanitary measures to cloak the suppression of protests with a veneer of legitimacy. In **Bolivia** and **Panama**, for instance, protesters were detained and charged for protocol violations while demanding aid during COVID-19. In the Dominican Republic, police **claimed** protesters against racism had been detained for violating social distancing rules, even though a nationalist protest on the same day was allowed without disruption.

Yet the Monitor documented widespread violations both before and during the pandemic. Protesters were detained in almost half of all CIVICUS Monitor reports documenting protests in the region during this period. Over 10,000 protesters **were detained** in Chile between October 2019 and January 2020, according to data from the country's National Human Rights Institute. In **Cuba** and **Nicaragua**, the detention



USA | Photo by David Dee Delgado/Getty Images



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of protesters was systematically used as a tactic to demobilise dissident movements. Mexican feminist marches were repressed **before** and **during** the pandemic, and human rights organisations **denounced** police using tactics that could amount to enforced disappearances of protesters.

In the USA, news outlets **reported** that about 9,000 people were detained within the first 10 days of mass protests against racism and police brutality. The USA's astounding **crackdown** on protesters by militarised law enforcement officers included hundreds of incidents of protesters being beaten, indiscriminate use of teargas and less-lethal weapons and crowd control methods that escalated tensions rather than protected public safety. In Colombia, people protesting against state violence were also **met with** brutality: security forces used firearms indiscriminately and over two nights of demonstrations at least 10 people were killed and 140 detained.

COUNTRY OF CONCERN: BRAZIL

The first two years of the government of President Jair Bolsonaro have tested the vitality and resilience of Brazil's civil society. Attacks from government against the freedoms of association and expression have taken a range of forms, including **public vilification** of CSOs, **criminalisation** of activists and **attempts to** monitor critics and **delegitimise** the media. Indigenous communities and environmental and land rights defenders have become increasingly vulnerable to **attacks**, as the government emboldens illegal loggers, miners and land grabbers. Activists and social movements are doing their best to resist, and have campaigned, mobilised public opinion and fought in court to **push back** against repeated attempts to restrict civic freedoms, reduce social participation and subvert democratic institutions.



Brazil | Photo by Amanda Perobelli/Reuters



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POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Protesters made their voices heard even when met with repression, forcing leaders to face public indignation and pushing core issues to the centre of political debate. Black Lives Matter protesters in the USA **advanced** state and local police reform policies, drove several authorities to re-evaluate their standards on the use of force in protests and heightened pressure for justice in cases of killings of Black and Brown people by law enforcement officers. They also reignited a global movement for racial justice and inspired protesters across the continent and further afield. Meanwhile in Bolivia, **sustained pressure** from protests and civil society forced the government to schedule and hold presidential elections. The country's peaceful transition of power offered some hope that less conflictual times could lie ahead.

Chile's protesters also evidenced the power of mass mobilisation. In October 2020, nearly a year to the date of the first protests, the country held a referendum on the creation of a convention to draft a new constitution. This was the culmination of months of political negotiation, in which civil society movements were prominent. The vote gave a clear mandate to establish a democratic body to develop a new constitution, with an unprecedented commitment to gender parity in its membership, as a result of civil society advocacy. Reserved seats for representation of Chile's long-excluded Indigenous peoples are also expected.

In November 2020, Mexico became the 11th country to ratify the first regional environmental human rights treaty, known as the Escazú Agreement. This means the landmark agreement, which was negotiated with civil society participation and provides human rights defenders with tools to hold governments to account, **will enter** into force in early 2021. Peru's human rights defenders also made **important gains** as national human rights organisations created new protocols and guidelines for their protection. In addition, civil society won important battles in court: in Canada, courts **upheld** recently introduced legislation to ban strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and ensured **protections** for journalistic sources; in Brazil, civil society **challenged** authoritarian policies at the Supreme Court and 18 young people who had been detained before an anti-government protest were acquitted after several years of facing charges.

Based on 109 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020.
Bolivia | Photo by Gaston Brito/Getty Image



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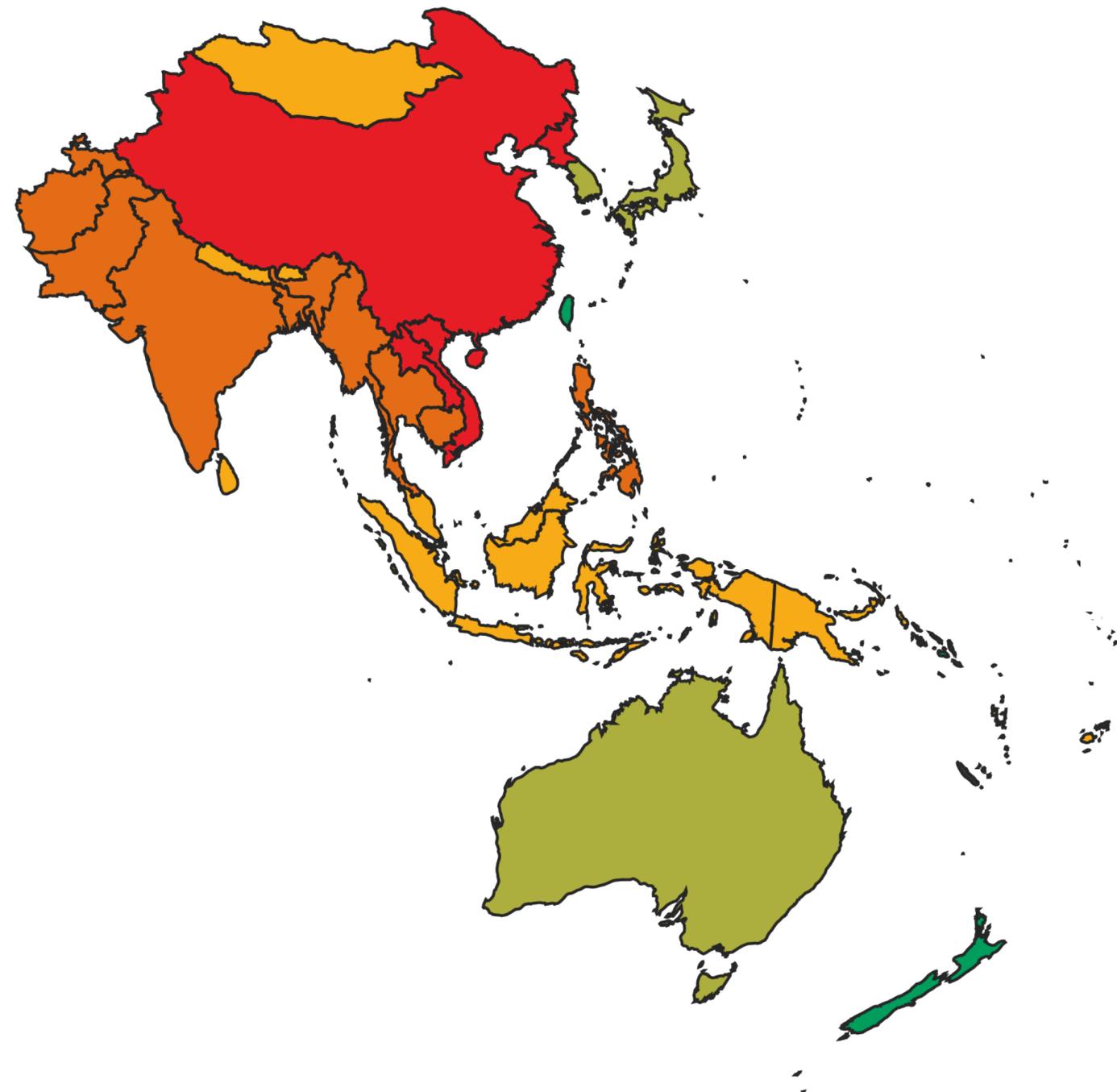
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RATINGS OVERVIEW

Restrictions and attacks against civic freedoms continued to occur across Asia and the Pacific in 2020, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the most widespread violations documented were the use of restrictive laws to criminalise and prosecute human rights defenders, journalists and critics. There have been attempts by numerous governments to stifle dissent by censoring reports of state abuses, including in relation to their handling of the pandemic. Other rampant violations include harassment against activists, the disruption of protests and detention of protesters.

Of 25 Asian countries, four – China, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam – are rated as closed, nine as repressed and nine as obstructed. Civic space in Japan and South Korea is rated as narrowed, with Taiwan the only country rated as open. In the Pacific, the story is more positive: eight countries are rated as open while three are rated as narrowed, including Australia, which was downgraded in 2019. Fiji, Nauru and Papua New Guinea remain in the obstructed category.

This year, the Philippines has been downgraded owing to its decline in fundamental freedoms. An ongoing **attack on** media freedom escalated when ABS-CBN – the largest media network – was forced off air, depriving people of critical information during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conviction of prominent journalist Maria Ressa in June 2020 for ‘cyberlibel’ has had a chilling effect among journalists. Senator Leila De Lima, a prominent critic of President Rodrigo Duterte, has spent more than three years in detention on fabricated charges. Human rights defenders, such as Zara Alvarez and Randall Echanis, have **been attacked** and killed with impunity. Others, like human rights defender Teresita Naul, have been **criminalised** or subjected to ‘red-tagging’ – a practice of labelling individuals and groups as communists or terrorists – as a result of their work. A new anti-terrorism law **passed** in July 2020 includes a broad definition of terrorism that gives law enforcers exhaustive powers and provides few safeguards against abuse, leaving it open to exploitation by those seeking to silence dissent.



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CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS

RESTRICTIVE LAWS USED TO STIFLE DISSENT

The use of restrictive laws against human rights defenders, journalists and critics, the most common civic space violation documented in Asia and the Pacific during the reporting period, occurred in at least 26 countries. Legislation most often used included laws related to national security, public order and criminal defamation. In at least 16 countries, human rights defenders were prosecuted.

In China's closed civic space, scores of activists, lawyers and critics were detained on charges based on vague and overly broad legislation, from 'subverting state power' to 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'. China also escalated its repression in Hong Kong. In June 2020, a new draconian national security law **was imposed** in the territory that is being used to silence free speech, including **targeting** overseas activism. The authorities have continued to arrest and prosecute pro-democracy activists.

In Vietnam, scores of activists were arrested or jailed after summary trials under an array of **restrictive laws** for 'abusing democratic freedoms' and 'anti-state propaganda', including bloggers and Facebook users. In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen's government has used 'incitement' laws to **prosecute** dozens of critics, including land and environmental human rights defenders, trade unionists, journalists, youth activists and musicians, in an escalation of repression. Amid the pandemic, Cambodia **passed** an emergency law giving the executive sweeping powers. Indonesia has continued to **criminalise** West Papuan activists for 'rebellion'.

Criminal defamation laws often continue to be deployed in a number of countries to silence dissent. In Bangladesh, the Digital Security Act is the weapon of choice used by the authorities **to pursue** critics, including those critical of its handling of the pandemic. Media workers, activists, academics and students have been targeted, including prominent journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, who was charged in May 2020 after he was forcibly disappeared for 53 days. In Malaysia, the Communications and Multimedia Act has been used **to prosecute** online criticism of religion and the monarchy and for



Philippines | Photo by Ezra Acayan/Getty Images



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spreading misinformation on COVID-19, while in Myanmar people **criticising the military**, such as members of the **Peacock Generation** poetry troupe, have been convicted and imprisoned for defamation under the Telecommunication Law and penal code. In India, Pakistan, Thailand and Singapore as well, **restrictive laws** have regularly been used against civil society.

In the Pacific, restrictive laws were passed or used in at least seven countries. Australia is using its Intelligence Services Act **to prosecute** a whistleblower for disclosing the bugging of Timor-Leste government buildings in 2004. In Fiji the Public Order (Amendment) Act 2014 has been **used to silence** and prosecute critics, including trade union leader Felix Anthony.

CENSORSHIP OF JOURNALISTS AND CRITICS

Censorship of media outlets, journalists, civil society and critics was another serious violation documented in the region, occurring in at least 24 countries. China, which has an extensive censorship regime, deployed it to block foreign websites, cover up its persecution in Xinjiang and Tibet and target its critics abroad. The authorities also **censored** articles and social media posts about COVID-19 by journalists, doctors, activists, academics and critics.

In Bangladesh, the authorities continued **to block** numerous news sites critical of the government, including investigative journalism website Netra News. In Pakistan, the authorities have attempted **to silence** media outlets such as The Dawn Media Group and The Jang Media Group for their critical reporting, and to block online content. In Thailand, the authorities used an emergency decree passed to handle the pandemic to instead **target media outlets** covering pro-democracy protests in October 2020.

Censorship was documented in at least six countries in the Pacific. In August 2020, Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama **ordered** the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation to stop airing a debate. In Vanuatu, media outlets **were not allowed** to publish articles on COVID-19 without government authorisation.

TOP 5 VIOLATIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS FOR ASIA-PACIFIC



1. RESTRICTIVE LAW



2. CENSORSHIP



3. HARASSMENT



4. PROTESTER(S) DETAINED



5. PROTEST DISRUPTION



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HARASSMENT OF ACTIVISTS AND JOURNALISTS

There have been reports of online and offline harassment of activists and journalists in at least 22 countries. In China, the government continues to **intimidate and harass** human rights defenders with raids on their homes and offices and subject their family members to police surveillance. The Communist Party has also used COVID-19 as a pretext to expand its surveillance regime. Vietnam's one-party regime continued to **harass** those who criticised it, including activists and bloggers. Many were kept under surveillance or detained for months without access to legal counsel and subjected to abusive interrogations.

In Indonesia, activists and critics, in particular those speaking up on the severe violations in West Papua, were **subjected to** digital attacks, smear campaigns and surveillance. The authorities in Malaysia **have harassed** activists and journalists, as well as news outlets Al Jazeera and Malaysiakini.com, for their critical reporting. Singapore has **deployed** its Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, a sweeping piece of legislation on misinformation, to harass online critics.

In Sri Lanka, human rights lawyers and journalists **faced harassment** and arrests ahead of the August 2020 elections. Activists and families of survivors seeking accountability for crimes committed during the civil war have been intimidated and subject to surveillance. Women journalists in Pakistan **faced** a gender based cyber-harassment campaign against them by government officials and supporters while **Pashtun activists** continued to be targeted. In the Maldives, the government forced a leading CSO to close and **seized its funds** while in Bangladesh journalists have **faced harassment** and physical attacks by activists from the ruling Awami League party with impunity. Journalists have also been attacked for their reporting in **Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan** and **Sri Lanka**.

CRACKDOWN ON PROTESTS

Protesters continued to stand up for their rights throughout the region, despite risks and restrictions. In 20 countries, protests were disrupted, and in 15 of those countries,



Thailand | Photo by Lauren DeCicca/Getty Images



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Good News Stories

Release of Human Rights Defender	1
Human Rights Defender Acquitted	2
Positive civil society developments	5
Positive court ruling	7

Based on 107 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020. Thailand | Photo by Lauren DeCicca/Getty Images

protesters were arrested. In nearly all cases where security forces used excessive force against protesters, no one was held accountable for the violence.

In Hong Kong, pro-democracy protest leaders continued to be **arrested and charged** under the Public Order Ordinance. Activists were **also targeted** for taking part in the Tiananmen Square massacre anniversary vigil, including activist Joshua Wong. In Myanmar, dozens of protesters have **been charged** under the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law for various protests against land grabs, development projects and the internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin States.

In Indonesia, hundreds **were arrested** in October 2020 for mass protests against an omnibus law that will erode workers' protections and remove environmental safeguards, while in Thailand the authorities **escalated their crackdown** on youth-led peaceful democracy protests with at least 90 people arrested in October 2020. Thai authorities also physically blocked access to protest sites and shut down transportation networks. In several **countries**, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand, police used excessive force against peaceful protesters.

In the Pacific, even as climate change manifested in fires and floods, environmental and climate action protesters in Australia were **vilified** and arrested.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

In a challenging year for fundamental freedoms, the CIVICUS Monitor documented a number of positive civic space developments, which are testament to the commitment of those who have fought for them. In Afghanistan, in January 2020, the authorities made a **public commitment** to establish a protection mechanism for human rights defenders, while Papua New Guinea **passed** a whistleblowers law in February 2020.

In Thailand, courts **dismissed** defamation cases brought against human rights defenders for exposing labour rights violations. In Indonesia, a court ruled in June 2020 that the government's decision to impose an internet blackout during weeks of protests in the West Papua region in 2019 **violated** the law. Human rights groups played **a key role** in bringing Myanmar before the International Court of Justice for violations of the Genocide Convention. Taiwan hosted one of the few Pride marches around the world in June 2020, as the island's LGBTQI+ community took to the streets, visibly asserting their rights.



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COUNTRY OF CONCERN: INDIA

Civic space in India, which was downgraded in 2019 to repressed, continues to regress. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has continued its **persecution** of human rights defenders, student leaders, journalists and those involved in protests

against the discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act. A variety of **restrictive laws**, including national security and counter-terrorism legislation such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, have been used to detain activists such as Sudha Bharadwaj for prolonged periods. Many who are jailed have been placed at risk of contracting COVID-19 in overcrowded and unsanitary prisons. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act has been used to target outspoken groups while the authorities continue **to impose** harsh and discriminatory restrictions in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir.



India | Photo by T.Narayan/Bloomberg



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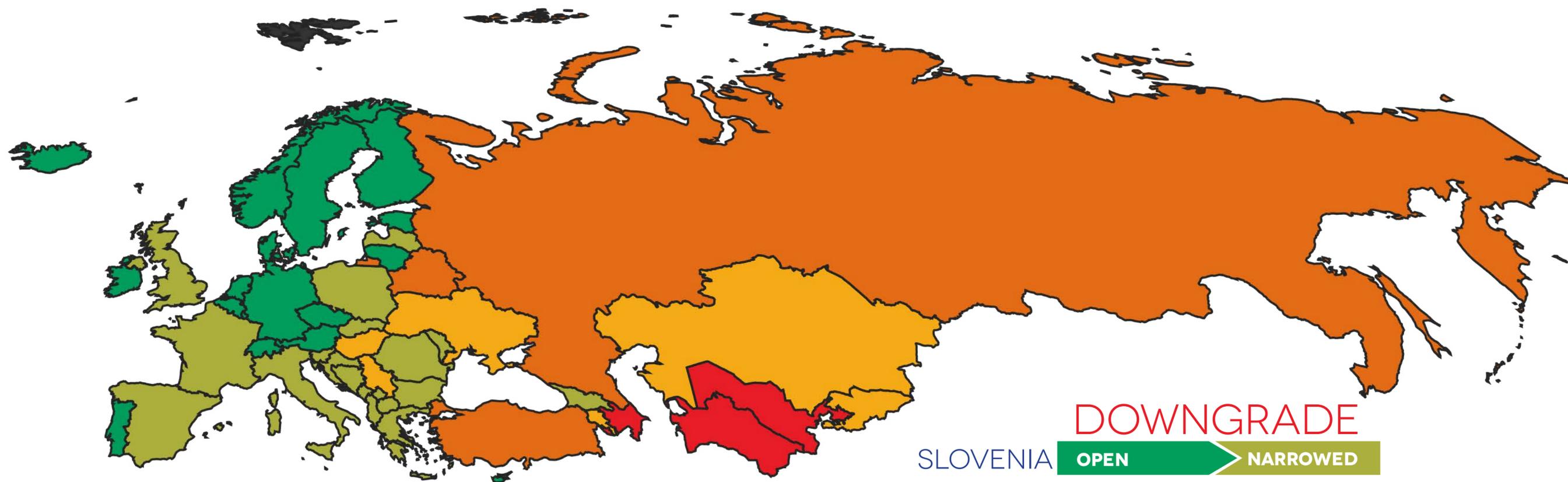
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RATINGS OVERVIEW

There have been no major improvements in civic space in Europe and Central Asia since the previous report. Of the region’s 54 countries, civic space is rated as open in 21 countries, narrowed in 20, obstructed in six, repressed in four and closed in three. Governments in Central Asia continue to repress civic space, while Europe is seeing a decline in civic freedoms. In the past year, there has been a notable decline in the quality of civic space in Slovenia, with improvements noted only in Austria.

The downgrading of Slovenia’s rating from open to narrowed reflects a significant **worsening** of civic space under Prime Minister Janez Janša, who came to power in March

2020 and is known for his anti-migration views and criticism of the media. The government has taken steps to diminish media independence with outlets such as Nova24 TV, Nova24 online and Planet TV increasingly being funded by people connected to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a close ally of Janša, and known for eroding the space for independent media in Hungary. The new government **has introduced** a package of three media laws that may lead to political interference over media management appointments. CSOs in the cultural sector have also come under threat, with several facing eviction at the time of writing. Since March 2020, people in Slovenia have **staged** Friday bicycle protests against the government.



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A GLOOMY PICTURE FOR CIVIC SPACE

Major restrictions on civic space in the region include repression of protests through excessive force and detention of protesters, censorship of journalists, activists and CSOs, intimidation and harassment and the passing of restrictive laws. Over the past year, threats to the freedom of expression and the targeting of women and LGBTQI+ groups are some of the key trends documented in the region.

In Germany, journalists **faced** verbal attacks during protests against COVID-19 measures. Journalists in France have been **obstructed** in doing their jobs through intimidation and detention while covering protests. Journalists also continue to **face threats** from the far-right Vox party in Spain. In response to the spread of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists in Croatia **launched** a fact-checking blog, but this left them on the receiving end of harmful speech on social media. In Montenegro, a new **Media Law** forces journalists to reveal their sources at the request of the Prosecutor's Office.

Civic space incidents involving women and LGBTQI+ groups are growing in various parts of Europe. Violations against these groups are often fuelled by far-right groups, a trend noted in our 2019 report that continues to have a negative impact upon civic space. In Hungary, despite numerous appeals from transgender rights groups amid the pandemic, the government **passed** an amendment to the Registry Act that only recognises 'sex at birth', outlawing legal recognition of transgender and intersex people. In **Poland** and **Turkey**, the governments have indicated that they intend to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, resulting in massive protests led by women. These developments will further restrict the space for CSOs working on women's and LGBTQI+ rights. Attacks on LGBTQI+ rights have also been documented in **Italy, Lithuania, North Macedonia** and **Romania**.

Civic space remains under threat in Central Asia, where the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a pretext to impose further restrictions. The governments of **Tajikistan** and **Turkmenistan** both initially denied the existence of COVID-19 in their countries

and instead increased restrictions on the freedom of expression. In Turkmenistan, the government's effort to cover up the COVID-19 outbreak included threatening medical workers with repercussions for speaking out about COVID-19-related cases. In neighbouring Tajikistan, the government targeted independent media for 'spreading panic' and attempted to stifle discussion of the pandemic by introducing a new law to punish people for distributing 'inaccurate' and 'untruthful' information about COVID-19 through the press or through social and electronic networks. In the name of fighting 'false information' about the pandemic, the authorities in other Central Asian countries have also **introduced** and implemented broadly worded legislation that restricts legitimate free speech.

The political future of **Kyrgyzstan** currently hangs in the balance, following post-election protests that **plunged** the country into a political crisis. The 4 October 2020 parliamentary elections were marred by allegations of widespread irregularities that ignited mass protests by opposition members and supporters. Law enforcement officers responded harshly to protesters and violence was used by non-state groups. Protesters managed to break in and occupy the White House, which is the seat of the president and parliament. Groups also unlawfully released previous high-profile political figures from prison, including Sadyr Japarov, a former member of parliament. The post-election protests resulted in a swift change, with Japarov sworn in as both acting president and prime minister, after the resignation of President Sooronbay Jeenbekov. Japarov has since stepped down to run for early elections that are set for 10 January 2021.



Belarus | Michael Short/Bloomberg



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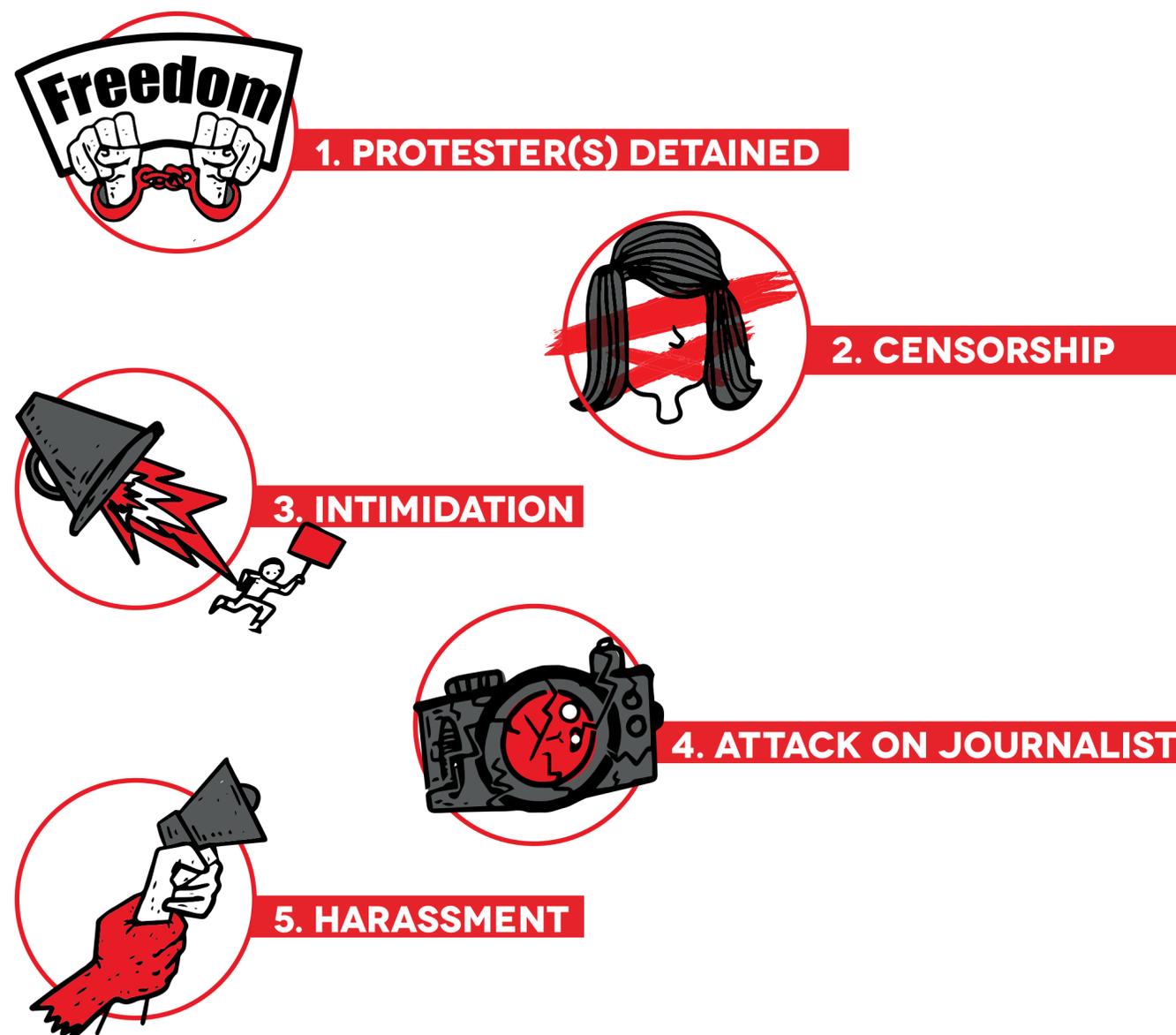
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CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS

Violations in the region most frequently documented by the CIVICUS Monitor during the reporting period were the detention of protesters, censorship, intimidation, attacks on journalists and harassment.

TOP 5 VIOLATIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS FOR EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



PROTESTERS DETAINED

In 2020, the detention of protesters was the most frequent violation, documented in at least 30 countries.

In Belarus, the mass detention of protesters, which **began ahead** of the August 2020 elections, continued after anti-government protests **erupted** following highly disputed election results in which the incumbent, President Alexander Lukashenko, was declared the winner. Thousands were arrested throughout August and September 2020 and detentions are continuing. In Serbia, anti-government protests **took place** shortly after parliamentary elections, boycotted by the opposition, in June 2020, following the government's reintroduction of a COVID-19 curfew. Peaceful protests attended by thousands of people around Serbia turned violent due to alleged provocation from civilian groups, with law enforcement officers using excessive force and detaining protesters. In Azerbaijan, people including activists, opposition groups and their supporters **took to the streets** to dispute the parliamentary election results. In February 2020, police detained 20 protesters at one protest and pre-emptively detained another 100 activists prior to another demonstration. Detention of protesters during anti-government protests **continued** in the months that followed, and also in relation to protests around the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict that began in July 2020. Around 90 protesters **were detained** in Armenia after supporters of Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party, staged a protest in front of the national Secret Service headquarters.

The detention of climate protesters has also been documented in some countries. In France, climate activists who **staged** a protest at the G7 summit were met with 13,000 police officers who secured the area to prevent protests and arrested over 100 protesters. About 40 Extinction Rebellion climate protesters were **arrested** in Oslo, Norway, after staging protests over the government's failure to deal with the climate crisis. In the UK, police **arrested** climate activists, including with pre-emptive detentions, for organising and staging the 'Heathrow Pause', a civil disobedience protest that involved flying a drone within the airport's exclusion zone to disrupt flights.

Based on 168 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020.



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CENSORING CRITICAL VOICES

Freedom of expression remains under threat in the region, with COVID-19 being used as a pretext to further restrict free speech. Censorship was documented in at least 25 countries in Europe and Central Asia.

In Hungary ‘false information’ on the pandemic **was criminalised** by a new law, with penalties that include jail sentences of up to five years. Media independence hangs by a thread due to relentless **political interference** by Prime Minister Orbán’s government. The entire editorial staff of Index.hu, which was Hungary’s leading independent news site, resigned due to proposals to compromise its editorial independence. Hungary’s Media Council **failed to** extend the licence of the Klubrádió radio station, one of the few remaining critical outlets.

In Turkey, where free speech was **under siege** before the pandemic, the government interrogated people associated with over 6,000 social media accounts for COVID-19 related posts and passed a restrictive law to censor social media.

Media freedom has come under greater threat in the UK in the last year, particularly during the pandemic. An Open Democracy reporter **was banned** from asking questions during briefings, while other reporters were met with restrictions when covering the daily COVID-19 media briefings provided by the prime minister and other officials.



Hungary | Photo by Bernadett Szabo/REUTERSa



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INTIMIDATION

The use of intimidation as a tactic to deter journalists, CSOs and human rights defenders was documented in at least 29 countries in Europe and Central Asia. In particular, several cases of intimidation of women journalists were documented in the Balkan region, with threats often gendered in nature. In North Macedonia, a woman journalist **received** messages via Facebook and Twitter containing verbal abuses and hate speech. She received dozens of messages threatening her with rape as well as death in response to her work. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** a woman journalist **was threatened** for reporting on an environmental rights story. In **Bulgaria**, a woman journalist, whose story portrayed a far-right group in a negative light, **had to flee** the country with her family after allegedly receiving threats from unknown people against her and the family, with her personal information leaked online.

In Serbia, CSOs and journalists who are critical of the government continue to **face intimidation**. One recent attack came in the publication of a list of CSOs and journalists to be probed for links with money laundering and terrorism.

Dozens of people, including journalists, bloggers, civil society activists, protest participants and others critical of the authorities, are frequently **subjected to** intimidation, pressure and court-imposed obstacles in Kazakhstan.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Increasing dialogue between government and civil society in Austria **has led** to an improvement in civic space, offering a much-needed positive story for the region. In an unprecedented move, the Austrian government passed COVID-19 legislation that recognised the role of CSOs and introduced a special grant package providing additional support for CSOs during the pandemic. The improvement in the space for civil society is due to political change, with the CSO-friendly Greens party replacing the extreme far-right Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ) in a coalition with the Peoples Party (ÖVP).

Based on 168 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020.
Austria | Photo by Martin Juen/Getty Images



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COUNTRY OF CONCERN: POLAND

In the last five years, under the governance of the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS), Poland has seen a rapid decline in civic space. The ruling party has undermined the rule of law and judicial independence, which has had a negative impact on fundamental civic freedoms. The government has **increased** its anti-LGBTQI+ agenda, with a third of Polish municipalities adopting resolutions ‘against LGBTQI+ propaganda’ and declaring themselves as ‘LGBT-free zones’. During the presidential election, which took place in June and July 2020, incumbent President Andrzej Duda ramped up his anti-rights rhetoric, remarking that LGBTQI+ individuals are “not people, but an ideology.” LGBTQI+ activists have **faced persecution**, with the separate arrest of three LGBTQI+ activists who hung up rainbow flags, on charges of offending religious feelings.

Massive protests **erupted** in October 2020 and continue at the time of writing, following a ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal to impose a near-total abortion ban, in a country that already has one of the strictest abortion laws in the European Union. Protesters were met with excessive force from law enforcement officers and violence from far-right groups.

Media freedom in Poland is also under threat, with PiS **targeting** independent media outlets such as Gazeta Wyborcza with dozens of lawsuits to intimidate and censor its critical coverage. Poland’s public television station Telewizja Polska has repeatedly been used as a government mouthpiece. Draft legislation **targeting** foreign-funded CSOs is also on the table, posing a major threat to the freedom of association. The government states the purpose of such a law is to fight CSOs that serve foreign interests.



Poland | Photo by Omar Marques/Getty Images



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RATINGS OVERVIEW

No major improvements in civic space in the MENA region have been documented over the past year, indicating that the conditions for civil society remain very challenging. As states double down on the crackdown on civic space, human rights defenders, journalists and other activists continue to bear the brunt of authoritarian excesses. In [Iraq](#) and [Lebanon](#), year-long protest movements have brought further civic space violations. Activists, including the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) [most prominent](#) human rights defender, Ahmed Mansoor, remain in prison while in Saudi Arabia, 13 women's rights defenders are still in jail following a series of arrests of those who stood up for the rights of women that started in May 2018. While rights groups in Iran advocated for detained human rights defenders to be freed as prisons posed a heightened risk of COVID-19 infection, only three women human rights defenders were freed as a result, partially or fully, of the virus: [Nargess Mohammadi](#) and, on a temporary basis,

[Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe](#) and [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#). In Bahrain, human rights activist Nabeel Rajab was finally freed from jail in June 2020, after being in detention since 2016 for peacefully expressing his opinions on Twitter, but must still serve out the remaining three years of his sentence at home. Many others remain at risk of contracting COVID-19 in prison. In [Palestine](#), journalists face arrest and detention by both domestic and Israeli forces, and in [Yemen](#), these dangers come from both sides of the conflict. The rights of migrant workers continue to be severely violated in the region, with states such as Qatar [denying](#) workers' basic rights and freedoms including the right to form unions. Across the region, the repression of women and those advocating for women's rights continues, including in [Iran](#), [Egypt](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#).

The latest CIVICUS Monitor ratings rate civic space as closed in nine countries, with five countries rated as repressed and five as obstructed. Most ratings are unchanged, apart from a notable decline in Iraq, which is downgraded from repressed to closed. This comes after a popular protest movement [began](#) in October 2019 that has seen a heavy-handed response with an extensive crackdown on the freedom of expression and many human rights violations, which continue to be documented.

CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS

The five most reported violations in MENA during the reporting period were censorship, harassment, detention of journalists, detention of human rights defenders and attacks on journalists. Indicating that civic space challenges remain entrenched, most of these are unchanged from the five most reported violations documented in 2019, with the only variation being that attacks on journalists replaces intimidation in this latest analysis.

CENSORSHIP

Censorship retains its position as the most highly recorded violation in the MENA region, having been documented in 14 out of 19 countries.

Censorship took various forms, including the blocking of websites, as seen in Palestine when a court [ordered](#) internet service providers to block 59 websites. In Oman, the Omani Feminists Twitter account [was suspended](#) and censorship was widespread at the 2020 Muscat Book Fair, with many books by Omani writers [seized](#) and banned from



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display. In Morocco, the authorities **enacted laws** to censor and restrict expression on social networks. The suspension and closure of media outlets was another tactic, as seen in Iraq when the Communications and Media Commission **ordered** several TV and radio stations to be shut down and **suspended** the activities of the Reuters agency. In Egypt, the authorities **withdrew** the accreditation of a journalist while warning another over reporting in 'bad faith'. Separately, the Egyptian Supreme Council for Media sent a warning letter to 16 news websites and social network accounts concerning posts about publishing false COVID-19 news which included a directive to ban the publishing of any information other than the Ministry of Health's official data. In Jordan, civil society groups **expressed** concern that new restrictions imposed by the government to curb the spread of COVID 19 would essentially limit people's freedom to share information or criticise the government's handling of the pandemic.

HARASSMENT

Harassment was documented in 11 countries. The authorities in Iran **detained and summoned** civil society members, journalists and members of the public who took to social media to criticise the government's management of the COVID-19 outbreak. In Lebanon, dozens of people and activists **were summoned** for interrogation for their participation in the popular uprising, and also in relation to **free speech charges**, including insult and defamation. Harassment, as reported in Libya, also took the form of **organised and systematic** scrutiny and searching of personal devices by security forces, targeted towards activists, lawyers, human rights defenders, media professionals and bloggers. In Egypt, the authorities **raided** the homes of activists' families to summon them for interrogation and kept them in detention. Similarly, in the UAE, state security apparatus **targeted** the relatives of several human rights defenders by revoking their citizenship, refusing to renew their identity documents and issuing travel bans. Judicial harassment has also often been used to punish and limit dissent, as seen in Iran in the case of human rights defender Atena Daemi, who was denied release from prison in June 2020 despite having completed a five-year term, after the authorities manoeuvred **to reopen** other lawsuits against her. In Yemen, some journalists were **subjected to** travel bans.

TOP 5 VIOLATIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



1. CENSORSHIP



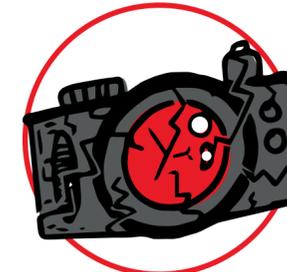
2. HARASSMENT



3. JOURNALIST DETAINED



4. HRD DETAINED



5. ATTACK ON JOURNALIST



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JOURNALISTS DETAINED

The detention of journalists was often used to suppress dissent across the region, as documented in nine countries.

In Egypt, security forces continued the **systematic detention** of journalists, as the authorities used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to further restrict expression. Similarly, in Tunisia, bloggers were **detained** in relation to social media posts critical of the government's response to the pandemic, while in Jordan, the authorities **detained** Salim Akash, a Jordan-based Bangladeshi journalist, over his coverage on the impact of lockdown measures on Bangladeshi migrant workers in Jordan. In Oman, journalists were **arrested and detained** for posting on social media, and in Iraq, journalists were **targeted and arrested** while covering the ongoing popular protest movement. In Yemen, violations were carried out by various parties in the conflict, including arrests of journalists such as **Moufid Ahmed Al-Ghailani** and **Radwan Al-Hashed**, and the **sentencing** of four others to death. In Palestine, journalists **faced arrests** from both Israeli and Palestinian forces for **covering issues** about the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Despite a difficult picture, there were some positive civic space developments during the year. In Bahrain, Nabeel Rajab's **conditional release** from prison came after years of sustained **civil society advocacy**. Rajab was released alongside other prisoners of conscience, but others such as Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja remain in prison. In Iran, woman human rights defender Narges Mohammadi's 16-year sentence for advocating against the death penalty **was commuted** in October 2020, enabling her release from prison. In Tunisia, the appeals court **upheld** the decisions of previous courts and rejected the government's longstanding bid to shut down the LGBTQI+ rights group Shams. In Kuwait, 13 human rights defenders **were acquitted** of charges related to their work advocating for the rights of the excluded Bedoon community, after they were arrested and detained in July 2019.



Good News Stories

Positive civil society developments	1
Human Right Defender acquitted	1
Positive court ruling	1
Release of human rights defenders	8

Based on 33 updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor for countries in this region between 12 November 2019 - 31st October 2020

Tunisia | Photo by NurPhoto/Getty Images



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COUNTRIES OF CONCERN: LEBANON AND IRAQ

With the protest movements that began in October 2019 in Iraq and Lebanon continuing throughout 2020, the authorities, particularly security forces, responded by intensifying their crackdown on the rights of protesters, activists and journalists.

In Lebanon, a total of 4,338 collective actions **took place** as part of a nationwide anti-government protest movement. The authorities **mounted** a violent response to the protests which saw increased repression of civilian protesters and activists. Despite the huge August 2020 Beirut **port explosion**, which left in its wake a trail of destruction, a resilient civil society has defied all odds to continue its collective actions to call for governmental accountability and social justice, amid continued **use of** lethal and excessive force.

In Iraq, since 1 October 2019, a popular protest movement has **been underway** with protesters demanding better services and an end to widespread unemployment and corruption. Many human rights violations continue to be **documented**, the severity and scale of which indicate a drastic decline in civic space. During the past year, the CIVICUS Monitor has reported an extensive crackdown on the freedom of expression and the continued use of lethal force by the authorities and armed militia resulting in deaths and injuries of protesters on a massive scale, along with repeated attacks, kidnappings and assassinations of activists and journalists, mass arrests and detentions of protesters, activists and journalists, and internet shutdowns aimed at thwarting the protest movement.

WOMEN: INDOMITABLE DEFENDERS OF CIVIC SPACE IN MENA

Across MENA, our analysis shows that women continue to play a major role in

championing civic space and human rights more broadly. At the same time, women continue to be targeted because of their peaceful human rights work.

In Lebanon, women **have been** at the forefront of the popular uprising. Women’s rights and feminist organisations have played a key role in the protests through organising and mobilising people and **organising** specific women’s protests. In Iraq as well, thousands of women **have participated** in the popular protest movement. At the same time, in Saudi Arabia, the **continued detention** of women human rights defenders who advocated for the very limited extension of rights now enjoyed by Saudi women shows a stark contrast between the authorities’ public pronouncements on women’s rights and their appalling treatment of those who protect and promote them.

CIVICUS Monitor reports continue to illustrate the important role and remarkable resilience of women human rights defenders in standing up for civic space and the rights of women across MENA.



Lebanon | Photo by Marwan Tahtah/Getty Images



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STATES:

- Guarantee that any exceptional measure and legislation issued to combat the pandemic do not in any circumstances restrict certain fundamental rights, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment, recognition before the law and the presumption of innocence.
- Make sure that any legislation enacted or measure implemented is necessary and proportional to the public health need, not discriminatory in any way, including on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual identity, language, religion and social origin, be limited in duration and subject to sufficient oversight by both the legislature and courts.
- Guarantee fully the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly as provided in international law and standards. Ensure that any restriction on public gatherings are regularly assessed to determine whether they continue to be necessary and proportionate in light of the health emergency.
- Review and if necessary update existing human rights training for police and security forces, with the assistance of independent CSOs, to foster the consistent application of international human rights law and standards during protests, including the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms. This should be coupled with ensuring accountability when violations occur while policing protests.
- Ensure that the freedom of expression is safeguarded in all forms by bringing all national legislation into line with international law and standards and refrain from censoring social and conventional media. Any restrictions should be pursuant to an order by an independent and impartial judicial authority, and in accordance with due process and standards of legality, necessity and legitimacy. Businesses must also not capitulate to censorship demands that are not in accordance with international human rights standards.
- Maintain reliable and unfettered access to the internet and cease internet shutdowns that prevent people from obtaining essential information and services during the crisis. Restrictions on access to the internet cannot be justified on public order or national security grounds.
- Repeal any legislation that criminalises expressions based on vague concepts such as “fake news” or disinformation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, as such laws are not compatible with the requirements of legality and proportionality.
- Explicitly recognise and reaffirm the work and legitimacy of human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists and publicly support their work. Take measures to foster a safe, respectful and enabling environment for civil society and work with these groups to establish effective national protection mechanisms which respond to the needs of those at risk.
- Take steps to address impunity for violations against HRDs and journalists, ensuring that these violations are independently and promptly investigated and that perpetrators are brought to justice.
- Release human rights defenders detained in connection with their human rights work, and any persons unlawfully held. People in prisons or other detention facilities are particularly at risk for COVID-19.



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INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL BODIES:

- Pressure states to repeal or substantially amend restrictive legislation that is not in accordance with international law and standards in protecting freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression.
- Protect and open spaces for civil society to advocate and participate in decision-making. Strengthen existing mechanisms and put in place new mechanisms to address reprisals against human rights defenders who cooperate with international and regional mechanisms.
- Take the necessary measures to ensure that activists and civil society actors are not put at risk because of the information they provide and publicly call out states who impose restrictions on the participation of civil society.

DONORS:

- Provide long-term, unrestricted and core support for civil society in countries where civil society is facing increasing restrictions from states. Funders should provide specific support to groups conducting advocacy in countries with rapidly closing civic space.
- Adopt participatory approaches to grantmaking. Include human rights organisations in designing schemes and conduct situation assessments with CSOs; maintain engagement at every stage, including when the fund has been granted, to create adaptation and re-allocation strategies with grantees when required by a difficult working environment.
- Prioritise security. In sensitive cases, donors need to balance transparency and security needs. Where civil society and human rights work is criminalised, defenders are under surveillance or facing constant harassment, key information such as the identity, work, activities and location might need to remain undisclosed. Support programmes to ensure that defenders have appropriate training, skills and equipment to conduct their work safely.



Philippines | Photo by Ezra Acayan/Getty Images



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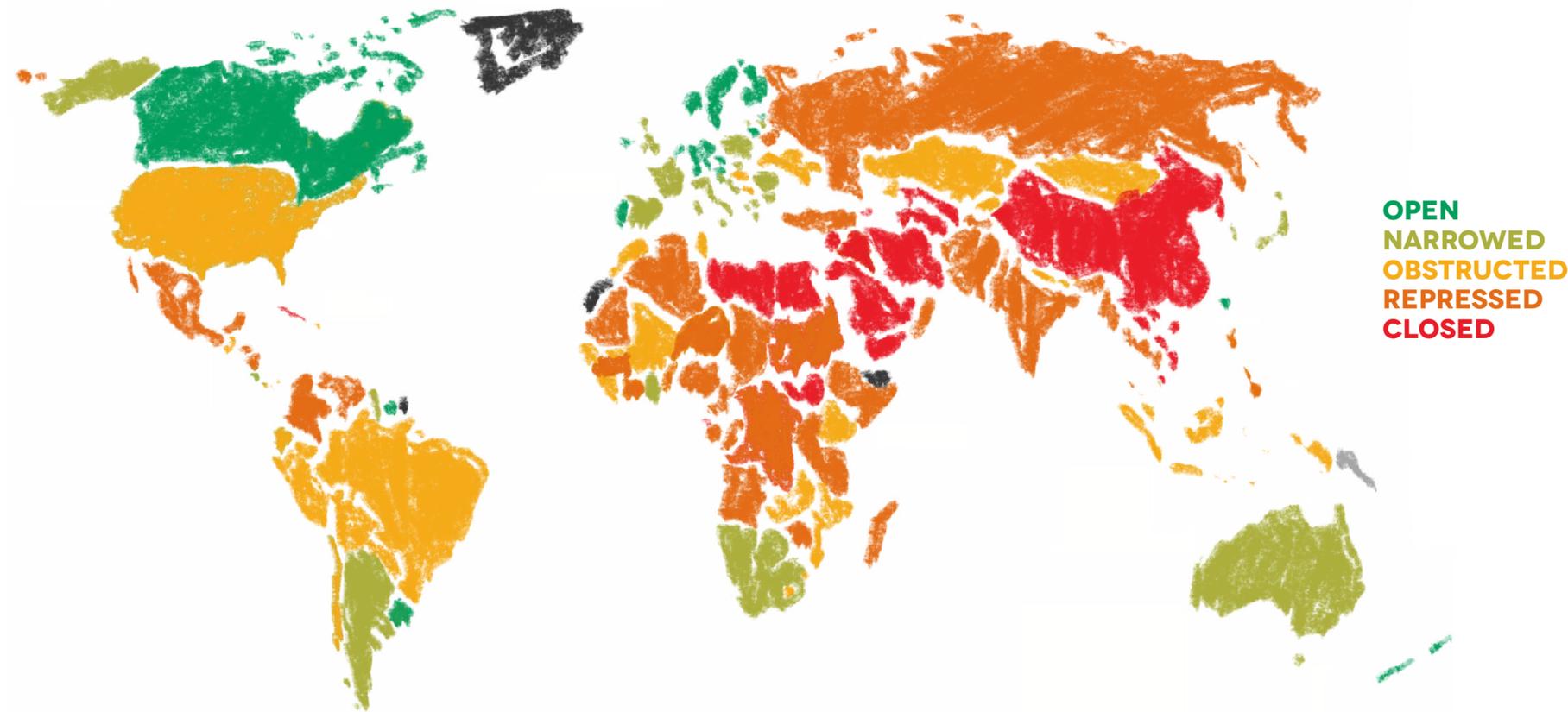
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OPEN
NARROWED
OBSTRUCTED
REPRESSED
CLOSED

AFRICA: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Eswatini (Swaziland), Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

AMERICAS: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, United States of America, Uruguay, Venezuela.

ASIA AND PACIFIC: Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nepal, New Zealand, North

Korea, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Vietnam.

EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

PEOPLE POWER

UNDER ATTACK 2020

A REPORT BASED ON DATA FROM THE CIVICUS MONITOR

CIVICUS: WORLD ALLIANCE FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

25 OWL STREET, 6TH FLOOR

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, 2092

PHONE: +27 (0)11 833 5959

EMAIL: MONITOR@CIVICUS.ORG

MONITOR.CIVICUS.ORG



@CIVICUSMONITOR