

# Authorities maintain tight grip on civic freedoms in the MENA region

Findings based on data released today by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) which rates and tracks respect for fundamental freedoms in 196 countries.

[People Power Under Attack 2018](#), a report released today by CIVICUS shows that civic space in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains severely restricted. This data shows that, out of 19 countries, eight are rated closed, six are rated repressed, while five are obstructed. No MENA countries are rated open or narrowed.

Any attempt to challenge those in power is met with high-handedness and repression, dissenting voices and independent opinions are muzzled, protesters are arrested, detained and assaulted while civil society organisations face threats to their existence.

Our research shows that detention of human rights defenders is the most common civic space violation in the MENA region, occurring in 15 out of 19 countries. In Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan, a crackdown on environmental and human rights activists has led to the mass detention of activists. In Iran, detentions have also extended to lawyers representing detained activists.

The report also shows that attacks on activists defending women's rights is a very visible aspect of the wider crackdown, something starkly illustrated by the frequent detention of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in many MENA countries. This is confirmed by an analysis of the situation in Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, where the highest number of cases of detention of HRDs has been recorded. Women's rights activists have been detained for protesting the mandatory wearing of the hijab, speaking out on sexual harassment and advocating for women's right to drive. In some instances, their family members have also been intimidated in a bid to silence the activists.

## TOP 10 VIOLATIONS: MENA



■ HRD detained ■ Censorship ■ Attack on journalist ■ Harassment ■ Journalist detained  
■ Killing of journalist ■ Excessive force ■ Intimidation ■ Torture/ill-treatment ■ Protest disruption

Based on analysis of civic space updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor since 24th October 2016: 194 updates for MENA. The numbers above represent the percentage of reports in which that violation was referenced.

“Women have especially borne the brunt of closing civic space in the MENA region. Those defending women’s rights have become frequent targets of unjustified detention. Even in countries such as Saudi Arabia where supposed reforms including the women’s right to drive have made global headlines, women activists pushing for human rights and equality for women have been punished through systematic targeting and detention’ said Sylvia Mbataru, Civic Space Research Officer at CIVICUS.

The second most common tactic used to restrict civic space is censorship, a violation documented in 57 out of 194 reports from 16 countries in the MENA region. According to reports from the CIVICUS Monitor, censorship has taken many forms and sometimes involves banning media outlets in Yemen, blocking websites in the UAE, denial of permission to report on specific events in Algeria, arrest and detention of writers in Egypt, or the complete closure of media stations in some countries.

Another tactic commonly used has been attacks on journalists which was reported in 9 countries in the MENA region. This has been particularly endemic in Palestine following protests in Gaza which have led to the targeting of journalists. As conflicts continue in Yemen and Syria, incidents of attacks and killings of journalists have been particularly common.

Other violations frequently reported in the region include harassment of HRDs and protestors, detention of journalists, killing of journalists, use of excessive force by authorities usually during protests, intimidation of people expressing dissenting voices, use of torture and ill treatment as well as the disruption of protests.

Kuwait’s civic space rating has been downgraded from obstructed to repressed on the CIVICUS Monitor due to the continued targeting, threatening, arrest and prosecution of human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers for their online human rights work. A proposed new law which is aimed at regulating the publishing of content on all social media outlets has also raised concern, as the government tightens the reins on free expression. CSOs have also been targeted by authorities, an example being the dissolution of the board of directors of the Kuwait Al-Huriah society, a move which is believed to have been related to a tweet by one of its members.

Despite the gloomy picture, a few positive developments have been reported in the Monitor. In Lebanon, the Right to Access to Information law was passed by parliament in January 2017, eight years after the first draft was submitted. The law, which allows members of the public to access documents of a regulatory nature from public entities has been welcomed by rights advocates who view it as the beginning of a new era of accountability by authorities.

[Over twenty organisations](#) collaborate on the CIVICUS Monitor to provide an evidence base for action to improve civic space on all continents. The Monitor has published more than 1,400 [civic space updates](#) in the last two years, data which is analysed in People Power Under Attack 2018. Civic space in 196 countries is categorised as either **closed**, **repressed**, **obstructed**, **narrowed** or **open**, based on a [methodology](#) which combines several sources of data on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.

**For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:**

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