



CIVICUS at the 61st Regular Session of the Human Rights Council

(23 February – 2 April 2026)

Advocacy priorities

Overview

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the UN Human Rights Council this year, the UN human rights system faces sustained and coordinated attacks. Civil society's role is more critical than ever. It is essential for mobilising responses and for securing principled and consistent UN investment in human rights.

At the 61st session of UN Human Rights Council (23 February to 2 April 2026), CIVICUS will prioritise protecting civic space and civic freedoms amid escalating human rights crises. These crises are marked by violent repression and the breakdown of international legal protections. Guided by our mandate to strengthen citizen action, we will support civil society actors facing new or unprecedented risks. We will also enable their meaningful and inclusive engagement with the Council.

The important work of civil society is now directly at risk. Across the globe, human rights defenders, civil society organisations and grassroots face increasing threats, restrictions, and severe funding shortages. decades of hard-won progress are at risk of being undone by the breakdown in multilateralism and erosion of democracy.

In this moment, civil society and human rights champions must stand in solidarity to prevent further erosion of rights and to respond to the crises of our times. As warned by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, “attacks on and dismantling of international aid systems, combined with the intensifying securitisation of global agendas, pose a radical and urgent existential threat to fundamental freedoms.”

In this context, civic space is shrinking not only because of widespread restrictions across all world regions, but because 'the lifelines that once kept it alive are now deeply challenged'. The new edition of [CIVICUS Monitor](#) shows that over 73 percent of the world's population lives in countries where civic space is severely restricted. These are the worst records since 2018, with 83 out of 198 countries rated as having a repressed or closed civic space, indicating routine repression of fundamental civil society freedoms.

Against this backdrop, the Council should reaffirm its commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights by renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders as a crucial avenue to secure a safe environment for defenders at risk globally. It should also extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Torture due to serious concerns around the treatment of protesters, journalists and human rights defenders detained in record number in 2025 as our [global report](#) shows. On



country situations, the Council should extend the mandate of its mechanism on South Sudan, where victims of grave human rights violations remain without credible avenues to seek redress, and strengthen monitoring of [Iran](#), ensuring the adequate resourcing of the Special Rapporteur and the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission in a context of impunity and large scale repression of nationwide protests. The Council should also reinforce scrutiny on Venezuela during the transition through the mandates of the Office of the High Commissioner and that of the Fact-Finding Mission.

Additionally, the Human Rights Council should also address challenges in countries not on its agenda that require urgent action to prevent further violations, in the context of its preventative mandate under [General Assembly Resolution 60/251](#) to avert gross, systematic, and emerging human rights violations through dialogue, cooperation, and early warning systems.

Structural issues

Human rights under attack at the UN

The UN's human rights pillar is under serious strain. As the UN undergoes its UN80 reform process, human rights face additional risks from recent UN budget cuts. Over time, the prioritisation of other sectors has led to chronic underinvestment in human rights, signalling to member states that this area is of lesser importance and *de facto* limiting collaboration with civil society.

This situation is exacerbated by the recent adoption of the [2026 regular budget envisioning further cuts](#). These are particularly alarming at a time when some of the most egregious violations of human rights are taking place. The budget adoption represents a deeper reduction than initially proposed by Secretary-General under the UN80 process, calling for a 15% reduction in human rights spending, and will result in the loss of over 100 staff posts at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. This risks weakening the UN's capacity to collect evidence, protect civic space on the ground, and support States in building effective human rights protection systems. The cuts are likely to have direct consequences for human rights and civic space on the ground, reducing baseline protections for activists, communities, and independent groups working to defend core civic freedoms.

A brand new "Human Rights Group"

The proposal to establish a system-wide "human rights group" under the UN80 initiative is starting to take shape. The group is expected to be co-led by the Office of the High Commissioner and the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. While strengthening and better coordinating human rights work across UN pillars is essential, civil society views the



proposal with caution. Beyond the stated goal of “mainstreaming human rights,” its purpose, added value and likely impact remain unclear.

If adequately structured, empowered and resourced, the [Human Rights Group](#) could strengthen system-wide coordination and help to fully integrate human rights across UN activities, decision-making and oversight. However, creating new structures without independence, while cutting budgets for the human rights pillar risks weakening accountability. It could also limit civil society scrutiny and sideline established human rights narratives, actors, and standards.

Weakened multilateral human rights cooperation

Last year's decisions by the governments of Nicaragua and the US to withdraw from UN Human Rights Council scrutiny and disengage from the Universal Period Review (UPR) process set a troubling precedent. These actions risk weakening the checks and balances that allow States to be held accountable for their human rights records by peers and by civil society.

The UPR remains a crucial avenue to elevate civil society perspectives through informed and targeted recommendations. It demonstrates civil society's potential to exert social control and public pressure on States. Ensuring that all UN Member States complete their review cycles is essential. This process can be strengthened by better linking UPR recommendations to country reports of Special Procedures and investigative bodies, further deepening the engagement of local civil society.

Multilateralism is further undermined by the creation of coalitions of the willing, including the recently established “Group of Friends on Global Governance”. While the group formally commits to “international rule of law, multilateralism, a people-centered approach and taking real actions,” the positions and actions of some of its members tell a different story. Their efforts to defund the UN’s human rights work risk undermining human rights and fundamental freedoms. This trend should be counterbalanced by the creation of a multistakeholder “Group of Friends of Human Rights and Civic Space,” committed to defending the UN’s human rights mandate and strengthening accountability.

Reporting on the UN Guidance Note on Civic Space

The [UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#), published in 2020, is a landmark reaffirmation of public participation and civic space as priority areas. It positions these as drivers of change, and essential for the successful implementation of all three pillars of the UN, including human rights. The Note commits all UN entities to



supporting more systematic participation and strengthening civil society space across UN bodies.

However, the Note risks remaining a dead letter. The [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), which will co-lead the [Human Rights Group](#) under the UN80 process, is well positioned to champion its implementation. The office could report on good practices, map barriers to implementation, identify corrective actions, and collect evidence from other UN bodies, agencies and country offices. ‘Mainstreaming’ the Note is necessary as a prelude to fully integrating human rights and civic space across the UN system.

Thematic priorities

Protecting Human Rights Defenders (HRDs)

Three years after the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, there are numerous challenges HRDs continue to face. These include grave human rights violations such as arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, ill-treatment, persecution, and extrajudicial killing, amid increased surveillance, harassment, and other attempts to terrorise such critical voices.

Protecting HRDs at risk should be prioritised to ensure a sound, healthy, democratic civic space. At this session, the *UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders* will present a report on environmental HRDs. Across entire world regions, these defenders experience inadequate documentation because of lack of recognition, while legal reporting in many countries is severely restricted. Globally, environmental defenders face increasing violations and abuses and frequently lack adequate representation and assistance. In the global South, authorities routinely abuse the notification system to prevent climate justice activists from gathering and protesting, including using excessive force, selective or arbitrary arrest, and unlawful detention to prevent or disperse gatherings.

The appointment of a new mandate holder by the Council will be essential to ensuring a strong and effective system of Special Procedures. The new Special Rapporteur should continue reporting on the challenges facing other HRDs at risk, like those in exile and those belonging to historically excluded groups.

We call on States to:

1. Renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, as a key tool to promote and protect individuals and groups who peacefully work to advance human rights worldwide, for a further period of three years.



2. Appoint an independent, impartial, highly competent expert to serve as the new Rapporteur, whose background and priorities should reflect the diversity of HRDs and the voices of excluded groups.
3. Adopt collective and inclusive action plans with preventive and reactive measures to secure physical, mental, legal safety and protection to environmental HRDs and other HRDs at risk.
4. Adopt specific policies and legal frameworks to ensure that the voices of Indigenous peoples, who are systematically excluded in environmental decision-making, are heard and considered.
5. Involve the UN and other multilateral institutions in monitoring environmental protests and urge the release of unduly imprisoned environmental defenders.
6. Guarantee the protection of HRDs through judicial, legislative, administrative, technical and other necessary measures *vis-à-vis* the adoption and implementation of cyber security and cyber-crime laws.

Torture and ill-treatment, including in detention

The arbitrary detention of protesters, journalists ranked among the top ten violations of core civic freedoms in 2025. Such unlawful detention, including that of activists and other prisoners of conscience, often carries a risk of torture and ill-treatment. This raises serious concerns for the health and well-being of those already arbitrarily detained serving lengthy prison sentences related to their political and human rights activities, often imposed on politically motivated or other fabricated charges.

Many are currently subjected to ill-treatment in detention, including denial of adequate medical treatment, in violation of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. In some countries, severe torture and mistreatment are routine, even during initial or pre-trial detention. Today, there are thousands of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience suffering poor conditions and mistreatment, including some profiled in our [Stand As My Witness campaign](#). Reported abuses include targeted harassment, excessive solitary confinement, and arbitrary denial of health care.

We call on States to:

1. Promptly renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Torture for a further period of three years.
2. Call for the release of arbitrarily imprisoned and abused HRDs and political activists and demand accountability for abuse, torture and ill-treatment in detention settings.
3. Provide human rights-compliant treatment to detainees, including in relation to the detention of minors, with international detention standards.



4. Release political leaders and human rights defenders, and all other prisoners held solely for exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly.

Country-specific priorities

Country situations on Council agenda

Country	Civic Space Rating	Key Issues	Recommended Actions for States
Iran	Closed	<p>The human rights situation in Iran has rapidly deteriorated following nationwide protests that began on 28 December 2025 over economic hardships and expanded into broad calls for political reform.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brutal crackdown on nationwide protests, including killing over 3000 protesters according to the authorities alone • Mass arbitrary arrests and detentions as over 24000 people are reportedly detained • Internet and communications blackout • Threats, intimidation and criminalisation against the protesters including punishment by death penalty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for the immediate release of all those detained for peacefully exercising their rights including SAWM-profiled WHRDs. • Continue to support the complementary mandates of the Special Rapporteur and the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran. • Demand an end to excessive force, arbitrary detention and internet shutdowns. • Support accountability for serious violations, including torture, enforced disappearances and unlawful killings. • Amplify and protect the voices of Iranian civil society, inside and outside the country.



<p><u>South Sudan</u></p>	<p>Repressed</p>	<p>Civic space in South Sudan is deeply constrained amid political turmoil and repression, marked by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political repression and arbitrary arrests • Suppression of peaceful assembly and public servants • Restrictions on expression and media freedom • Internet and information control • Escalating violence and instability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand the immediate release of individuals arbitrarily detained in political contexts and ensure fair trials. • Urge the government to uphold freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression and access to information. • Support independent, international monitoring and documentation of rights violations. • Support the renewal of the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan
<p><u>Venezuela</u></p>	<p>Closed</p>	<p>Following the US unlawful military intervention in Venezuela, the civic space remains severely constrained and under threat due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declaring state of emergency and continued repression • Use of terrorism and national security charges to criminalise civil society and opposition voices • Militarisation and heightened control over public life that contributes to a wider environment of fear and repression • Civic freedoms continue to deteriorate amid political instability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand an end to arbitrary arrests and criminalisation of civil society and opposition actors • Condemn the State of External Commotion Decree and of all laws used to criminalise individuals perceived as political opponents or HRDs • Facilitate full, safe and independent access for international human rights protection mechanisms and support the renewal and adequate resourcing of international independent investigative mechanisms including the Fact-Finding Mission • Facilitate the return and strengthening of a fully mandated OHCHR country office. • Consider establishment of a dedicated international independent mechanism with meaningful civil society



			participation to advance a transitional justice process
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Country situations that require Council attention

Country	Civic Space Rating	Key Issues	Recommended Actions for States
India	Repressed	<p>Civic space in India remains repressed with sustained pressure on civil society, due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crackdown on peaceful protests and arrests of demonstrators • Internet shutdowns, censorship, and bans on books and critical content • Raids, deregistration and funding restrictions on NGOs • Activists held without bail under security laws; prolonged pre-trial detention • Use of UAPA and other laws to silence critics, students and HRDs • Frequent internet shutdowns used to curb mobilisation and restrict information • HRDs face raids, surveillance, smear campaigns and reprisals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urge legal reforms to prevent judicial abuse targeting civil society • Urge protection of the right to peaceful assembly compliance with international standards on the use of force against peaceful protesters • Urge the government to limit internet shutdowns to lawful, exceptional cases • Demand that CSOs can operate freely without politically motivated restrictions • Urge the release of arbitrarily detained HRDs, including Khurram Parvez, and strengthening of judicial independence • End misuse of counterterrorism and public order laws against dissent • Ensure protection for HRDs and accountability for attacks, including by calling for an international human rights investigation mechanism on India
Tajikistan	Closed	<p>Civic space in Tajikistan remains severely restricted, with an ongoing systematic repression of Pamiri Indigenous Peoples and independent civil society. The country was recently considered</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call on Tajik government to release all arbitrarily detained activists and HRDs, including those listed by CIVICUS' Stand as My Witness Campaign



		<p>under the UN Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure and the issues include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Systematic repression of Pamiri Indigenous communities, including extrajudicially killings, arbitrary detentions <i>en masse</i>, torture, and collective punishment• Violent crackdowns on peaceful protests; excessive use of force and mass arrests• intimidation and arbitrary detention of journalists, and criminalisation of criticism of state authorities• Over 700 NGOs are forcibly liquidated, amid unprecedented crackdown on civil society• Use of vague extremism, terrorism, and “anti-state” charges to silence activists, lawyers and HRDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• End systematic, state-led repression of Pamiri people and establish a UN-mandated independent investigative mechanism into the crackdown• Stop torture and ill-treatment of detainees and ensure access to adequate medical care in detention• Provide protection and humanitarian support to Pamiri refugees and asylum-seekers abroad• Support restoration of civic space, as well as protection of Pamiri Indigenous identity
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