



Civic Space

A global snapshot

THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE WORKS WITH COMMUNITIES in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and the United States to build peace. Our programs foster vibrant and open civic space and commitment to human dignity and rights.

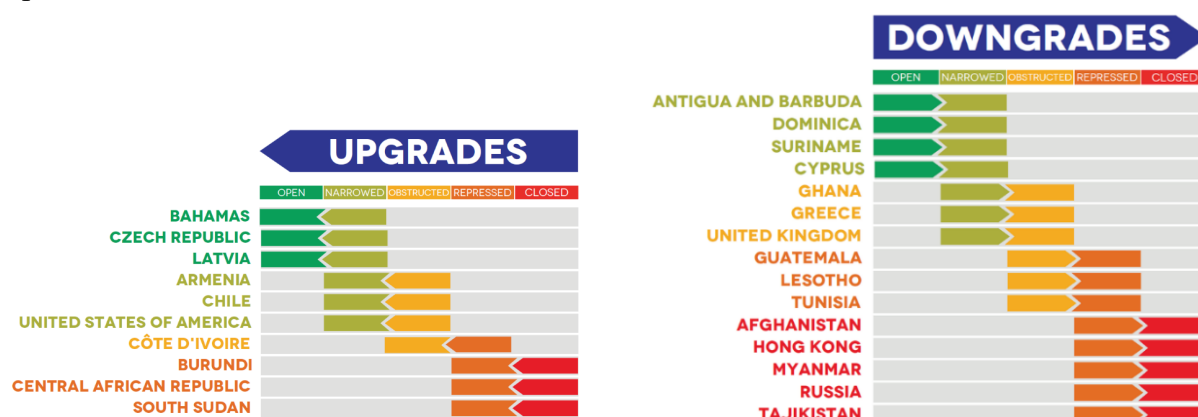
This report, *Civic Space: A Global Snapshot*, was commissioned as part of our ongoing work to support the protection of civic space. Under the Mask was AFSC's project developed to address the increasing closing of civic space. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic saw an acceleration in this global trend, and Under the Mask highlighted and documented increased restrictions on civic space, sharing strategies and actions that communities and activists around the world are using to protect their space. Today, as we transition from a pandemic focus, AFSC responds to and supports civil society and communities impacted by restricted civic space through our new global program, focused on advancing civil liberties, human rights, and the protection and expansion of civic space.

Restrictions to civic space

In recent years, global trends have emerged concerning restrictions to civic space. These include a decline in democracy and a rise in authoritarianism, the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic, and challenges to civil society.

The development and passing of controversial legislation during states of emergency have enabled governments to act with fewer checks and balances, allowing “back door” activities to go unnoticed. Governments have restricted rights to freedom of expression and assembly by punishing dissent and silencing critics and activists. Authoritarian regimes have increasingly improved their ability to co-opt or bypass the norms and institutions intended to uphold fundamental freedoms.

The graphics below are based on CIVICUS findings from 2023. These graphics display how various countries have either upgraded or downgraded in terms of how free their civic spaces are.



Regional breakdown (2023)

	OPEN	NARROWED	OBSTRUCTED	REPRESSED	CLOSED
AFRICA	2	3	14	27	3
AMERICAS	8	13	6	6	2
ASIA & PACIFIC	8	7	10	8	7
EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA	20	19	7	2	6
MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA	0	0	3	7	9

State of civil society 2023 report: CIVICUS

Global trends regarding civic space have included:

1. Restricting rights to protest.

[Amnesty International's Report 2022/23](#) on the state of the world's human rights highlights a continuing trend of repression of dissent and civil society globally. Crackdowns on freedom of expression and association have been seen in many countries. Around the world, people have protested governmental failure to tackle climate change and other concerns. In many cases, states have used unlawful and sometimes lethal force to repress these protests. The international response to these human rights violations has been inconsistent.

2. Restricting freedom of expression.

In the last 17 years, there has been a steady decline in freedom of the press and personal expression. This has been amplified by the rise of information and communication technologies, which have broken many states' media monopolies. Authorities have responded to new forms of online expression with harsh offline punishments.

Authorities in a variety of countries fail to offer effective protections to media professionals who are at risk of violence. For instance, journalists reporting on the security situation in Haiti experienced an extraordinary amount of physical violence in 2022. Members of the media were executed by gangs, killed while in police custody, and shot at while on their way to work.

Beyond the news media, [ordinary people are less free to express their views to others](#), whether online or off. Many governments have applied existing repressive laws to online spheres and adopted invasive technologies to monitor digital communication. The result is restricted freedom of expression and a pervasive sense of fear among citizens.

3. Digital authoritarianism.¹

[Digital authoritarianism](#) encompasses a variety of methods and strategies that governments use to exert control over their citizens. These tactics pose a threat to human rights of privacy, free expression, and assembly.

[Freedom on the Net's 2022 report](#) on 'Countering an Authoritarian Overhaul of the Internet', found that global internet freedom has declined for a 12th consecutive year. This report found that in at least 53 countries, internet users were charged, arrested, or imprisoned for posting about political or social causes. In at least 40 countries, social, political, or religious content was blocked online. In at least 22 countries, authorities restricted the usage of social media or communication platforms. Examples of these

¹ Digital authoritarianism—the use of information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations ([Digital authoritarianism is on the rise, and democracies can't stand on the sidelines. \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#))

violations were found in countries such as Libya, Sudan, Rwanda, Jordan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Brazil, and Nigeria.

The ability to share information quickly and easily through online platforms has benefited civil society. Activists and journalists are able to expose human rights violations previously kept hidden. However, repressive regimes have sought ways to limit digital information sharing. This ranges from taking down social media platforms to cracking down on advocates who release information.

4. Continued decline in democracy.

Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) state in their report on the '[Global State of Democracy in 2022](#)' that the number of countries experiencing democratic regression remains at its highest level. More than twice as many countries have shifted towards authoritarianism compared to those moving towards democracy.

Global democracy faces multiple tipping points. Populists are gaining ground as democratic growth and innovations stagnate or decline. Even countries performing at middle to high levels of democratic standards are experiencing stalled progress. In nearly half of the 173 countries evaluated, there are deteriorations observed in at least one sub-category of democracy, even in nations faring better overall.

5. Dropping confidence in democratic government.

The World Values Survey, which covers 77 countries, shows that less than half of all respondents (47.4%) believe democracy is important, down from 52.4% in 2017. Confidence in democratic government is also dropping. Over the past years, the percentage of individuals endorsing the concept of a powerful leader who can bypass parliament and elections has steadily increased, climbing from 38% in 2009 to 52% in 2021.

Public opinion has also moved in favor of autocratic leadership. The figure below plots responses to the World Values Survey question: 'Would you say that "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?'

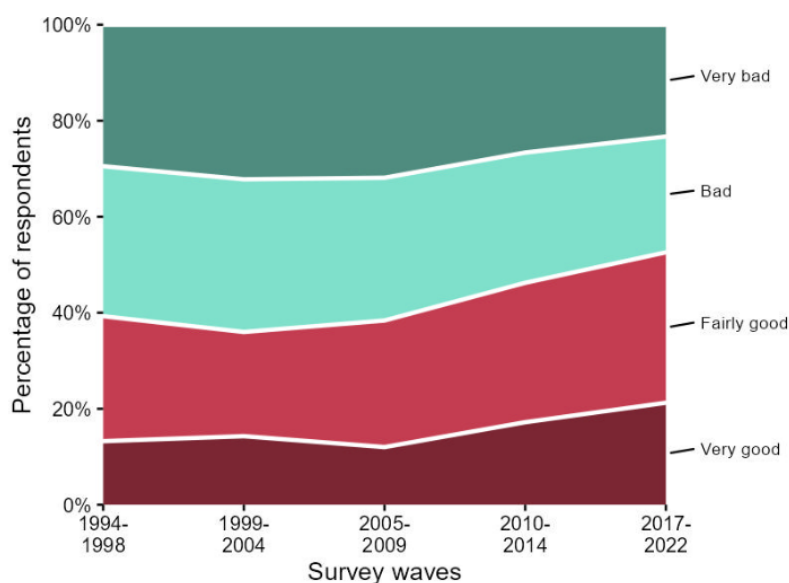


Figure from OECD report: ['The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment with International Standards and Guidance.'](#)

Key findings

1. Civil society is playing a key role in responding to conflicts and humanitarian crises—and facing retaliation.

Civil society plays a crucial role in responding to conflicts and crises, providing essential services, advocating for victims, monitoring human rights, and collecting evidence to hold those responsible accountable. However, civil society often faces repression and attacks from states who see it as a source of counter-power. Lack of recognition and stigmatizing narratives also hamper the ability to do vital work.

2. Catastrophic global governance failures highlight an urgent need for reform.

International institutions, including the UN Security Council, are often unable to take effective action due to bureaucratic approaches, veto power, and economic pressure from powerful countries. Civil society plays an essential role in engaging with international systems to push for ambitious commitments and monitor compliance. However, there are often barriers to participation. A well-developed reform agenda exists, but decision-makers need to be willing to challenge the status quo for it to be effective.

3. The right to protest is under attack—even in long-standing democracies.

The right to protest is under attack globally, with even peaceful protests being criminalized in some democracies. Governments use a wide range of tactics to crack down on protests, including lethal violence, surveillance, and harassment. Civil society groups are working to defend protest rights and engage with UN human rights machinery to expose violations and promote progressive norms. However, closing protest spaces offers a challenge for civil society, particularly in contexts where protests are the primary means to express dissent.

4. Disinformation is skewing public discourse, undermining democracy, and fueling hate.

Disinformation played a significant role in elections in various countries over 2022 and 2023, while also being a prevalent issue during the pandemic. Disinformation is being used by powerful authoritarian states to sow confusion over their violations of human and civil rights. Disinformation is pervasive in the pushback against women's and LGBTQI+ rights, and tech companies thrive on it. Fact-checking is only a first step, and a global effort is needed to counter disinformation, including better regulation of the tech industry.

5. Civil society is reinventing itself to adapt to a changing world.

Civil society is diversifying and expanding its tactics beyond conventional NGO models, with grassroots groups and networks, often led by women, young people, and Indigenous people, at the forefront. These groups rely on voluntary engagement, organize horizontally, and adopt participatory approaches and distributed leadership. They often achieve more with less. However, questions remain about their long-term sustainability. A major challenge ahead is how to sustain and channel this prodigious energy into achieving impact and systemic change, as well as how allies can meaningfully support their work.

Moving forward

These trends follow two decades of increasing government restrictions on civic space, most evident in restrictions on freedom of expression and the media, freedom of assembly and association, and repression of civil society. A global decline in the protection of civic space is unfortunately predicted to continue. AFSC is currently undertaking research on how digital safety and security is impacting civil society around the world, mapping how resources are reaching networks and their effectiveness, and continuing to support civil society actors working in repressive environments.