



Tens of thousands march in Hong Kong against the proposed Extradition Bill. Credit: Anthony Kwan/Getty Images

# PART 4

STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT 2020

# THE STATE OF DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS



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Time and again in 2019, people proved they want **more and better democracy**. In several countries where democratic freedoms have been denied, people took to the streets to demand that their voices be heard and their rights respected. Democracy is a shared human expectation, and its denial invariably sparked mass protests and civil society demands for reform, and continued to do so even in the face of civic space restrictions and violence from states and anti-rights groups.

Mass protests broke out in contexts where people were denied the basic right to elect those who rule in their name. They happened too in places where elections have been held regularly, but have not been free and fair, and in countries where incumbent leaders sent worrying signals that they were not inclined to give up their grip on power.

In 2019, people around the world showed they want real democracy – which must include free and fair electoral competition, the choice of genuine alternatives and an opportunity to debate a range of viewpoints before making an informed decision. They want incumbents to face the real risk of losing their positions, which is one of the mechanisms by which politicians remain accountable and answerable to the public. But in 2019 people's experiences were often those of disappointment, as incumbents rigged elections and stifled opposition to cling onto power, offering the

ceremony of democracy without its crucial content.

In several places the protests mounted in response to denials of democracy achieved great impact, as people succeeded in ejecting from power leaders who had sought to isolate themselves from democratic accountability. Still then people wanted more, and continued to demand more profound democratic transformations.

Civil society also continued to mobilise in the face of the right-wing populist and nationalist parties and politicians that have won influence in many contexts. In some countries these have gained power through electoral means, but reject other key aspects of democracy, such as respect for diverse opinions and minority views, and acceptance of continuing democratic accountability, including the oversight provided by civil society. In 2019, right-wing populists and nationalists made some further gains, with harsh consequences for excluded groups and the civil society that defends their rights. Even when they did not power themselves, they influenced the agendas of more established political parties. But in several places, they also encountered setbacks, suggesting that under the ongoing conditions of political volatility that characterise many societies, more progressive and rights-oriented alternatives can also hold sway, offering possibilities of space for and partnership with civil society.



People take part in a rally organised by the new anti-fascist Sardines movement in Rome, Italy. Credit: Antonio Masiello/Getty Images

## 1. DEMANDS FOR DEMOCRACY: KEY MOVEMENTS AND TRANSITIONS IN 2019

ALGERIA, ETHIOPIA, HONG KONG, PUERTO RICO AND SUDAN



Protesters in Khartoum, Sudan, call for a civilian government in June 2019. Credit: David Degner/Getty Images

Protests for democratic freedoms in 2019 showed once again that demands for democracy are universal and can break out with little warning and in places where they might be unexpected.. Sudan's people bravely demanded the end of decades-long repression, and in Hong Kong, people stood up to China's immense power. Women and young people played a leading role in protests for democracy in Hong Kong and Sudan, and in many other countries. In Sudan, and in Algeria and Puerto Rico, corrupt and self-serving leaders were toppled after people took to the streets.

But people demanded more fundamental change, beyond merely having a new face at the helm: in Sudan people refused to accept military rule

following the removal of a dictator; in Algeria people sought a change to a system of elite power that keeps most people isolated from decision-making and impoverished; in Puerto Rico, people questioned the cosy bipartisanship that continues to fail them. In some places, democracy remains a dream deferred: China has conceded little ground to Hong Kong's democracy movement; in Algeria, the elite quietly reasserted itself. But everywhere, the hunger for democracy remained, and the struggles continued. People protesting in 2019 wanted not just a change of leaders and institutions, but more just, equal and sustainable societies to come as a result of democracy: demands, still largely unfulfilled, that run not just through this chapter but through every page of this report.



## SUDAN: PEOPLE DARE TO DREAM

At the start of 2019, few would have expected that Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, who had brutally suppressed all opposition for three decades, would soon be out of a job. But the protests that started to gather in **December 2018** ousted him and were the start of a process – marked by extraordinary courage in the face of brutal violence – that could see the country make the long-term transition towards democracy.

As was often the case with the protests of 2019 ([see section](#)), Sudan's uprising initially sprang from discontent with shortages of essential goods and rising prices, before turning to demands for political reform, including the resignation of al-Bashir. They followed on from protests over sharp increases in the costs of essential goods in January 2018 that were **severely repressed**. Behind these economic problems – in an oil-rich country – lay decades of misrule and corruption.

Abdel-Rahman El Mahdi of the **Sudanese Development Initiative** tells the story of the beginnings of the protests, and the way in which the state's customary response of repressive violence only fuelled people's anger:<sup>1</sup>

*The wave of protests was initially sparked by the rising cost of living and the increasing difficulties the Sudanese people face in meeting their basic needs. Poor economic and fiscal policy coupled with unbridled corruption had led to record high inflation rates, widening poverty and causing critical shortages in basic commodities and services. Shortages of fuel and bread across the country had people standing in long queues for hours to get these basic living commodities. A chronic liquidity crisis where banks and ATMs were only dispensing up to 2,000 Sudanese pounds (approximately US\$40) a day to account holders was also making things worse and fuelling a lack of confidence in the banking system and the overall situation of the country.*

*The peaceful demonstrations that started in the capital, Khartoum, in December 2018 quickly spread across Sudan. Throughout major*



People outside central military headquarters demand a civilian transition government in Khartoum, Sudan. Credit: Stringer/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

<sup>1</sup> All interviews quoted in this report are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews can be found on our website at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/news/interviews>.

*cities people came out in their hundreds calling for reforms and demanding immediate solutions to address the crisis that was bringing the country to the brink of collapse, but demands quickly escalated in reaction to the government's heavy-handed response to the protests.*

Following the fall of al-Bashir, **Hassan Abdel Ati** of the National Civic Forum similarly emphasised the long-term roots of the protests and outlines how attempts at suppressing protests backfired:

*The protests were the culmination of the struggles that started 30 years ago. But the latest events were triggered mainly by some economic causes. It is not only an issue of fuel and bread as people are trying to put it, but it is also related to the harassment that accompanied the hardship economic measures and that were applied by the government.*

*The streets were already saturated due to the behaviour of the regime and the use of torture, imprisonment and abuse. This was followed by large-scale detention of people during protests. In Khartoum alone we had about 700 to 800 protesters detained, while according to some estimates there were total of about 3,000 detentions.*

On 22 February the government declared a state of emergency in response to protests, giving itself **extra powers** to search and arrest people, raid premises, ban gatherings and limit the circulation of news, and imposing heavy sentences for violations of these strictures. This made it easier for it to abduct, arbitrarily arrest and detain people associated with protests, and torture them in prison. The state arrested **journalists** and cracked down on academia: in February, 16 professors from Khartoum University **were arrested** for planning to join a protest. Recognising the critical role of students in the protests, the authorities also targeted them, **raiding universities**; in one such instance, teargas was used to break up a **protest** of several hundred students at the National University campus in Khartoum on 7 March.

Speaking as the protests were still unfolding, Abdel-Rahman provided a vivid picture of the extent of the state violence:

*The response of the Sudanese authorities to these peaceful protests was violent and repressive. By January, according to government accounts, 800 protesters had been detained by Sudanese security personnel and 19 people killed in clashes. Other, more impartial sources provided much higher figures. According to Sudanese activists and medical workers, **at least 40 people** were killed. Those arrested included protesters, journalists, doctors, lawyers and opposition party leaders.*

*Unbridled violence is being actively practised by different elements of the government security*

“THE PROTESTS WERE THE CULMINATION OF THE STRUGGLES THAT STARTED 30 YEARS AGO. THE LATEST EVENTS WERE TRIGGERED MAINLY BY SOME ECONOMIC CAUSES, BUT THE STREETS WERE ALREADY SATURATED DUE TO THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE REGIME AND THE USE OF TORTURE, IMPRISONMENT AND ABUSE.”

HASSAN ABDEL ATI







Thousands of Sudanese people demonstrate outside military headquarters to urge the military to hand power over to a civilian government. Credit: Stringer/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

*apparatus. Accounts of live ammunition fire, beating and torture being used have grown to the point that it seems that they have become common practice by the security apparatus to manage demonstrations. Videos documenting some of these inhumane and violent responses and showing the extent of the brutality of the authorities are constantly being circulated on social media. Hospitals where some of the injured protesters sought medical attention have also come under attack by the authorities.*

But the people stood firm, and crucially, military support started to ebb away from the president. On 10 April, civil society organised a major sit-

in outside the army headquarters in Khartoum, demanding the army withdraw its support for the regime. This was pivotal. The following day, the army arrested the president and announced it would take over for the next two years. After 30 years of misrule, the al-Bashir regime was over.

What happens when long-term presidents are deposed by the military is often pretty dismal. [Zimbabwe](#) ([see section](#)) offers one recent sad example of how little can change in reality, and how the military, long the agents of repression, may continue their brutal habits. But the mass street protests had been the decisive element in bringing about change,

and those many voices simply refused to fall silent. While in mid-May the Sudanese public prosecutor **charged** al-Bashir with the killing of protesters, people knew that after three decades, his appointees were everywhere in the governance structure, and would not go without a struggle.

What happened next was not the usual story. Continued military rule was avoided because many people bravely kept on stepping forward. They continued protesting against the new Transitional Military Council (TMC). The sit-in outside army headquarters remained. Protesters did not want a coup; they insisted on a revolution.

The TMC did not grant people their revolution easily. It **announced** that the national emergency would continue and imposed a curfew. As protests went on, the new government not only continued the violent policies of the old, but intensified them. At least five protesters were killed on **13 May**, and there were other instances during May of security forces using live ammunition. But the most infamous day came on 3 June, when the peaceful sit-in outside army headquarters was violently **raided**, with **over 100 people** killed, although the number of deaths was unclear because paramilitary Rapid Support Force (RSF) officers were reported to have thrown dozens of bodies into the River Nile in an attempt to cover up the scale of the atrocity. Officers were reported to have blocked the exits and opened fire indiscriminately. RSF officers were also reported to have raped **over 70 people** during the attack and its aftermath, and **prevented** medical access and attacked and threatened medical workers. A number of **children** were reportedly killed in the 3 June violence and in the ensuing days. In the aftermath of the slaughter, RSF officers stayed on the streets, beating people.

The brutality of this action brought a halt to the sit-in. A general strike was chosen as the new tactic, enabling people to protest while staying safely at home. The military might have thought it had won. But not for long. People were gathering themselves for renewed protest. On 30 June, tens of thousands of people again **took to the streets** of Khartoum and cities across the country, demanding that the TMC hand over power to a civilian government. Live ammunition was again used against them and at least seven people were killed, while around 200 more were injured, several

with bullet wounds.

The TMC also continued al-Bashir's practice of suppressing the media. On 30 May it **shut down** the Khartoum bureau of Al Jazeera and banned its journalists from reporting. A mobile internet shutdown **started** on 3 June as the brutal action against the sit-in unfolded, and broadened into a **total shutdown** from 10 June.

Many of those putting themselves in the firing line and defying danger brutality were women, particularly young women, demanding a different future in a country where they have systematically been denied rights. Alaa Salah, a 22-year old student photographed clad in white leading the protests from the top of car, became a powerful **symbol** of resistance to military rule. Many other women, such as **Mervat al-Neel**, stood alongside her, insisting not only that the government change, but that new arrangements make space for women's voices after decades of being shut out of any say. Many women removed their face coverings, symbolising their liberation from patriarchy. They made the point that women had experienced the worst exclusion and injustice under al-Bashir, who had introduced conservative interpretations of Islamic laws. Hassan points out that many protests specifically focused on the struggle for women's rights:

*There were a lot of protests related to the laws discriminating against women, violence against women, provoked usually by the state, the special courts designed mainly for punishing women and the use of force.*

The leading role played by women was one of the key distinguishing features of the 2019 democracy protests compared to those of the past, and was key to their eventual success, because women's participation and leadership demonstrated how broad-based and demanding of real change the movement was. The **message** was that everyone must take part in building the new Sudan. Of course this called for considerable bravery, as women activists were targeted and **risked** sexual violence by security forces, such as the 3 June atrocities, along with other gender-specific **tactics** of repression, such as denial of access to children and threats to their families.



Protesters also found creative ways around repression. In response to the **internet shutdown**, people spread information and calls to mobilisation through murals, graffiti and printed brochures. Later, they would **rename streets** after people who had been killed, as a way of keeping their memory alive and demanding justice. Solidarity protests were held around the world among the Sudanese diaspora. On 19 June, for example, hundreds protested in Nairobi, Kenya to **express solidarity** with Sudanese civil society, but as is often the case in Kenya, they too were met with a harsh security force response.

Alongside people's protests, the other crucial element in bringing change was regional pressure. The African Union (AU) has often been criticised for taking insufficient action towards its authoritarian members, but this time the protest clamour and horrific violence were simply too significant to ignore. While Sudan's strategic allies – notably Saudi Arabia – were predictably quiet, on 6 June the AU **suspended** Sudan's membership and warned of further actions if a transitional democratic regime was not established. Several African governments called on the TMC to stop the violence and allow protests to continue peacefully. The European Union (EU) strongly condemned the lethal use of force and stated that this threatened to hamper its bilateral relationship with Sudan.

All this pressure eventually told. Following an AU-brokered **negotiation** involving representatives of Ethiopia – itself embracing rapid change (see below) – and Mauritania, military and opposition leaders signed a **political agreement** on 17 July and a full **power-sharing agreement** on 4 August. The deal replaced the TMC with a sovereign council combining civilian and military representatives, with a roadmap to democratic elections for a new government to be held in 2022. The agreement recognised that democracy, after three decades of dictatorship, corruption, internal conflict and ethnic and religious strife, could not happen overnight, but it made clear that this was where change should lead.

Thousands took to the streets, this time not in protest but celebration. At the same time, protest leaders emphasised the need for justice for the many people killed in protests: ahead of the signing of the political agreement, tens of thousands had protested to insist that pro-democracy leaders demand justice. In September, the prime minister **announced** that



Protesters listen to the Friday sermon during a mass sit-in outside military headquarters in Sudan. Credit: David Degner/Getty Images



a national investigation committee into the 3 June killings would be established. While the committee is supposed to be independent, concern was however expressed about its inclusion of a ministry of defence representative.

After months in detention al-Bashir was **put on trial** in August on a range of corruption charges. During the trial he confessed to having misappropriated funds from Saudi Arabia. In December he was **found guilty** of corruption, receiving illegal gifts and possessing foreign currency, and sentenced to two years in detention. The confiscation was ordered of millions of dollars of currency he possessed. But many people demanded that he face more serious charges and punishments for his human rights crimes. Al-Bashir has long been the subject of a warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur, where hundreds of thousands of people died. In February 2020, the government **said** that those wanted by the ICC should appear before the court, holding out hope that al-Bashir will face international justice. But beyond the symbolism of the former dictatorial head of state being locked up, people in the protest movement also want the net to be cast more widely. They urged that former al-Bashir associates, including those still in government, be brought to trial.

A small moment of redress came on 3 September, when a court **ordered** telecommunications companies MTN and Sudani to apologise to their customers for disrupting access to their networks in June. A further promising move for the freedom of expression came that same month, when the Telecommunications and Post Regulatory Authority was placed under the sovereign council rather than the ministry of defence, ensuring its **independence** from the military.

People showed their willingness to take to the streets again on 21 October, when thousands mobilised to call for the **dissolution** of al-Bashir's National Congress Party; the government **disbanded it** the following month. In an acknowledgement of the leading role of women in the revolution, the government also repealed a series of laws that had been used to regulate women's behaviour, including laws that determined how women could dress and interact with men other than their husbands and family.

Many challenges remain, and civil society needs to be able to play its role in helping to tackle them. Abdel-Rahman points to the need to open up the space for civil society as part of any reform:

*An important area that needs to be tended to is the opening of civic space. Dimensions of civic space within this domain that need attention would include human rights and the rule of law, the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, citizen participation, the freedom of religion and the right to non-discrimination. Tangible progress on these fronts is a prerequisite ahead of any constitutional reform process or elections that would ease the transition to a more secure path to democracy.*

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ABDEL-RAHMAN EL MAHDI



The path to open civic space and democracy is far from assured. The new government will have to address the ingrained economic malaise that sparked the protests, and which remains. The demands for justice for the many who died at the hands of the military have not been satisfied. Al-Bashir's deep state is not yet dismantled, and armies rarely concede a stake in power willingly; there are numerous examples – neighbouring Egypt ([see section](#)) provides one – of military leaders adopting civilian guises to maintain their grip on power. But Sudan's people have come to understand their own power, and those who seek to rule their country can expect to hear the many voices of protest again if they fail to deliver on the expectations of a hard-won revolution.

## HONG KONG: A DECISIVE SHIFT IN DEMANDS FOR DEMOCRACY

The bravery of Sudan's protesters was matched by that of Hong Kong's. It takes real courage to stand up to the awesome might of China's vast machinery of authoritarian repression. But Hong Kong democracy protesters did it again and again in 2019, refusing to back down in the face of an increasingly violent state response.

Protests were triggered by a specific threat: the Hong Kong authorities proposed an Extradition Bill to allow the extradition of prisoners to countries that Hong Kong does not currently have such arrangements with, notably mainland China. The obvious concern this raised was that the Chinese state would be able to extract dissidents from Hong Kong and subject them to the same harsh treatment meted out to anyone who expresses dissent in China.

But as often happens when protests take off, this issue became a prism through which broader concerns about Hong Kong's relationship with China were refracted – about its pro-Beijing administration, the Chinese government's growing influence and the lack of a truly democratic say in the governance of Hong Kong. The protests became a renewed and resurgent democracy movement. The Extradition Bill was suspended in June and formally withdrawn in October, but this did nothing to alleviate protests; people saw themselves as engaged in a decisive struggle for democracy.

Democracy movement organiser **Johnson Ching-Yin Yeung** of the **Hong Kong Civil Hub** emphasises the long-term origins of the protests:

*When Hong Kong was decolonised in 1997, China signed an international treaty promising that people in Hong Kong would enjoy a high degree of autonomy. In other words, Hong Kong would have its own government, legislation, courts and jurisdiction. But China is not fulfilling that promise and Hong Kong is slowly becoming more like China due to Chinese intervention in our government and judiciary.*

*Following the 2014 Umbrella Movement, there have been increasing restrictions on the freedom of association, and for the first time in decades the government made use of colonial-era laws and outlawed organisations that advocated for Hong Kong's independence.*

*Political participation has also been under attack. In 2017, for the first time since 1997, a few lawmakers were disqualified and expelled from the legislature. In the past three elections there have been disqualifications of candidates. This is becoming a major tactic used by China, based on claims that certain candidates are not respecting the law or they will not be loyal to Beijing. This explains why at some point people decided to take their grievances to the streets, given that most institutional channels for political demands are shut down.*

The protests were instantly large and outspoken, taking place weekly, and marking symbolic moments, such as the anniversary of the city's handover by the UK to China on 1 July, emphasising the betrayal of the handover agreement. On that day, after a peaceful march of around half a million people, hundreds of protesters **broke into** the legislative building, graffitied its walls and flew the former colonial flag. Protests built up to a big showdown on 1 October, China's National Day, with the Chinese state determined to celebrate 70 years of mainland communist rule. The Chinese government was desperate for the day to pass without disruption; protesters in Hong Kong would not allow that, and the day was marked by mass protests and violence.

Johnson describes the early protests and growing demands, and the state violence mustered in response:





Protesters hold placards during a rally against the Extradition Bill in Hong Kong on 9 June 2019. Credit: Anthony Kwan/Getty Images

*On 9 June, more than a million people mobilised against the Extradition Bill. Three days later, the legislature decided to continue the process regardless of the opposition seen on the streets, so people besieged the parliamentary building. The Hong Kong police reacted with extreme brutality, firing teargas and rubber bullets, shooting into people's heads and eyes.*

*There was a huge outcry because we had never experienced this kind of repression before, and two million people – almost a quarter of the population of Hong Kong – took part in the protests that took place four days after.*

*From then on, protesters had a few additional demands on top of the initial demand that the extradition agreement be withdrawn. Protesters demanded the release of the arrested demonstrators and the withdrawal of the characterisation of the protests as riots, which is cause enough to hold someone and convict them: all it takes is for a defendant to have been present at the protest scene to face up to 10 years in prison for rioting.*

*Protesters also demanded an independent inquiry into police activity. We've documented a lot of torture during detentions. Excessive force is used all the time against peaceful protests, so people really want the police to be held accountable. A recent survey showed that 80 per cent of the population support this demand. But the government is relying solely on the police to maintain order, so they cannot risk such investigation.*

*Last but not least, there is the demand of universal suffrage and democratic rights, without which it is difficult to foresee anything else changing for real.*

*What did not change was the government reaction and the police repression. Thousands of people were injured during the protests. The official number is around 2,600 but this is a very conservative estimate because more than half of the injured people were not brought to public hospitals and did not seek medical assistance because they were afraid they would be arrested. Some doctors and nurses organised*

*underground settlements to treat serious injuries like infections or rubber bullet injuries. But they had to remain anonymous and there simply were not enough of them and they didn't have enough medical supplies.*

*Lots of people have gone missing. Students and activists who are arrested are often deprived of their right to a lawyer and a phone call, and no one knows where they are detained. In many cases, it's hard to verify whether people are in fact missing or have fled the country.*

Repression came directly from the state and also from more shadowy forces. For example, on 21 July a group of men wearing white shirts and masks attacked protesters and commuters on their way back from an anti-government demonstration in Yuen Long railway station, injuring **several** people, some of them critically. Activists and lawmakers **accused the police** of standing by while the assaults took place, and pro-Beijing officials were alleged to have hired the attackers.

Deaths and serious injuries were inevitable. During the China National Day protests, 18-year old student **Tsang Chi-kin** was shot in the chest with live ammunition at point blank range, while many others were hospitalised; while he survived, insult was literally added to injury when the authorities said Tsang would be **charged** with rioting and attacking the police. In late October a man handing out leaflets for pro-democracy protests was **stabbed** by a man shouting pro-China slogans; earlier in the week a protest organiser was hospitalised after being attacked by men with hammers. November saw **two deaths** within a week: a bystander died, reportedly after being hit by a brick, and a student died after falling from a building and sustaining head injuries. Violence in November left **two people** in a critical condition as a protester was shot in the stomach by police and a man was set on fire after arguing with protesters.

The policing of the protests meant that violence was designed in, rather than an accidental consequence, with police violence escalating as protests continued. The police deployed live ammunition, teargas, water cannon using blue dye to identify people for arrest, rubber bullets and baton charges, alongside undercover tactics. There were numerous reports of police forcing people into the city's subway system and using the confined



“THE HONG KONG PROTEST MOVEMENT IS A LEADER-FULL MOVEMENT: IT IS FULL OF LEADERS AND IS RUN BY COUNTLESS SMALL NETWORKS OF TALENTED PEOPLE CAPABLE OF ORGANISING AND COORDINATING ACTION ON THEIR OWN.”

JOHNSON CHING-YIN YEUNG



space to unleash indiscriminate violence. Many people’s trust in the police was shattered as a result: in September, a **poll** showed that 48.3 per cent of people in Hong Kong had zero trust in the police, compared to the 6.5 per cent who had expressed this sentiment before the start of the protests.

That this level of repression was unable to quell the democracy movement was in part down to the sheer number of people involved. But it was also a result of the diffuse nature of its organisation. It was often characterised as a **leaderless** movement, in common with many other protests around the world that have organised horizontally rather than hierarchically. But this does not mean that the movement was disorganised. As Johnson points out, it would be more accurate to describe it as decentralised; lots of people took the initiative. Technology was part of how this was achieved, but its uses evolved as the protests went on, and it was never more important than the people involved:

*The Hong Kong protest movement is a leader-full movement: it is full of leaders and is run by countless small networks of talented people capable of organising and coordinating action on their own.*

*During the first few months at least, people would rely on their phones and the Telegram app. People would have strategic discussions and channel these discussions into a Telegram channel. These are not the safest communication tools but they can hold more than 3,000 subscribers, which means that you can speak to 3,000 people at the same time, you can share action timetables, the site of protests or the location of the police with a huge number of people. We use a live map to inform protesters where the police are and where the protests are taking place, so they can avoid being arrested. Another app shows which businesses and stores are supportive of the movement. Pro-democracy businesses appear in yellow, while pro-government ones appear in blue.*

*But after a few months, people started using online apps less and less. They would instead form their own groups and organise their own actions. There are frontier leaders, first aiders, people working on documentation, people who organise street protests – each is doing their own thing while at the same time warning others about clashes and organising timetables. This is how we use civic tech.*

Another aspect of the democracy movement’s resilience lay in its broad composition, as the protests became possibly the largest and certainly the most diverse in Hong Kong’s history. As in 2014, young people, born since the handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China in 1997, were prominent. They are the generation who have grown up under the rubric of ‘one nation two systems’ and the betrayed promise of respect for human rights and progress towards universal suffrage. Among them were many young people taking political action for the first time. But while a generational divide between these young protesters and their less radical parents was sometimes observed, in 2019 the democracy movement

spread more broadly than before. Small businesses held **shutdowns**, and teachers and unionised workers as well as students supported protests. When protests spread from weekends and evenings to weekday daytimes, office workers came out and protested on their lunch break.

Protests stretched out from the centre of Hong Kong, where past mobilisations had concentrated, to the suburbs, including those closer to the Chinese mainland. These areas, seen as more traditionally working class, had not experienced protests before. As a result the democracy movement seemed more **united** than in the past, a distinct feature when compared to the fragmented initiatives that resulted from 2014's protests, as Johnson highlights:

*While the demography of the protests is quite diverse in terms of age, background and social class, more than the 50 per cent of protesters are female, and the major force of the protests are people aged 20 to 49. There is also a strong presence of highly educated people: more than 85 per cent of protesters have tertiary education or above.*

*But a notable characteristic of this disparate protest movement has been its unity, which may have resulted from the longstanding repression of civil society. When the leaders of the 2014 protests – most of them young students – were sentenced to prison, older people showed up at the protests because they felt that they had not been doing enough. People also united against police brutality, because there was no previous history of such a serious crackdown on protesters and people felt morally responsible to show up in support.*

*Another key lesson concerns the importance of the unity between the moderate side and the radical front of the protests. Given that even authorised protests would be dispersed with teargas for no reason, some people began resorting to more militant actions to combat the police and protect their space. Some social movement analysts claim that radical incidents diminish popular support for the movement, but this does not seem to be happening in Hong Kong. In a recent survey, more than 60 per cent of respondents said they understood the use of violence. I suppose that one reason why people do not reject militant actions is that they view the government and the police as responsible*



Jimmy Sham, a candidate for the Civil Human Rights Front, campaigns ahead of the District Council elections. Credit: Kyodo News via Getty Images



*for most of the violence, and view violence by protesters as a fairly understandable response. Another reason is that radical protesters have been careful not to target ordinary people but only the police and pro-government businesses.*

*According to recent polls, almost 90 per cent of the people supported independent investigation of human rights violations, more than 70 per cent demanded the resignation of the Hong Kong Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, and 75 per cent supported universal suffrage. That kind of popular support has remained stable for several months, which is pretty amazing.*

This unity and acceptance of diverse methods was also highlighted in an earlier interview, conducted at the height of the protests, with **Wong Yik-mo** of the **Civil Human Rights Front**, an umbrella body of Hong Kong's pro-democracy groups:

*From the 2014 Occupy Movement we learned that we should not blame each other, even if we tend to use different means of protest, such as peaceful demonstrations or some tactics such as storming buildings. In the course of the current campaign we have come to admit that all the protesters love Hong Kong, and that only by recognising each other's effort can we be strong enough to fight against the government.*

As the protests developed, **tactics evolved** and diversified. Creativity was key. The protests repurposed symbols of the 2014 protest movement, such as '**Lennon walls**' – vast paper mosaics of protest information – and umbrellas. On 24 August, protesters formed a **human chain** of more than 200,000 people across the city to demand freedom and democracy, in a tactic inspired by the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the **Baltic Way**, in which two million people formed a human chain across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to demand independence from the Soviet Union. Protesters organised supply lines and set social media alerts to be triggered in case they were detained. They flew their **own version** of Hong Kong's flag, with the colour changed to black and the flower emblem wilted and dying. They used laser pointers to dazzle the facial recognition technology that has become a key part of Chinese surveillance. When undercover police started to infiltrate protests, protesters **tucked in** their shirts to distinguish themselves from agents trying to conceal weapons. This fluidity of protest organising is something Wong points to:

*The Civil Human Rights Front organised demonstrations the 'traditional' way, that is, by notifying the police and advertising our plans beforehand. But many other protesters, such as those surrounding the police headquarters, organised and mobilised through the internet. It happens often that people discuss strategies online and when some good ideas come up, people echo and support them, and that is how tactics are chosen. People then know what to do, without the need for clear instructions.*

“WE SHOULD NOT BLAME EACH OTHER, EVEN IF WE TEND TO USE DIFFERENT MEANS OF PROTEST. ALL THE PROTESTERS LOVE HONG KONG, AND ONLY BY RECOGNISING EACH OTHER'S EFFORT CAN WE BE STRONG ENOUGH TO FIGHT AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT.”

WONG YIK-MO



Tactical fluidity and dispersed organisation helped the protests sustain themselves, as Johnson attests:

*Several elements explain why people keep showing up and why the movement is so resilient against government repression. First, people deploy their actions in their own neighbourhoods. We disperse action rather than concentrate it, because when we use concentration tactics, such as holding a protest in front of a government building, we become an easy target for the police. In the face of dispersed actions, in comparison, the police would try to disperse protesters but would often end up attacking passers-by or people going about their business in their own neighbourhoods. For many people not involved directly in the protests, this was also a wake-up call and functioned as a recruitment mechanism: police brutality ceased to be a far-away problem; instead, it hit home and became personal, triggering a protective reaction.*

*Lennon Walls appear in various places and people use them to send and receive information about the protests. People also put posters in bus stops so when people are waiting for the bus, they can get information about the protests. People sing in protest in shopping malls. This way, people use their lunchtime to sing a song and protest while going about their business, and they reach people who don't read the news and don't pay much attention to politics. That is one of the key lessons here.*

*A big lesson that we've learned concerns the effectiveness of creativity and humour to offset government repression. Protesters used laser tags to disable cameras used for the surveillance of protesters, so people started to get arrested for buying laser tags. After a student was arrested for possessing a laser tag, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in a public space and used laser tags to point at a public building. Another example of an effective response took place in early October. There is a law that states that people can be jailed for a year if they wear a mask or anything covering their faces, so people responded in defiance, forming a human chain in which everyone was wearing some kind of mask.*

Police violence also provoked retaliation, marking a break from the normally peaceful tactics of protesters, which included people throwing bricks and petrol bombs as well as building barricades. Amid escalating violence, tourism numbers collapsed and business as usual became untenable. An at times violent occupation of the airport in August saw almost a thousand flights **cancelled**. By October, the impact of the protests had been such that Hong Kong's economy was in **recession**.

On 4 October the government **reactivated** colonial-era emergency regulations that gave it broad powers to suppress protests, the first time these had been used since the handover from the UK. Under these powers the authorities passed the Anti-Mask Law, banning protesters from concealing their identity. These strict new measures provoked an angry response in which people set fire to metro stations and vandalised mainland-owned businesses. Police responded to the violence with more live ammunition and teargas.

The authorities increasingly came to target universities, several of which were **occupied** and barricaded by student protesters. The police **claimed** that universities were a 'refuge for criminals' after police and students clashed in November at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Protesters **took over** several university campuses. Classes in schools and universities were suspended and many universities closed early for the year. The police **lay siege** to the Polytechnic University, seeking to keep student protesters pinned down inside, before protesters eventually surrendered to the police.

Alongside violence came increasingly intrusive surveillance, widespread state propaganda and detentions. The authorities **checked** the phones of Hong Kong residents when they entered mainland China, seeking to identify protesters. At least a **dozen** Chinese residents who crossed from mainland China to Hong Kong to protest were held and interrogated by police upon return. The state also **denied entry** to Hong Kong of several people who have criticised it, including journalists, academics and civil society personnel. In January 2020, the head of Human Rights Watch, **Kenneth Roth**, was barred from entering Hong Kong.

Vilification was another state tactic. The Chinese government accused



protesters of terrorism and its official media depicted pro-democracy activists as ‘**mobsters**’. As protests wore on into November, Carrie Lam described protesters as ‘enemies of the public’ and police were heard calling protesters ‘cockroaches’, marking a dangerous escalation of dehumanising language.

Alongside this, the Chinese government spread disinformation through **Twitter** ads; the sheer scale of the disinformation industry was hinted at by the fact that **YouTube** took down 200 hundred channels and **Twitter** and

Facebook suspended almost 1,000 accounts that were found to be part of a coordinated campaign against the democracy movement. In October Apple removed the Hong Kong protest app **HKmap** from its App Store, citing concerns that it was intended to circumvent the law, leaving people questioning whether the state had applied pressure on the tech giant.

The threats were very real for civil society personnel: on 26 August, **staff members** of a civil society organisation (CSO) in mainland China with close ties to Hong Kong civil society were arrested under accusations of state



Hundreds of thousands rally against the Extradition Bill in Hong Kong on 9 June 2019. Credit: Anthony Kwan/Getty Images



subversion. On 30 August, high-profile democracy activists Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow were **arrested** and charged with organising and taking part in an illegal assembly and inciting protest. Permission to hold a mass rally on the fifth anniversary of the start of the Umbrella Movement protests had been denied. Earlier that day, **Andy Chan Ho-tin**, head of the banned Hong Kong National Party, was arrested at the airport as he was about to travel to Japan. It appeared to be a round-up, with several others arrested at the same time.

If the authorities thought they could stop the diffuse protest movement by targeting and detaining figureheads, they were of course wrong. But the increasingly harsh actions of the authorities took their toll on frontline protesters and created new support needs, as Johnson relates:

*A lot of young protesters are traumatised by the violence they have witnessed and experienced. We have support groups with social workers and psychologists, but they cannot provide support in their official capacity or they would find themselves under pressure by their employers who take money from the government. Social workers are also at risk and the police constantly harass them. To strengthen self-care and gain resilience for the battle ahead, we need to train more people and create support groups to help people cope, control their stress and share their stories.*

One of the sources of encouragement for protesters was the knowledge that their voices were echoing around the world and winning support. Johnson relates how protesters started to seek international support and solidarity:

*We've come to understand the importance of global solidarity and leveraging geopolitics. The Hong Kong diaspora has organised a lot of lobbying and advocacy in various cities around the world. We have also lobbied foreign governments and supported the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, a bill that was introduced in the US Congress following the Umbrella Movement in 2014, but that was only passed in November. This law requires the US government to impose sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials*

*responsible for human rights abuses in Hong Kong, and requires the US Department of State and other agencies to conduct an annual review to determine whether changes in Hong Kong's political status – namely its relationship with mainland China – justify changing the unique and favourable trade relations between the USA and Hong Kong. This is huge, and we are trying to replicate this in other countries, including Australia, Canada, Italy and New Zealand.*

*We have also done advocacy at the United Nations (UN), where some resolutions about police brutality have been passed. But the UN is quite weak at the moment, and aside from the documentation of human rights violations there is not much they can do. Any resolution regarding the protests will be blocked by China at the UN Security Council (see section). That said, a thorough UN investigation on police brutality would send a strong message anyway. We have been communicating with human rights civil society organisations to do more advocacy at the UN.*

*We are also looking for alternative tactics such as working with unions in France, because water cannon are manufactured in France.*

Solidarity protests were held in other countries, including Australia, Canada, **Japan**, New Zealand and Taiwan. Some of these saw clashes between pro-democracy and pro-China protesters. In Auckland, New Zealand, pro-China students verbally threatened a group of student democracy protesters; the Chinese Consulate in Auckland **praised** the counter-protesters for their patriotism. In August, solidarity protests in several Canadian cities were **disrupted** by organised groups of pro-China counter-protesters, who attempted to block marches. In one incident in Vancouver, the police had to escort people from a prayer meeting for Hong Kong as the church they were meeting in was surrounded by an intimidating presence of Chinese government supporters.

Rather predictably, the Chinese government consistently claimed the protests were propelled by **foreign interference**, even as it relied on foreign support for its repression: besides using French water cannon, the Hong Kong **police force** received **training** from the former colonial power, the UK.



Support for democracy stayed strong and carried through into November District Council elections, which delivered a **landslide victory** for the pro-democracy camp. Carrie Lam said she would ‘listen humbly’ to this show of support to the protest movement. Johnson assesses what that victory means:

*True, the District Council doesn’t have any real political power because it carries out neighbourhood duties, like garbage collection and traffic management. Still, in the latest election 388 out of 452 seats went to the pro-democracy camp, whereas back in 2015 they were only 125 pro-democracy representatives, compared with 299 who were pro-Beijing.*

*I don’t think the pro-democracy movement should put too much of its energy into institutional politics because the District Council is not a place where the political crisis can be solved. However, the elections served as a solid foundation to organise people at the local level.*

What may have changed more are mindsets. For many in Hong Kong, the year – which ended with protests even during the **holiday period**, when protesters occupied shopping malls – marked a decisive break with any trust they might have once had in government institutions. Attitudes to power may have shifted for good. The democracy movement knows it still faces a mighty opponent, but it feels prepared for the long struggle, as Johnson concludes:

*While there is no sign of protests calming down, there is also no sign of the government making concessions anytime soon. The Chinese government will not let itself be challenged by protesters, so it is infiltrating organisations and tightening the grip on civil society. Organised civil society is relatively weak, and Beijing can easily interfere with academic institutions, schools and the media by appointing more allies and dismissing those who are critical of the government. The next five years will likely be tough ones for civil society and democracy in Hong Kong, and we will have to work to strengthen civil society’s resilience.*

*We expect restrictions on association, funding and exchanges with*

*international organisations and civil society to increase over the next few years.*

*Another potential challenge is the limited sustainability of global solidarity. Right now Hong Kong is in the spotlight, but this will not last long. Our struggle is for the long haul, but the world will not be paying attention for much longer. So we will need to build more substantial and permanent alliances and partnerships with civil society groups around the world. We need to empower local groups and give people new skills regarding international law, advocacy and campaigning. The protest movement is not going anywhere. It’s going to be a long struggle so we will have to train more organisers. We will disseminate the knowledge gained by the protesters, so when they are sent to jail others will take over.*

It took the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to halt protest momentum, as people took care to avoid crowds to prevent the spread of the disease. For the time being, this meant that Hong Kong’s hunger for democracy had to take a back seat. But it would be foolish to think the struggle is over, and in safer times, people can be expected to reengage in a foundational fight for democratic freedoms.

## PUERTO RICO: PEOPLE HOLD POLITICIANS TO HIGHER STANDARDS

While Carrie Lam hung on in Hong Kong, protesters claimed a scalp in the US territory of Puerto Rico, where Ricardo Rosselló’s reign as Governor was brought to a premature end in August as a direct result of mass protests. Protesters struck a powerful blow for accountability and demanded higher standards from their political leaders, and a better, more responsive form of politics.

In July, contents of a group chat between Governor Rosselló and his staff on messaging app Telegram were **leaked**, and they painted a deeply unsavoury picture. Rosselló was revealed to use language rife with racism, misogyny and homophobia, while the content included discussion on how social media could be used to troll his political opponents along with jokes about

shooting opponents. Particularly distastefully, messages included a joke relating to the deaths caused by 2017's devastating **Hurricane Maria**. This was not the first such leak; an earlier release of WhatsApp messages in 2018 involved several Rosselló cabinet members. Together, they suggested a political class that felt it could do as it wished, with contempt for voters, and a macho governing culture lacking in respect for women and minority groups.

People had caught a glimpse behind the curtain, and they were angry. The protest response was swift and huge. The issue became a lightning rod for other concerns, including over the failure to respond adequately to the many impacts of Hurricane Maria, corruption in the use of post-hurricane funds – for which two former senior Rosselló officials face charges – and the economic austerity measures ([see section](#)) imposed since the hurricane.

Not surprisingly, given Rosselló's misogynistic language, women's groups were the first to protest, with civil society group Colectiva Feminista en Construcción assembling to greet Rosselló at the airport as he returned from holiday to try to head off the emerging crisis. They were quickly joined by people in their hundreds of thousands. At the protest peak, 22 July, over a million people were said to have joined the demonstrations, a protest record for the nation of around three million people.

Despite the anger, the protests had a festive air. On 19 July a mass banging of pots and pans was organised across the island. Many of Puerto Rico's best-known **musicians and performers** took part in the protests, including Ricky Martin, himself the subject of **homophobic slurs** in the leaked messages, and people sang and recorded protest songs. People daubed the number 4,645 on walls, the **estimated** death toll of Hurricane Maria, reminding the government of the much lower estimates it had publicly made as it tried to play down the impact of the hurricane. Solidarity protests were held by Puerto Rican communities in the **USA** and further around the world. A general strike was called, closing down one of the major roads in the capital, San Juan. But in the face of these peaceful protests, on several occasions the police **responded** with rubber bullets, teargas and pepper spray, including against the major protest of **22 July**.

What the protesters were making abundantly clear is that no politician should maintain power if they have clearly lost the support of so many people, regardless of when the next election is due. Despite this, Rosselló did what he could to cling onto office. Several of his staff resigned, and Rosselló **quit** as head of the ruling New Progress Party on 21 July, pledging not to stand again in the November 2020 election. But this was not enough to appease the protesting masses, or even his own party members, who increasingly **turned against** him; after two weeks of protests Rosselló **announced** his intent to resign, eventually **standing down** on 2 August. There was a further twist to come, however, as Puerto Rico's Supreme Court overturned Rosselló's nomination of his first choice of successor.



Protesters in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, call on Governor Rosselló to step down.  
Credit: Joe Raedle/Getty Images



People celebrated Rosselló's departure, while also condemning the lack of broad democratic accountability over the appointment of his successor. This, along with some questioning of the two-party system in which the two major parties have alternated in power for decades, was indicative of a wider disenchantment with the political elite and the present state of Puerto Rican politics, and a desire for greater change. The bigger questions – including over austerity and privatisation – remain, but Puerto Ricans offered a reminder that even in times when many politicians position as mavericks by engaging in performative outrage, many still expect high standards of behaviour and respect from their elected leaders. The protests

made clear that winning an election should not insulate any politician from ongoing democratic accountability.

Another crisis hit Puerto Rico in January 2020, when an earthquake struck. The quake killed several people, **destroyed** many houses and left many people without power. It raised questions about whether any lessons had been learned from Hurricane Maria, and whether Puerto Ricans are being properly served by the politicians on offer to them. Fresh **protests** were sparked at the government's response to the emergency and the distribution of essential aid. Puerto Ricans will continue to ask more of their political class, and might just be prepared to demand further change.



People protest behind a barricade set up along a street leading to the governor's mansion in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. Credit: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

## ALGERIA: A BLOCKED REVOLUTION

Like Puerto Rico, Algeria experienced mass protests resulting in the resignation of its leader in 2019, and as in Sudan, the ousted president had long been in office and had seemed secure. However, in this case a well-practised political and military establishment conspired to block the real change that people were seeking.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika had been president for 20 years and had survived, through heavy police repression, the great wave of protest that swept North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. In recent years he had been reported to be in ill health, and after experiencing a stroke in 2013, he rarely appeared in public; he came to resemble less the classic strongarm leader than a convenient puppet behind which elite interests lurked. The elite must have been confident that his rule would continue untroubled when in February it was announced he would run for a fifth presidential term. But the announcement quickly sparked a wave of **protests**, with people in the capital, Algiers, defying the longstanding official **ban** on demonstrations.

For many, the proposed fifth term epitomised an out-of-touch, ageing and corrupt political establishment intent on perpetuating its hold on power but incapable of tackling the problems of economic hardship, unemployment and lack of adequate housing that affect many people, particularly the young people who make up **70 per cent** of Algeria's population. People want everyone, and not just elites, to benefit from the country's oil wealth: Algeria, a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), is one of the world's top 20 oil producers.

Huge weekly protests, called the Hirak, were held each Friday. They were the biggest protests in Algeria's post-independence history. On 1 March, three million people were estimated to have protested. Official posters of the president were torn down by protesters, but the protests were **peaceful**, with many women, families and **young people** taking part. In response, protesters faced teargas, water cannon and detentions.

The protests brought many different people together. In February journalists held a **protest** against media censorship and lack of coverage

of the mass protests in state-owned media and media privately owned by government supporters, leading to around 15 arrests. Around a thousand **lawyers** protested in March, calling for Bouteflika's candidacy to be declared inadmissible. A five-day **general strike** was also called in March; crucially, workers in the country's oil and gas industry were among those who joined in. International solidarity mobilised: thousands, mostly from the diaspora, **marched** in Paris and other major French cities in support of those protesting at home.

As it became clear that the protests would not halt, President Bouteflika manoeuvred, first to try to shore up his power and then to secure an acceptable exit that would leave the structures behind him intact. He first **announced** that if re-elected he would hold another early election in which he would not stand, and would introduce reforms, including a new constitution. He then stated that he would not stand in the election, but would continue as president until a new constitution had been adopted, effectively proposing to extend his term in office illegally. He appointed a new prime minister and formed a new cabinet, but as hundreds of thousands of people continued to rally the pressure was too much. On 1 April he announced his intent to stand down on 28 April, but as the protests kept on regardless and the **military** – an enduringly important force in Algerian politics – increasingly turned against him in public, his time was up, and Bouteflika was **gone** the next day.

But crucially, Bouteflika's old regime was still there. His temporary replacement was Abdelkader Bensalah, a long-time **ally** of the former president, who had often stood in for him when he had been too ill for public duties and had **supported** Bouteflika's fifth-term candidacy even amidst the protests. The military was heavily involved in the interim government. Accordingly, the weekly protests **continued**.

People wanted more than just a change of president. They wanted the **dismantling** of the system of elite power and close ties between establishment politicians, the military and business interests that had long enabled Bouteflika and those behind him to remain in power and benefit from corruption while keeping most people poor and insecure. These demands for a complete system overhaul **intensified** as the protests went on.





Protesters in Algiers, Algeria, continue demonstrating after President Bouteflika's resignation to demand the dismissal of all officials affiliated with the former president's regime. Credit: Enes Canli/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Students marched each Tuesday in addition to the weekly Friday protests. Protesters had a festive air, and people cleaned up after protests. As in Sudan, women were visible and **active** in the protests, asserting that system change must include equal rights for women and the **dismantling** of patriarchy. Femmes Algériennes pour un Changement vers l'Égalité (Algerian women for a shift to equality) was one of the new civil society groupings formed as part of the democracy movement, holding regular 'feminist square' **events** within the protests.

Protest did not stop even as some political and business figures, including the deposed president's influential brother, were **arrested** and charged:

protesters saw these as tokenistic measures and clearly understood that the establishment would not countenance radical demands for the redistribution of power. That was made clear when crackdowns on protests intensified and arrests of protesters increased in May and June, and parts of Algiers were closed off to protests. Access to Google and YouTube was **blocked** for a spell in August when the platforms shared a video calling for the ousting of the leader of the military. Access to social media sites was also restricted. In August, activist Hamza Jou'di was **arrested** for calling for civil disobedience, and by September people were being arrested just for holding banners, or for **waving** Amazigh (Berber) flags.





French-Algerians demonstrate against President Boutefflika's fifth-term bid in Place de la République, Paris, France, on 10 March 2019. Credit: Kiran Ridley/Getty Images

On 18 September the army started to **stop and seize** cars and buses bringing protesters into Algiers, and the number of arrests **increased** further. Between 11 and 19 September **more than 37** student and political activists and leaders were **arrested**. Several foreign journalists were expelled. From October onwards, as the December presidential election approached, security forces further ramped up their violent

suppression of protests, and arrests soared further still: according to the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, by October **over 100** people had been arrested and detained, and dozens were **prosecuted**. In the face of this repression, the weekly protests continued.

Abdelkader Bensalah stayed on as caretaker president while the planned



presidential election was postponed, first from April until July and then, after only two candidates put themselves forward, until December. **Protesters** started to call for a **boycott** of the election: 200,000 people took part in the 37<sup>th</sup> weekly protest on 1 November, the anniversary of the start of the war for independence from France, **rejecting** the forthcoming election as a sham exercise by a corrupt elite. People banged pots and pans in support. The sentiment was that it would not be enough to try to get an opposition candidate elected, as an unchanged system would not enable any president to deliver fundamental change. Rather than a vote under a continuation of a system that fails them, protesters called for a national assembly to design a new governance structure. Election day saw further protests, and corresponding security force violence and arrests of protesters.

The five candidates who stood in December were all part of the **political establishment**, and most were former ministers who had served under Bouteflika. They may have paid lip service to the protests, but collectively they offered little to address the protesters' deeply held grievances. For the first time in a generation Bouteflika's name was not on the ballot, but people delivered their verdict by staying away or spoiling their ballots: the number of spoiled ballots exceeded the votes for three of the five candidates, and even on official figures, which many believe were inflated, turnout was the **lowest** of any Algerian presidential election since independence.

The election winner was Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who had held a range of offices in Bouteflika governments, including that of prime minister. A man in his 80s had been replaced by a colleague in his 70s, while the military continued to lurk in the background. Algeria still looked like a vast country of struggling young people ruled by a tiny coterie of secure older people. This was not the radical break from the past that so many people sought.

The new president could be said to have power, but not **legitimacy**. President Tebboune held discrete **dialogues** with Hirak movement members and opposition leaders, and some protesters and opposition figures who had been detained were released, but major change was still not on offer. Mass **protests** duly greeted the news of Tebboune's election, and continued into 2020. The Algerian revolution may have been blocked, but people's passion for change remained undimmed.

## ETHIOPIA: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES FROM TOP-DOWN CHANGE

In Ethiopia, a change at the top in response to mass protests in **2018** continued to bring mostly positive change for civil society. The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali has reopened several doors for civil society that had long been closed. In response, civil society has been trying to develop the new capacities it needs to play its full part in ensuring the transition to democracy becomes real, defending human rights and helping to stop rising ethnic conflict.

**Bilen Asrat** of the **Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Forum** looks back on recent progress:

*During 2019, there have been a lot of changes in the state of democracy and human rights, which has been reflected in a wider space for independent civil society and opposition political parties.*

*Prime Minister Ahmed was appointed in April 2018 after his predecessor resigned as a result of anti-government protests. Although he was a member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the party in power since 1991, the Prime Minister pledged to reform the authoritarian regime, and repressive terrorism and media laws were repealed. Imprisoned journalists were released and the environment for the media improved. The new government also released political prisoners and legalised opposition parties, some of which had been labelled as terrorist organisations and banned. Once political change became apparent, a lot of politicians who had been living in exile came back to Ethiopia.*

A particular breakthrough for civil society came in February with the **amendment** of the infamous Charities and Societies Proclamation, which had made it virtually impossible for CSOs to receive international funding and work on human rights issues. In another positive sign, the changes came after consultation with civil society and largely reflected its input, as Bilen relates:

*In February, the draconian 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation was amended. This law imposed a lot of restrictions on civil society, especially when working for human rights, democracy and good governance. The new law changed the classification of CSOs and only distinguishes between local and international CSOs. It lifted restrictions on funding for CSOs and allowed for the re-entry of international organisations into Ethiopia.*

*The scope of action for CSOs has now widened because unlike the old law, the new proclamation does not provide an exhaustive list of the*

*permitted activities of CSOs, so it does not set a limit to the activities that civil society can engage in, except those that are against criminal law.*

*Before the new law was passed, there were several consultations across Ethiopia's then-nine regions, and over a thousand CSOs were engaged in the process. In fact, the initial document for the draft law was produced by civil society itself. We submitted it to the former prime minister and various governmental offices, pointing out the challenges posed by the previous proclamation and recommending*



Ethiopians protest against religious attacks during a march in Rome, Italy, on 6 October 2019. Credit: Stefano Montesi/Corbis via Getty Images



*specific changes, and eventually it was our recommendations that were turned into law – including for instance the right to appeal against the decisions of the regulatory agency in front of a court of law.*

*We only have one objection to the new proclamation: we think that the agency that has the mandate to regulate civil society should be accountable to the legislative body, and not to the executive. We expressed this during the consultations, and when the Office of the Attorney General finalised the draft and submitted it to the Council of Ministers, we put our concerns to parliament. But the government didn't accept our recommendation.*

Taking advantage of these improvements in the freedom of association, December saw the **founding** of the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Coalition, a national network of people and organisations working to protect human rights defenders and promote a safe environment for the defence of human rights. This would until recently have been impossible in Ethiopia.

When several domestic and international CSOs and human rights defenders **met** in the capital, Addis Ababa, in January 2019, it was a landmark for many of those taking part, who had just been able to return to the country. **Yared Hailemariam** of the **Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia** describes the burgeoning of CSO activity unlocked by recent changes:

*Just a year and a half ago, international human rights organisations were not able to organise any meeting or training activity, or even visit Ethiopia. I've now been able to conduct capacity development workshops in Addis Ababa. So, the impression I have is one of huge progress that is very satisfactory for local civil society.*

*There is now a lot of activity, including training and workshops, and it's open to international human rights organisations. They are providing capacity development training and financial and technical support to local civil society, which is also receiving support from donors, embassies and the international community. These opportunities are new. Local civil society can now recover and rehabilitate from its past*

*limitations, and reach the international community, because people can also now travel.*

The year was replete with moments that symbolised the increased openness. One such landmark came when Daniel Bekele, a long-time Ethiopian advocate for human rights who had been detained under the previous regime, was named the **new head** of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in July. The Commission was previously **notorious** for failing to investigate human rights abuses properly and downplaying any criticisms of the government. Once in office, Daniel Bekele **called** for the Commission to be adequately resourced so that it could do its job properly, and for its autonomy to be respected.

Another powerful **symbol** of increased openness came in September, when an infamous Addis Ababa police station long synonymous with the regime's practices of detaining dissidents and journalists was **opened** to the public. Maekelawi police station was **decommissioned** in 2018, and its public opening and likely conversion into a museum signalled a willingness to acknowledge Ethiopia's recent history of appalling human rights violations. A further step forward came in January 2020, when the anti-terrorism law, long used to prevent protests and detain journalists, was **replaced** and the scope of the definition of what constitutes a terrorist act was reduced.

At the same time, civil society needed to be careful to balance acknowledgement of recent improvements with constructive criticism. The new anti-terrorism law still gives the state **leeway** for abuse. The issue of investigation and redress for past human rights violations and the suffering that people experienced at the hands of state officials remains **unaddressed**, and there are still **concerns** about officials acting with impunity and **failing** to respect the rule of law. Concerns also remain about the freedom of expression. 2019 saw intermittent **reintroductions** of internet restrictions and shutdowns. In June, Eskinder Nega, who served seven years in jail for his criticism of the government, was **prevented** by the police from holding a press conference.

Yared suggests that one of the problems is that so many people associated with the old regime still have power:



Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali receives the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.  
Credit: Rune Hellestad/Corbis via Getty Images

*Most government structures, offices and institutions are full of political appointees from parties in the ruling coalition. That makes it really difficult to reform organisations. Even when the central government says something or a new law or regulation is adopted, it may not go very deep. Reforms may not go deep through to the bottom of the bureaucracy, to the structures. People are starting to complain in public media that the government is saying the right things, reforming the law, appointing new faces to high-ranking positions, but the suffering still continues at the lower level. So, that's one challenge, and there is still no clear roadmap that shows how the central administration can improve this mess.*

*People who were appointed because of their political affiliation rather than their talents now feel under threat. They fear they may be moved or replaced. So in some regions we have seen that some movements are trying to shift the direction of reform. Some people linked to the old regime are still in control of their regions and are trying to instigate conflicts.*

And while CSOs of many kinds now have more freedom to form and operate, not everyone has access to the right to the freedom of association. For LGBTQI+ civil society, this remains a dream, as Bilen indicates:

*The scope of legitimate civil society activities does not include the promotion of LGBTQI+ rights, because this is considered to be against 'public morals'. Homosexuality is illegal in Ethiopia; it is a crime under the Criminal Code and it is punished with imprisonment. It is also not accepted by the majority of the population, so there is not much of a perspective that the law will change in that regard.*

*Restrictions do not apply anymore to CSO activities in the areas of human rights and democracy, but the establishment of CSOs to promote the rights of LGBTQI+ people is still not allowed, because they would be promoting an activity that is considered a crime by our Criminal Code.*

Persisting challenges meant that, when Prime Minister Ahmed was awarded the 2019 **Nobel Peace Prize** in October, in recognition of the peace deal



that ended the long conflict with neighbouring Eritrea, it prompted among Ethiopian civil society pride but also caution about the work that still needs to be done and a determination to continue to push for change. Bilen describes how the award was received:

*Prime Minister Ahmed got many congratulatory messages from civil society and communities, as the peace processes started to have visible effects both in Ethiopia and in Eritrea. Ethiopian military forces stationed abroad were brought back to the country, laws started changing and hellish prisons where horrible human rights abuses took place were shut down.*

*I think the Nobel Peace Prize is fulfilling two purposes. First, it is an acknowledgment of the Prime Minister's contribution to ending the 20-year conflict between the two countries and an encouragement to continue along the peacebuilding path.*

*Second, the award is an expression of support for the Prime Minister's project to build a democratic nation, opening up political competition, allowing for the growth of an opposition and a multiparty system, promoting an active civil society, and striving for greater equality. Prime Minister Ahmed has brought women on board: he appointed a cabinet that was 50 per cent female and for the first time a woman was appointed as president of the Supreme Federal Court.*

Campaigners for human rights in Eritrea however noted that peace **had not** brought any change in the highly authoritarian state that remains **characterised** by state slavery, arbitrary detention and torture, even though the state long framed its many rights violations around its conflict with Ethiopia. People expressed **concern** that their head of state, the dictatorial President Isaias Afwerki, was benefiting from the association with the peace deal without making any changes at home.

Within Ethiopia the big challenge however remained that of bringing people together across ethnic lines. Ethiopia's governance structure recognises and gives devolved powers to states defined along ethnic lines, and political parties are also largely constructed around ethnic identities.

These structures can lend themselves to politics defined around narrow interpretations of identity and narratives of ethnic competition. Recent years have seen several lethal disputes.

It is important to recall that ethnic violence preceded Ethiopia's current reforms. Violence flared under the **previous regime**, as the protests that led to a change of prime minister – initially triggered by the impact of the expansion of Addis Ababa on the Oromia Region – increasingly followed ethnic lines, and the government's initial response of violence and mass detention only inflamed the situation; authoritarianism proved itself unable to accommodate differences and enable mediation between competing groups. Movement towards democracy has enabled spaces for differences and demands to be articulated, but increasing political competition has been accompanied by ethnic and religious violence, as various political leaders have sought to rally support on the basis of identarian appeals.

In May, deadly ethnic clashes in the Amhara and Benishangul Gumuz regions left **at least 200 people** reported dead. June then saw an **attempted coup** in the Amhara Region, in which the region's president, among others, was killed by the security chief, who was in turn shot dead two days later. The purpose of the coup attempt seemed to be to spread division within the military and encourage ethnic conflict. And then in October, according to government figures, **86 people** died in violent clashes, sparked when a high-profile and controversial media owner and activist, Jawar Mohammed, complained of police harassment, **causing** protests that turned into communal violence. Over the course of the year there were also several reports of **places of worship** – both Christian and Muslim – being **set on fire**. Conflicts have led to huge displacements of people, with an estimated **3.2 million people** uprooted, creating **humanitarian emergencies**.

Hope that less violent ways could prevail came in a largely peaceful referendum in November, when people **voted overwhelmingly** to create Ethiopia's 10<sup>th</sup> regional state. The Sidama people in southern Ethiopia backed the creation of their own region, with over 98 per cent voting in favour. The mostly peaceful vote was met with relief, given that **at least 17 people** had been killed in clashes with security forces in the region in July, evidently after the military had opened fire.



Ethiopians celebrate the award of the Nobel Peace Prize. Credit: Minasse Wondimu Hailu/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Bilen sets out the some of the challenges that have to be addressed:

*Communities have been unable to exercise their rights and their power for too long, and when all these spaces suddenly open up there is a danger that they will be put at the service of power struggles. Democratisation is moving forward in a context in which conflict persists. There are some states that are still under a state of emergency, experiencing **internet blackouts** and **ethnic clashes**. The social situation is also delicate because of high unemployment and poor economic performance.*

Yared points out how people who seek to sow division are taking advantage of the new opportunities created by the unblocking of many websites to spread **disinformation** and **hate speech** via Facebook and YouTube:

*It is the elites and their activists who are using social media to spread hate speech instigating ethnic tension, violence and targeting of certain groups of people. They have followers, and when they call some kind of violent action you immediately see that there is a group on the ground that's ready to act and attack people.*

*Ethiopia is now in the 10 highest countries in the world for internal*



*displacement. This has happened in the last year and a half because of ethnic conflicts. Hate speech is spreading easily and very quickly through phones and social media, especially Facebook. Some of the calls for ethnic conflicts are coming from outside Ethiopia, including Europe and the USA.*

In November, and looking ahead to the planned August 2020 election – postponed at the time of writing due to the COVID-19 pandemic – Prime Minister Ahmed moved to limit divides in his government by bringing the different ethnically-based parties that made up the ruling coalition **together** into one cross-national party. However, in an indication of continuing strife, the Tigray Liberation Front, which until Ahmed took office had dominated the coalition and from which previous prime ministers were drawn, refused to participate in the vote to merge the parties.

The election, when it eventually takes place, will be Ethiopia's big test of progress. The election law **passed** in August was controversial because it increased the number of signatures required for registering a party, something that could exclude smaller parties. Opposition parties said there had not been enough consultation and their views had been ignored, and some threatened to **boycott** the election, a threat which if activated could undermine its credibility.

This will always be the danger with top-down reforms; the ruling coalition has complete control, and could be accused of wanting to have a democratic transition but stay in power, along the lines taken in Thailand (see below). Bilen identifies some challenges in preparing for the elections, as well as some progress:

*We have not yet had a free and competitive election. Prime Minister Ahmed was appointed by the parliamentary body that resulted from the 2015 election, which was tightly controlled by the ruling party and marred by coercion and intimidation.*

*In August, parliament – whose current members are all from the ruling coalition – passed a new election law, and opposition parties complained that some of the changes made things more difficult for them and threatened to boycott the election. So the process is by no*

*means without obstacles, and it will be a test for all of us, including for civil society, which needs to work to keep the authorities accountable to the community and make sure that the democratisation process succeeds.*

*But first and foremost, the election will be a test for the government and the ruling party to keep their promise that if they lose, they will relinquish power. Even before we get to that point, it is already testing their willingness to open up the media space and make sure that fair conditions for competition are met.*

*Progress is being made in that regard. The Electoral Board now has a new structure and is chaired by a **former opposition party leader**, a woman, who had been imprisoned and exiled for her political ideology and came back after reforms were initiated.*

The challenges around top-down reforms and holding a free and fair election are one of the reasons why Ethiopia needs a strong and civil society, to exercise scrutiny, assert accountability and advocate for further reform, as Bilen indicates:

*I believe the best is yet to come. But as civil society, we have a lot of work to do to make it happen. We need to work hard to build a democratic, transparent and accountable system in Ethiopia. We need to keep watching and make sure the government remains committed to protecting democracy and human rights. We need to watch closely and make sure it includes women's issues in its agenda. We expect these elections to be the most democratic and peaceful that we have ever had, with more female candidates than ever before, and we expect the losing and winning candidates to shake hands and accept the people's will.*

*Civil society has a great role to play in bringing democracy to Ethiopia, especially in terms of building peace by establishing dialogue and reaching some form of consensus among religious leaders and local communities. If a certain degree of peace is not achieved internally, democratic elections become impossible. So the first task for civil society to undertake is internal peacebuilding.*

“WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO DO ALL OF THIS BY OURSELVES, SO WE NEED SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT. AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME COULD BE HELD TOGETHER IN ISOLATION, BUT DEMOCRACY WILL NEED A LOT OF HELP TO GROW AND SURVIVE.”

BILEN ASRAT



Yared also suggests that civil society has an essential part to play in healing divisions as a new generation prepares to experience democracy:

*Civil society could play a key role in overcoming divisions, given that political parties and some media are ethnically based. Because civil society is neutral, the international community should focus on strengthening its capacity to play a key role in shaping the behaviour of new generations, who are vulnerable to being used by political elites. Civil society could give broad-based civic education to nurture good citizens who understand their responsibilities.*

New opportunities create the need for new responses and capacities to enable these responses. For most in civil society, the situation is still novel and after years of defensiveness and self-censorship they are having to develop new skills and different ways of working. Support to help develop that civil society capacity is **essential**, as Bilen attests:

*CSOs are starting to engage, but it's taking time, because we are still in trauma due to our past experiences. Until very recently civil society was not allowed to work on peacebuilding or reconciliation, and it was a very dangerous thing to do. Over time, most of the experienced people with the right skills for the tasks ahead migrated to the private sector or left the country. This opening is a new phenomenon and to be up to the task we need to reassess the situation, revise our strategic plans, gain new skills and produce training materials.*

*We are building up our own resilience while trying to engage in these very necessary activities. This is where our allies in international civil society could help us. Ethiopian civil society needs support for capacity building and training, developing advocacy tools and learning about best practices and replicable successful experiences. International organisations could also help us to bring different stakeholders to the discussion and reach a consensus about the democratisation process and the required human rights protections.*

A capacitated civil society should be seen as an intrinsic part for the democracy that many hope is being built in Ethiopia. Bilen concludes by calling for everyone to work to make Ethiopian democracy a reality:

*I also think this change has happened because of the sacrifices many people have made. Many people have died for this to happen. Now it's time to use only our hearts, not weapons, to achieve change. We will not be able to do all of this by ourselves, so we need solidarity and support from regional and international organisations. An authoritarian regime could be held together in isolation, but democracy will need a lot of help to grow and survive.*



## 2. DYSFUNCTIONAL DEMOCRACY: FLAWED AND FAILED ELECTIONS

BENIN, BOLIVIA, GUINEA, INDONESIA, KAZAKHSTAN, SOLOMON ISLANDS AND THAILAND



Students in Bangkok, Thailand, stage a mock funeral for democracy to protest against the dissolution of an opposition party in February 2020.

Credit: Lauren DeCicca/Getty Images

As protests for democratic freedoms and political change showed, democracy means much more than the holding of elections. But there is no democracy without regular free and fair elections in which there is a real prospect of incumbents losing power. People want elections that offer them a genuine choice. For incumbent parties and leaders, the key democratic test is whether they are willing to preserve the conditions that allowed them to gain power and step down when losing popular support.

As the examples below indicate, this is often not the case, and too many elections are a ceremony staged in pursuit of legitimacy, offering the semblance of democracy without its substance. Too often, in the elections of 2019, no real political choice was on offer, and incumbents rigged the system to their advantage, facing elections with no fear that they might

lose power.

In Kazakhstan and Thailand, what was positioned as transition offered no real democratisation, and the interests being served by new governments remained the same. In several countries – Benin, Bolivia, Guinea – people protested in huge numbers when those in power blatantly changed the rules of the system to perpetuate their power. Protests in the run-up to and aftermath of elections, in these countries and in many others, including Indonesia and the Solomon Islands, showed that people have high expectations that elections will be fairly held under clear rules and minority opinions will be tolerated. Those expectations were repeatedly disappointed, and it was another sign of democratic failure that protests were often met with excessive and lethal force.

## THAILAND: MILITARY RULE IN CIVILIAN SUITS

Thailand's overdue elections, the first since May 2014's military coup, finally took place in March, following many postponements that prompted **protests**. But any hopes of a return to civilian rule were thwarted, as the military donned politicians' suits and continued to hold power.

Among those contesting the election was the main political party from before the coup, Phue Thai; this is the successor to two banned parties that had won every election since 2001 and that appeals particularly to poorer people, but which has repeatedly been opposed by the military and seen its former leaders forced into exile. Another established party that ran was the pro-royal family and conservative Democrat Party, but several new parties joined the fray. Chief among these was Palang Pracharath, which was essentially the political representation of the military junta, and which supported junta leader Prayut Chan-o-cha as its candidate for prime minister; under the new system, the prime minister need not be attached to a party or even stand in the election. His candidacy was supported by several other smaller pro-military parties. Against them, another prominent new party, Future Forward, stood on a platform of limiting the power of the military and promoting social and economic equality.

On this basis, it might have seemed that healthy political competition was on offer. But with the military still such a dominant power, and highly repressive laws restricting the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression still in force, there was no hope that the election could be a free and fair contest. Provisions limiting criticism of the junta stayed in place, as did media **censorship**. In one example, TV journalist Orawan Choodee was **suspended** from her programme for hosting a discussion asking first-time voters whether they agreed with Prayut Chan-o-cha's decision not to take part in debates with other candidates, along with other questions related to the military's role. Severe rules to limit the use of social media in campaigning were **introduced** in January, something that might have worked particularly against non-military parties seeking to reach out to younger people.

Ahead of the election, there were **allegations** that the junta was **reworking**

constituency boundaries to its advantage. The Election Commission had been appointed by the junta, and was accused of being biased towards the military and its candidates, and of prioritising investigations of opposition parties. One prominent opposition party, Thai Raksa Chart, which was proposing a member of the royal family as its candidate for prime minister and **seemed likely** to attract support, was quickly **dissolved** on court order and its board members banned from any involvement in party politics for 10 years.

Not surprisingly, independent monitors reported that the election environment was **heavily biased** towards the military. There were reports of **vote-buying**, **ballot stuffing** and pressure by the junta on people to vote for pro-military parties. The Election Commission made numerous errors that particularly excluded voters based in other countries, while the process of **counting** the votes and distributing seats through a complex formula was opaque. The reporting of the results was **delayed**, incredibly until May, enabling both the pro-military and anti-military camps to **claim victory** and causing suspicions to spread that the final results were being massaged to suit the military.

Even if the electoral competition had taken place on a level playing field, a huge obstacle faced any hope of a return to civilian rule. Under changes introduced by the junta, the prime minister would be chosen by all members of parliament – both the 500 elected members of the House of Representatives and the 250 appointed members of the Senate; all 250 Senate members were appointed by the military, giving it a permanent presence in the country's politics and a huge say in choosing the prime minister.

When the disputed results were announced, Palang Pracharath narrowly came first in the vote ahead of Phue Thai, although the complex workings of the electoral system meant that Phue Thai won more seats, while Future Forward came third, winning the support of many young voters in particular. An **alliance** formed of seven opposition parties that claimed to command a majority in the House of Representatives, arguing that it had the right to form a non-military government. But with its ability to rely on all 250 Senate votes, Palang Pracharath only needed 126 votes in the House



of Representatives, making it easy to recruit a handful of pro-military members in addition to the 115 seats it had won. As a result, in **June** Prayut was confirmed as the continuing prime minister.

**Sutharee Wannasiri**, a human rights activist in Thailand, is one of many who doubts that the election did much to move Thailand towards democracy:

*The majority of Thai society still doubts whether the 2019 election was free and fair. I think we have not achieved a transition to a more democratic and more accountable regime. The ruling government is still made up of the same military generals that led the military government over the past five years.*

If, following the election, there was some hope, it lay in the fact that some progressive and diverse new voices had entered parliament. Among the more diverse group of newly elected politicians was, for example, Future Forward candidate and Thailand's first-ever transgender member of parliament, **Tanwarin Sukkhapisit**. Those new parliamentarians worked to try to reactivate their space as a forum for genuine debate, as Sutharee relates:

*A positive sign is that new members of parliament from progressive parties have opened up parliamentary debates about concerns from their constituents, including the land rights of farmer communities, attacks against student activists and the criminalisation of political activism. At least we have seen these issues being discussed in parliament, but there is still a long way to achieve a solution.*

There was also hope that the ruling military coalition might prove to be less unified than the junta, offering spaces for dialogue and change. But the clear pattern following the election seemed to be that of consolidation of its rule. The repression was essentially unchanged.

Pro-democracy activists were subjected to violent attacks following the election. In June, one such activist, **Sirawith Seritiwat**, was attacked and beaten twice by unidentified groups of people and left hospitalised after trying to collect signatures for a petition calling on the Senate not to support Prayut Chan-o-cha as prime minister. This was only one of several attacks on democracy activists in the wake of the election, which together indicated a campaign of **systematic violence**, compounded by evident impunity for those who carried out attacks. The military was also accused of being behind the killings and disappearances of several **democracy activists** who had gone into exile in neighbouring Laos.

In May, 15 activists from a student group who had tried to bring charges against the police for their use of excessive force when suppressing a 2015 protest on the anniversary of the coup were charged with

“I THINK WE HAVE NOT ACHIEVED A TRANSITION TO A MORE DEMOCRATIC AND MORE ACCOUNTABLE REGIME. THE RULING GOVERNMENT IS STILL MADE UP OF THE SAME MILITARY GENERALS THAT LED THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT.”

SUTHAREE WANNASIRI





At a news conference held in Bangkok following the March general election, seven political parties opposed to Thailand's ruling junta said they had the numbers to form a majority coalition. Credit: Nicolas Axelrod/Bloomberg via Getty Images

**sedition.** It seemed the military, rather than move on and try to forge an inclusive democracy, was determined to settle old scores.

The regime was clearly keen to position Thailand to the outside world as a country that had undergone a democratic transition, even though this had only happened on paper. Ahead of Thailand hosting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Peoples Forum – an annual regional civil society

gathering – in September, several civil society personnel **reported** receiving threats and anonymous messages from state officials warning them that they should not criticise the country or harm its public image.

Dissent continued to be tightly policed. In October, the government introduced a **new order** forcing café owners to track and store their customers' wifi data. At the same time, it **established** a 'fake news



monitoring hub' to monitor social media posts that 'mislead people' or 'damage the public image' of Thailand. Given Thailand's track record of censorship and suppression of dissent, this could only be another worrying development; it showed once again how the terminology of 'fake news' has been decisively co-opted by repressive states.

The continuity military government also went after its political opponents. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a wealthy business leader who established and led the Future Forward party, was the subject of repeated investigations. In 2018, he had been **charged** with spreading false information after posting a speech on Facebook accusing the junta of recruiting support for pro-military parties. Following the election, in April, **three charges** were filed against him, including sedition, for allegedly helping an anti-military protest leader in 2015. In November, Thanathorn was **disqualified** as a member of parliament after being convicted of breaking electoral laws by holding shares in a media firm while registering to run in the election; he insisted that he had transferred his shares and the conviction was politically motivated.

In February 2020, the authorities went further still: the Constitutional Court **dissolved** Freedom Forward and banned 16 of its leaders from involvement in politics for 10 years, on the basis that it had breached electoral laws about party donations by taking a loan from Thanathorn; other parties' finances did not receive a similar level of scrutiny. Its members of parliament were given 60 days to find a new political party. While Thanathorn announced his intention to continue the campaign as a social movement, he still faced criminal charges and the ban could only weaken the party in parliament; the more than six million people who had voted for Freedom Forward risked being disenfranchised.

Moves to dissolve Future Forward sparked Thailand's largest **protests** since the coup, when thousands demonstrated in the capital, Bangkok, in December. The desire for change was still there. But the message from the establishment seemed to be that now the vote had taken place, people should fall quiet and not demand anything else. It had not taken yet another military coup this time for hopes of democratic progress to fade in Thailand, only a highly skewed election.

## KAZAKHSTAN: THE CHANGE THAT WASN'T

A change that was no change also came in Kazakhstan in 2019, which saw its first new president in a generation, followed by an early election, but little that was different in reality.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, president for almost three decades, has been a dominant presence since Kazakhstan became independent in 1991. He **stood down** in March, appointing Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, speaker of the upper house of parliament, as his successor. However, Nazarbayev very much **remained** the power behind the throne, staying on as head of the ruling party, Nur Otan, as well as remaining a member of the Constitutional Council and chair of the Security Council, a lifetime role, and retaining his title as leader of the nation. He continued to play a highly visible role after his resignation, representing the country in foreign visits and receiving visiting leaders, while his family also remained influential. He retained approval power over most ministerial appointments. It seemed that Nazarbayev remained head of state in all but name.

Protests are rare in a country where permission is required and often denied, which means that when protests go ahead they are usually illegal and participants are liable to arrest. But Nazarbayev's formal resignation was preceded by unusually prominent and persistent protests, **prompted** by the death in February of five children in a house fire in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana – renamed Nur-Sultan in the outgoing president's honour the following month. The children's two parents had been at work on night shifts at the time of the fire, leading to calls for more state support for struggling families. In a country that remains dependent on oil production, people protested about the state's inability to meet their economic needs, and the government's remoteness from their concerns. In response to protests, Nazarbayev **dismissed** his government and promised a package of social spending. Further small protests also greeted the **name change** of the capital that followed his resignation.

However, the election was never going to deliver real change. Over the course of his career, Nazarbayev had **not allowed** serious rival political parties or other platforms for dissent to take root. No election held in Kazakhstan has

ever been declared free and fair by independent observers, and none has ever gone to a run-off vote, such was the size of Nazarbayev's lead: in recent votes he had racked up improbable majorities of over 95 per cent, facing only tokenistic opposition. By that margin, Tokayev's winning vote of 71 per cent in the June election seemed relatively modest, but old habits die hard: an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe **observer mission** found there had been significant irregularities, including ballot box stuffing and a lack of rigorous vote counting procedures. The observer report also noted the broader restrictions on civic freedoms that hindered real political competition; there was only one genuine opposition candidate in the race, and all the barriers against assembling in public and expressing dissent online remained. Meanwhile, a powerful state machinery and media backed the incumbent. A change of regime had never been on offer, and after the election, Kazakhstan remained in the hands of former Soviet apparatchiks.

The election took place in the face of further protests, in which people called for a boycott of the vote; when there is minimal political choice, staying away can be the only way people can make their dissent heard, and reported turnout duly dropped by almost 18 percentage points. Among those leading protests was an **emerging** social movement known as Wake Up, Kazakhstan and another new group, Respublika, apparently driven largely by former public servants calling for a better and more responsive administration. Protests also mobilised on social media. But they faced repression. Thousands of people were **arrested** at **protests** in the run-up to and on the day of the election, including for merely calling for a fair election to be held. Riot police were **mobilised** and excessive force was used while making arrests, **including** of several journalists. There were also many examples of preventive detention of civil society activists and journalists ahead of protests, along with police visits in which people were warned not to participate in protests. In addition, there was **intimidation** of independent election monitors and blocking of social media access during protest periods. Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, was put under virtual lockdown immediately following the election and mobile internet access was shut off for spells.

Rare permission was then given for post-election protests to be held,



A protester is detained in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, at a protest questioning the fairness of the presidential election. Credit: Kyodo News Stills via Getty Images



presumably due to the bad publicity the electoral protests and their repression had attracted. Protest groups called for the people arrested during the protests to be acquitted, a review of the election and a reversal of the renaming of the capital city. There was no indication that they might be listened to.

In the meantime, a mothers' association, one of several nascent civil society movements, had formed to take forward the momentum of the February protests, holding further protests to demand better state provision. They too continued to face restrictions. Some of those involved reported being **questioned** by the police, and being threatened with loss of custody of their children, and one was physically attacked as she left a police station. Three of the mothers' association leaders had **criminal investigations** opened against them on charges of participation in a banned organisation, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party, which was designated an extremist organisation and prohibited in 2018. Movement leaders also faced charges of knowingly spreading false information, a catch-all charge that is increasingly used against people who share their views on social media, including information related to the banned party.

After being elected, President Tokayev offered to convene a discussion forum, the 'National Council for Citizen Confidence' and hinted at some potential for political liberalisation, but protest movements doubted the sincerity of the offer. At the same time, the government started to roll out Chinese-style facial recognition surveillance **technology**, and Nazarbayev urged the introduction of stiffer penalties for defamation, which is already criminalised in Kazakhstan, following an increase in **criticism** of him and his circle on social media. In one recent example of how the law is used to criminalise dissent, journalist Amangeldy Batyrbekov received a **jail sentence** of two years and 10 months in September after criticising a state official. A group of people seeking to found a new party **lost** a defamation case brought by the ruling party, which they had accused of obstructing them; police also detained supporters when they tried to seek donations to help pay the damages awarded.

President Tokayev proposed a revision to the law on peaceful assemblies to make it easier to obtain permission, as well as offering the designation

of specific protest sites, although many of those suggested were far distant from sites of political power, and restrictions continued even as liberalisation was discussed. For example, around 100 people were **detained** at a peaceful protest in support of Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan in Almaty in September, and several activists were detained and rapidly sentenced in advance of the Almaty protest and similar protests in other cities. In November, the law was **amended** to introduce penalties for bringing children to protests, in a move that seemed clearly targeted at the mothers' protest movement, in which women frequently demonstrated accompanied by their children. Independence Day protests held in December also saw dozens of people **detained** for demanding democratic reform and an end to Nazarbayev's influence.

The authorities also **refused** to register an election monitoring organisation or allow a referendum on changing the electoral code to encourage greater political competition, while attempts to hold meetings to establish a new political party were repeatedly disrupted by organised groups of intruders.

All of these continuing restrictions showed that little had changed in reality. People will want to see action rather than words, real political liberalisation allowing for the expression of dissent and a plurality of viewpoints, and proof that the former president's grip on power is waning; until they see that, many will suspect that there is only some superficial tinkering to make the new president look like a reformer, while entrenched practices of repression remain.

## BENIN: NO COMPETITION IN AN EMPTY ELECTION

Benin's April parliamentary election provided an extreme example of formal but fake democracy. Voters were offered no political choice at all, as only two parties, both connected to President Patrice Talon, were allowed to stand.

The lack of political competition seemed no accident. In 2018 a new electoral code had been introduced that vastly **increased** the deposit required for a party to enter a list of candidates – to approx. US\$425,000 – and raised the threshold for entering parliament to 10 per cent of the vote. These

actions penalised many small parties, which in response to the new rules, formed **larger blocs**. But those efforts were in vain. In January, the election commission allowed only the two parties associated with President Talon to stand, while all five opposition groups had their applications **rejected**. President Talon refused to intervene to delay the election or change the rules, meaning a sham poll went ahead in April. Many observers refused to monitor the election, not wishing to be seen as legitimising something so palpably flawed.

In an attempt to suppress dissent about the lack of political choice, blanket bans on protests were introduced in the run-up to the election. When people protested regardless, they were met with **excessive force**. Security forces used teargas, batons and compressed air cannon against protesters, and live ammunition against post-election protests. At least **seven people** were reported killed during protests in April and May, and when violent clashes broke out following the arrest of two people accused of post-electoral violence in June, **two more people** were reported killed as a result of live ammunition. Violence was accompanied by arrests of civil society activists, journalists and opposition politicians.

Online dissent was also repressed. On election day, first social media and communication apps were blocked and then all internet connectivity was **taken down**. A further internet disruption was **imposed** the following month during post-election protests.

Earlier moves by the government suggested that backlash had been anticipated, as it had brought in harsh new laws to make it harder to protest and share dissent: in 2018 it **introduced** a new Penal Code that criminalised offences against the 'symbols and values' of the state and gatherings that could disturb 'public tranquillity' and in 2017 it passed a digital law that criminalised incitement to rebellion and publishing false information online. Under the digital law, **at least 17 people** were prosecuted over a two-year period, many of them journalists and bloggers, including investigative journalist **Ignace Sossou**, who received an 18-month sentence in December. The empty election was therefore indicative of and enabled a broader trend of consolidation of presidential power and the suppression of dissent.

Not surprisingly, come election day, most people boycotted the polls: in a record low, only 23 per cent of registered voters – later adjusted to a still derisory 27 per cent by the Constitutional Court – cast their ballot, compared to the 66 per cent who had voted at the previous election in 2015. Such was the level of discontent that even people who said they were supporters of President Talon **refused** to vote. Election day also saw unrest, with protests **closing down** some polling stations and security forces responding with violence. There were also **reports** of ballot stuffing, vote buying, intimidation and other irregularities.

In October the government and opposition groups agreed an amnesty for crimes committed in the context of the elections, but civil society **criticised** this for denying the possibility of justice for people whose rights had been violated by state forces. The sham election had passed, the government was pretending all was normal and President Talon was showing no willingness to re-run the election with a proper slate of competing parties that people could choose from.

A hollow parliament will clearly now play no part in holding President Talon – who has in the past been accused of corruption – to account for the rest of his term. Even more than usual, it will fall to those outside parliament – including protesters and CSOs – to help fulfil this vital democratic function.

## GUINEA: A DEADLY CRACKDOWN AMIDST TERM-LIMIT MANOEUVRES

Another African leader who seems determined to cling onto power is Guinea's President Alpha Condé, in office since 2010. He continues to be accused of manoeuvring to break the two-term limit that should see him stand down in 2020. In May the ruling party announced plans to amend the 2010 Constitution, **arguing** that there was a need to modernise the country's institutions, and to hold a constitutional referendum to that end. The clear suspicion is that President Condé – who turned 82 in 2020 – intends to become the **latest** in a long line of presidents who rewrite constitutions to stay in power; a new constitution could in effect write off the two terms he has served as no longer relevant to term limits.



To resist changes to the Constitution, a coalition of civil society groups and opposition parties formed the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution in April. But they faced a violent enemy in the form of the state. All African states where presidents have recently overturned constitutional term limits have **seriously restricted** civic space, and Guinea is following this pattern.

Suspicion that a third-term bid was on the cards had long been brewing, amid broader discontent over political and economic issues. 2018 saw **strikes and protests** over pay, working conditions and labour rights, and opposition protests over the disputed results of local elections, to which the state responded with excessive and lethal force. This pattern of violent response sadly continued in 2019. In June, Guinea's parliament – its term extended by President Condé after elections scheduled for 2018 were postponed – **approved** a law to give the police greater discretion to shoot people and not face prosecution. The police evidently enjoyed their new powers: at least 18 people were reported killed in protests between January and October, and more than 30 by early 2020.

Overall, Amnesty International **reported** in November that since 2015 at least 70 people had been killed in protests, on top of 109 who died in custody. The report also pointed to the almost total impunity for rights violations committed by security forces – something the law change would only worsen – and the targeting of journalists critical of the ruling regime. Private radio station journalists protested against their repression in August by taking part in a two-hour **protest broadcast** aired across multiple stations.

Any protests that took place did so in defiance of a de facto **protest ban** that has applied since July 2018: in defiance of international best practice, groups that want to hold protests must notify local authorities, which can prohibit a protest on public order grounds; protests opposed to the ruling party are almost invariably denied permission. By October over 20 protests had been banned since the rules were introduced, enabling the consistent police violence, including live ammunition and teargas, mobilised against protests that went ahead regardless. Those who took part in weekly protests, often wearing the red colours of the National Front for the Defense

of the Constitution, knew they might pay a high price.

Among the grim roll call was Mory Kourouma, a protester who died of his injuries in hospital after ruling party supporters violently **assaulted** a group of pro-democracy protesters in the town of Kankan in April, while the police looked on; ruling party supporters also beat two journalists who were covering the protest. The following month, Amadou Boukariou Baldé, a student, was beaten to death by police at a protest at the University of Labé.

On 13 June, shortly after opponents of constitutional change had ominously been labelled 'enemies of the Republic' by the ruling party, one person was **killed** and at least 28 were wounded at a protest in N'Zérékoré. At least 40 people were arrested. On 16 June, the police stormed a civil society meeting and arrested and detained members of the A'Moulanfè (It will not happen) civil society movement.

At least nine people were **killed** in protests from 14 to 16 October in the capital, Conakry, and other Guinean cities. These protests were again declared illegal, enabling the use of excessive force. In addition to the deaths, around 70 people were reported injured and 200 arrested. At least **two more people** were killed during a funeral procession for victims of the October killings in November. Protests – and violent state responses – **continued** into 2020. Journalists continued to be **injured** as they tried to cover protests. Women rose to the forefront, marching in Conakry in **October** and **November** to demand that the killings be stopped and those responsible be held to account.

Members of the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution were targeted for arrest. During the October protests, around 60 of its members were arrested, including its national coordinator, Abdourahmane Sanoh. On 22 October, 12 of them received **jail sentences**, although most were freed pending an appeal in December. **Five more** were arrested and detained on their way to a protest in November.

Against this backdrop of repression, the 'national consultations' organised by the government in September on the constitution and timing of the

delayed parliamentary elections were clearly a sham, and were **boycotted** by many in civil society along with most opposition parties.

In February 2020 parliamentary elections – which the opposition had announced they would **boycott** on the basis that they could not be free or fair – were once again **postponed**, and the following month the constitutional referendum was **postponed** as well. President Condé accused the opposition of tampering with the electoral roll. Continuing repression was the only certainty.

When the referendum finally went ahead later in March, under conditions of limited freedom and intimidation and amidst the promised opposition boycott, it was no surprise that it delivered the vote the president wanted. Guinea's next presidential election is due in October 2020, but no one will be surprised if it is postponed or if, when it eventually goes ahead, President Condé's name once again appears on the ballot paper.

The National Front for the Defense of the Constitution stated that it would continue to **oppose** constitutional change by 'all legal means'. But there are powerful interests that support President Condé's continued reign. Like many other countries, Guinea is home to many poor people despite being rich in minerals; it is one of the world's major exporters of bauxite, for which demand has soared, given the use of aluminium in infrastructure development in Asia in particular. Russia has extensive **mining interests** in Guinea, and has publicly backed the idea of Condé staying in power. China, another partner, has no interest in a democratic change of power. These are powerful forces that civil society and anyone who wants to see democratic freedoms in Guinea will continue to face.

## BOLIVIA: DISPUTED ELECTION SPARKS POLITICAL TURMOIL

A lesson in how future problems can be stored up when presidents run for office again and again was offered in Bolivia. President Evo Morales, having **overturned** constitutional provisions against standing again, won a fourth presidential term in disputed elections held on 20 October. But this was only the prelude to a political upheaval that could have lasting

ramifications, and a period of turmoil characterised by rights violations on both sides of the divide.

Allegations of electoral irregularities were rife. Under the rules, if the winner's lead over the runner-up is less than 10 per cent, a run-off vote is required. The gap was below this threshold on the preliminary count released after most votes had been tallied, at which point public updates of the count mysteriously ceased. Four days after the vote, Morales was officially declared outright winner, squeaking over the 10 per cent limit by a very narrow margin.

For many, the accusations of irregularities were the final straw. Morales had run again despite losing a referendum he had called in 2016 that was explicitly engineered to enable him to stay in power; now he was accused of stealing an election. The opposition called foul and protests began. Amid a **call** for a national strike, tens of thousands people **marched** in cities including Cochabamba, La Paz, Montero and Santa Cruz. President Morales' response was to call on his supporters to take to the streets to, as he characterised it, defend democracy against a coup organised by the opposition and foreign powers. Government and opposition supporters **clashed** and by 30 October at least **two** people had died as a result.

**Eliana Quiroz** of **Fundación Internet Bolivia** describes the earlier **discontent** among many sections of the public that fed into protest anger:

*The chain of events began with the results of the constitutional referendum held on 21 February 2016, which asked citizens whether they supported a change of an article of the Political Constitution of Bolivia, which would allow Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera to run again as candidates for president and vice president. Both were prevented from doing so because the Constitution only permitted two consecutive constitutional periods for elective authorities.*

*Morales and García Linera lost the referendum, since 51 per cent of voters rejected the reform. However, they did not quit and instead began to look for other options to run again. They finally found one, through a ruling issued by the Constitutional Court in November 2017,*





Women in La Paz, Bolivia, protest against Evo Morales after he declared himself the winner of the presidential elections on 24 October 2019.

Credit: Javier Mamani/Getty Images

*which invoked the human right to elect and be elected, enshrined in the American Convention on Human Rights.*

*In reaction to this, social mobilisations and national strikes were organised under the 21F banner, in reference to the date of the referendum. Using the slogan 'Bolivia Said No', people demanded respect for the popular vote. Participants in the protests included both people legitimately annoyed with this manipulation and opposition*

*activists who perceived a legitimacy crisis and tried to take advantage. These were mobilisations of the urban middle classes, which found themselves in a position opposed to that of many social movements of Indigenous and rural populations, among others, who backed the re-election of Morales and García Linera.*

As Eliana goes on to relate, there was plenty of fuel for suspicions of electoral irregularities, and protests were quick to mobilise:

*In October 2018, two spots became available in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), as one judge resigned because ‘internal decision-making processes were stalled’ and another quit for health reasons. Consequently, two alternates were appointed in their stead, and María Eugenia Choque became the TSE president. These events damaged the legitimacy of the TSE, and would turn out to have crucial consequences during the political crisis in late 2019.*

*On election day, the rapid counting system – which only provides preliminary and unofficial data, since the official results are announced days later, once the ballots have been physically checked – stopped at 7.40 pm. When it stopped working, with 84 per cent of the votes entered, it was giving an advantage to the Movement for Socialism (MAS), the ruling party, but not one big enough for it to win in the first round. The system was down for 23 hours.*

*From then on, mobilisations began against the TSE and its departmental offices, several of which were taken over and burned amid clashes between MAS supporters and opponents. The Organization of American States (OAS), the EU and the governments of several countries expressed concern about the violence and the legitimacy crisis. Several voices called for a second election, while others denounced that a coup d’état was being prepared. On 24 October, when official results were announced that showed Morales as the winner in the first round, the legitimacy crisis had become unstoppable. So Morales called for a new election and invited the OAS to conduct a binding audit.*

The OAS **audit**, published 10 November, found evidence of significant irregularities, including forged records and manipulation of electoral data. This made it unlikely that Morales had passed the 10 per cent threshold. Morales **agreed** to call a fresh election. But it was already too late. When the police **mutinied**, a tipping point had been passed, as Eliana describes:

*The stability of the government was precarious; it was hanging by a thread, pending the outcome of the OAS audit, which would be binding. Assessments were done and submitted to the audit mission*

*that substantiated claims of electoral fraud. Vigils were held in several cities, particularly Santa Cruz.*

*Several groups from other cities around the country, who were headed to La Paz to support citizen mobilisations against Morales, were violently repressed. There were violent street clashes between groups that supported Morales and groups that claimed fraud. MAS campaign offices and public buildings were burned down. Government actors and civilian groups of MAS supporters sought to prevent opponents from reaching the seat of government, including by firing guns.*

*The mobilisations reached a turning point when the police mutinied. Although this mutiny was also motivated by specific police demands, it echoed the demands from mobilised groups for Morales’ resignation and new elections. Police units began to mutiny on 8 November, arguing they could not repress their own people. On 10 November, at a press conference, the General Commander of the Armed Forces – who had made it clear that he would not use force against the people – accompanied by the commanders of the forces, suggested the president should resign. Morales submitted his **resignation** at noon on that same day and obtained asylum in Mexico. A few weeks later he sought refuge in Argentina.*

It was not clear what would happen next. Vice President García Linera also resigned, along with the President of the Senate, who would normally be next in line. In this gap between Morales standing down – while still denouncing his ousting as a coup – and a successor emerging through an opaque process to **claim power**, human rights abuses flourished and the death toll rose. Now much of the violence turned on MAS supporters, as Eliana relates:

*The police and military repression against protesters who supported the MAS, as well as the reaction by MAS supporters, led to 33 deaths by 10 November alone.*

*The power vacuum created with Morales’ resignation lasted until*





A protester holds a banner that reads 'no to the coup d'état' during a demonstration in La Paz, Bolivia, on 12 November 2019.

Credit: Marcelo Perez Del Carpio/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

12 November, when Senator Jeanine Áñez took over as interim president, making use of a legal mechanism that was as supported as it was criticised. In that period the urban population of the cities of Cochabamba, El Alto and La Paz lived in a state of terror. The police were mutinying and offered limited security on the streets. Civilian groups of MAS supporters clashed with groups that celebrated Morales' resignation. The homes of MAS opponents and public service buses were set on fire, houses in residential areas were threatened with invasion, barricades were set up in most neighbourhoods and vigils were held to protect private property from the attacks of groups

of MAS supporters and criminals. The police requested the support of the armed forces because they were overwhelmed.

It was reported that before 10 November the police repressed people demonstrating against Evo Morales, and that after that date they went on to repress those who demonstrated in favour of the former president. The military was not active in the streets when Morales was president but came out after his resignation, and violently repressed groups of MAS supporters.

*Irregular civilian groups emerged that took up some police functions, calling themselves 'The Resistance'. They were recorded evicting Indigenous people from Cochabamba Square. 'Resistance' groups emerged in Santa Cruz, where the Cruceñista Youth Union was already in place, as well as in La Paz and Sucre. These civilian groups claim they provide security, hold vigils in front of embassies and the residences of former MAS authorities to prevent them from fleeing the country, organise collections to provide funds to the police, and give information to and have links with people in the intelligence community.*

*There are still demonstrations for and against Evo Morales and his legitimacy as a political actor. Some want to see him excluded while others want him to return to Bolivia. Politics continue revolving around his figure.*

Eliana also describes how, at all stages of the crisis, journalists experienced censorship, attacks and intimidation from both sides, amidst a climate of claim and counter-claim exacerbated by disinformation:

*In this period from the election to Morales' resignation we found 19 incidents of temporary restriction and blockages of media pages on Facebook and Twitter, but they were likely more numerous. This phenomenon occurred mainly on the day after the elections, 21 October, and affected those media that denounced electoral fraud. Some journalists reported the confiscation of their equipment by protesters, and some protesters stated that the content of their smartphones had been accessed without their consent.*

*On 5 November, the civic leader of Santa Cruz was at El Alto International Airport trying to get to La Paz to deliver a letter demanding Morales' resignation; several journalists claimed that protesters had stripped them of their devices while they were recording what was happening outside the airport, to erase the videos or photographs taken, or they were denied the right to circulate material.*

*The new government's minister of communications issued a public*

*statement in which she threatened legal action against journalists who committed sedition and insisted that she had identified those journalists who had done this. Two days later, on 16 November, journalist Carlos Valverde, who broadcasts his programme on Facebook Live, announced that his Facebook page had been blocked. Foreign media and journalists were harassed and accused of reporting in favour of the version that a coup d'état had taken place while local ones were accused of reporting against it – in both cases as a result of bias, according to their detractors.*

*But censorship did not only originate from the government. People organised through Telegram and in secret Facebook groups, which reported social media accounts and had them shut down to prevent the spread of content for or against the previous government. An example of this was the establishment of a group with the purpose of closing down accounts of people with high public profiles.*

*Other actions created social tension and increased polarisation, such as the issuing of unsubstantiated statements by the authorities and the spread of 'fake news' that armed Bolivian and foreign groups were operating in the country and that protesters had weapons stolen from the police, in addition to baseless accusations against MAS activists or supporters that were disseminated on social media.*

*There were also attempts by the new government to influence public opinion by propagating a pro-government narrative through public media. For example, on 21 November numerous customers of the state-owned telephone company commented on social media that they had received a text message with a link that led to a video of a call between Morales and the coca grower leader Faustino Yucra. Although no viruses or malware were found alongside the video, this case of mass spam made use of the state company's lines, meaning that its databases were used to disseminate material that reinforced the government's narrative.*

*In a context in which numerous civilians sought to document abuses committed by police and military officers while policing the protests,*





Bolivian nationals demonstrate in support of former President Evo Morales outside the Bolivian Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 11 November 2019.

Credit: Ricardo Ceppi/ Getty Images

*messages were also circulated on social media to urge citizens not to film the military or police when they carried out operations for the interim government.*

*From early November vilification and political persecution increased on social media, and especially on WhatsApp, directed mainly against people affiliated with the MAS. Digital violence targeted women and young politicians disproportionately. The strategies used focused on the dissemination of unconsented personal information (known as doxing), harassment, threats and the dissemination of intimate images without consent. The dissemination of this kind of information on social media causes the people involved to receive insults or intimidation; as a result, several people affected had to close their accounts or change their phone numbers.*

Abuses of the freedom of expression **continued** into 2020, when the minister of communication accused an Indigenous radio station of broadcasting 'seditious voices' and community radio stations reported experiencing censorship. The National Press Association **reported** that 'resistance' groups were harassing journalists in some neighbourhoods of La Paz, and that harassment was going on as police officers watched and did nothing.

Allowing such abuses was interim President Áñez, who was not the runner-up in the presidential election, or indeed a candidate: her Democrat Social Movement Party placed fourth in the legislative assembly elections with around four per cent of the vote. She assumed the interim presidency after invoking a constitutional rule that placed her next in the line of succession following the resignation of Morales and other MAS-affiliated officials. This did not look like democracy, and nor did the interim government act like a caretaker administration focusing on essential tasks until another election could be held; rather its manner was that of an elected government intent on reversing direction from Morales' policies and purging officials associated with him from government as quickly as possible. The interim government's new interior minister **vowed to jail** Morales for the rest of his life, accusing him of terrorism and sedition for calling on his supporters to blockade cities, and in December issued a **warrant** for his arrest. There were threats to prevent MAS, the leading party in both houses of assembly,

from standing in the next elections. This was not a searching for consensus and healing on either side, but a continued stoking of polarisation and division. The aim seemed to be to replace one elite with another.

As a right-wing politician and religious conservative, Áñez represented a very different direction to that followed by Morales. While Morales was Bolivia's first Indigenous president and drew much support from the Indigenous communities that make up **over 40 per cent** of Bolivia's population, Áñez's new cabinet contained no Indigenous people, but did find room for many members of the wealthy elite. Áñez, who grasped a large Bible as she declared herself president, **stated** that 'the Bible has returned to the government' and had previously condemned Indigenous practices as 'satanic'. This set the tone. Following the takeover, the Indigenous flag was repeatedly burned during street protests, police removed it from their uniforms and people were threatened for their Indigenous appearance or clothing. There was a sharp rise in racism and hate speech, both in the streets and on national TV. The religious right – with a strongly anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ stance – is **resurgent** and newly confident in Bolivia.

MAS protests continued, and their repression – and the associated killing of Indigenous people – intensified. On 14 November, the interim government published a **decree** granting the military broad discretion in the use of force against protests. Under the decree, armed forces were exempted from criminal responsibility for their actions. The decree remained in place for two weeks, enabling multiple uses of excessive force against protests. At least **five protesters** were reported killed and 75 injured in the town of Sacaba on 16 November when police opened fire with live ammunition as people tried to pass a military checkpoint. On 19 November, military forces ended a blockade by MAS supporters of a gas plant in El Alto, using live ammunition and teargas. At least **eight people were killed**; the defence minister called the protesters 'terrorists'. A funeral procession for the protesters was also **attacked** with teargas and rubber bullets, leaving mourners scattered in panic.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights **condemned** the use of excessive force and visited Bolivia later in November, meeting with civil society and journalists as well as the interim government; its report



“CSOS, LIKE POLITICAL SOCIETY, ARE DEEPLY DIVIDED, AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE EXTREME POLARISATION WE LIVE IN. EVEN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS HAVE ADOPTED CONTRASTING POSITIONS. VARIOUS CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS REMAIN TRAPPED IN POLARISING NARRATIVES ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER.”

ELIANA QUIROZ



found evidence of **extrajudicial killings** in the Sacaba and El Alto cases. The interim government initially rejected the report before agreeing to an international **investigation** into the killings, opening up at least some hopes of redress for rights violations.

Tensions appeared to be subsiding at the turn of the year. In January 2020 a date for new elections was set for May 2020. While Morales continued to denounce the government as a dictatorship, his party seemed to be moving on: MAS said it would **compete in** the elections with new, younger candidates instead of Morales and García Linera; the Morales era appeared to be over.

But many problems remain. As Eliana indicates, there are still human rights violations taking place, in a climate where the interim government continues to vilify Morales and his supporters:

*The country has calmed down. Although tensions have persisted, there have been no confrontations or violent repression. However, there have been political persecutions and violations of due process against MAS activists and supporters apprehended under sedition, terrorism and other charges.*

*We see clear violations of international treaties and national laws, and human rights abuses. Examples of this have been the arrests of two former officials of the MAS government, who were later released, despite having been assured of safe conduct by the interim government, the closure of more than 50 community radio stations without any clear reason, and people being detained in prison for alleged crimes without any respect for due process guarantees.*

In a context such as this, civil society can play crucial roles: it can provide neutral spaces for debate and the development of non-partisan solutions, urge that human rights be respected and violations held to account and provide independent oversight of elections. But, as Eliana concludes, civil society has not been immune to the division and polarisation that characterises Bolivia:

*CSOs, like political society, are deeply divided, as an expression of the extreme polarisation we live in. Even human rights organisations have adopted contrasting positions. Some support the actions of the transitional government and do not report on human rights violations, while others speak up timidly against rights violations and abuses. Various civil society groups remain trapped in polarising narratives on one side or the other, and no one seems to have the ability to diminish their negative effects on social cohesion.*

Many challenges lie ahead if peaceful, free and fair elections are to be held in which different points of view can be debated and dissent can be expressed. Building bridges within Bolivian civil society should be a crucial first step.

## INDONESIA: POST-ELECTION PROTESTS IN A YEAR OF UNREST AND UNCERTAINTY

Lethal post-election protests also broke out in Indonesia, as part of a year of unrest in which the state frequently offered a heavy-handed response. Incumbent President Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, won the April election, comfortably beating challenger Prabowo Subianto – previously a son-in-law and ally of dictatorial former ruler President Suharto – to secure a second term in office. But a wave of **protests** and violence by opposition supporters greeted the official announcement of the result on 21 May as Prabowo Subianto **claimed fraud**, albeit without producing any evidence.

Protests outside the offices of the electoral supervisory body on the day of the results were initially peaceful, but on the evening some groups were reported to have tried to force their way into the offices and to have thrown stones at the police. A massive pre-emptive police presence had been deployed on the streets of the capital, Jakarta, and they responded with teargas. Teargas was again used, along with rubber bullets, against protesters the **following night**, as protests degenerated into riots. By 26 May at least seven people **had been killed** and hundreds injured, including several journalists covering the protests.

Several supporters of the defeated candidate who called for a ‘people power’ revolt were arrested, and some were charged with treason. The state also **restricted** the use of key messaging and social media platforms, including Instagram and WhatsApp.

Seven CSOs came together to conduct an **initial investigation** into the protests. They found evidence of widespread human rights violations, including the use of live ammunition, arbitrary use of teargas, arbitrary arrests and ill treatment, including of injured protesters, and blamed both sides for using provocative language that had escalated conflict. They called for a full and independent investigation.

Prabowo Subianto subsequently called off the protests and had his lawsuit against the election results rejected. His apparent enmity towards President Jokowi was evidently put to one side when he was appointed defence minister in the new cabinet in October, suggesting that little had

been at stake other than political positioning, and sparking civil society **concern** over what this said about human rights, given his record of alleged violations under the Suharto regime.

Later in the year students took to the streets, with mass protests in September prompted by the rapid introduction of a new law that threatened to undermine the independence of the Corruption Eradication Commission and reduce its ability to investigate high-profile corruption cases. The decentralised protests became the biggest student mobilisation since the fall of Suharto in 1998.

Protesters called on President Jokowi to block the new law, passed by the house of representatives at the end of its 2014 to 2019 term, prompting suspicions that lawmakers were seeking to insulate themselves from potential future investigation. Protests were, however, about more than the serious problem of corruption. Students also **mobilised** in response to a proposed new **criminal code**. New provisions threatened to criminalise sex and cohabitation outside marriage – something that could be used to increase **repression** of LGBTQI+ people – and further restrict access to abortions.

Protesters saw these changes as an unwarranted attack on their private lives, and as giving ground to the growing political influence of highly conservative interpretations of Islam. They also objected to provisions in the draft law to criminalise insult of the president and vice president, religion, state institutions and state symbols, measures that would clearly restrict the freedom of expression. Further sources of discontent included the passage of a mining bill, which would make it harder to protest against extractive companies, and moves to curtail labour rights. Altogether, students saw a risk, under a newly re-elected president, of an alarming slide back towards the conservatism and repression of civic and personal freedoms that had characterised the Suharto era.

Mass protests involving thousands of students unfolded in multiple cities – including Bandung, Jakarta, Malang and Yogyakarta – from 23 September. When a demand by student leaders that they meet with members of the house of representatives was refused, some people attempted to break down a fence and threw rocks and bottles. A strong police presence





Students protest against proposed changes in Indonesia's criminal law code. Credit: Ed Wray/Getty Images

responded with teargas and water cannon. Protests grew and **continued** for several days as the term of the house of representatives came to an end.

Repression intensified as protests went on. **At least three** student protesters died, two of them – Muhammad Yusuf Kardawi and Randi – reportedly as a result of police gunshots. The six officers responsible for these two deaths received only tokenistic **punishments**. On 25 September more than 300 university students and police officers were **hospitalised** in Jakarta, with

several protesters receiving head wounds, while 94 people were arrested. At least three journalists were also reported to have been **kicked and beaten** by riot police while trying to cover the protests. In addition, the government threatened to sanction university lecturers if their students were found to have joined protests.

President Jokowi has also been accused of enabling human rights abuses and blocking their investigation in the West Papua region, where the two





Opposition supporters protest outside the Constitutional Court in Jakarta, Indonesia on 24 May 2019. Credit: Dimas Ardian/Bloomberg via Getty Images



mineral-rich provinces of Papua and West Papua are home to a growing independence movement that the state strongly resists. Another demand of the student protesters was an end to the militarisation of West Papua, which intensified in the run-up to the April elections. On two separate occasions in April, the police **attacked** and forcibly dispersed groups of students who were calling for a boycott of the elections. In May, Papuan student activist Simon Magal was **sentenced** to four years in jail after being found guilty of plotting against the state.

The stakes were raised in early July when a West Papuan pro-independence organisation, United Liberation Movement for West Papua, **unified** the three main political independence movements that seek independence, declaring itself a state in waiting. And then this tinderbox atmosphere was **sparked** into protest on Indonesian Independence Day, 17 August, when a dormitory housing Papuan students in Surabaya on the island of Java was attacked and the students racially abused. Rather than defend the students, the police used teargas and raided the building, arresting 43 people. As video footage of the incident circulated, for many Papuans it was fresh evidence that they were viewed as second-class citizens in Indonesia, and they **protested** in West Papua and in cities across the country.

In West Papua the protests grew increasingly violent, with some buildings set on fire, including the **parliament building** in provincial capital Manokwari, and reports of an **attack** on one of the major airports. Protesters blocked roads and flew the Morning Star flag, a symbol of Papuan self-rule banned under Indonesian law. They also held peaceful marches against **racism**.

The government reacted with a characteristically heavy hand. It deployed over 1,000 **extra troops** to West Papua and **blocked** internet access, making it harder to monitor and report on human rights abuses. On 28 August, it was reported that at least six protesters and one military officer had been **killed**, apparently after security forces used live ammunition. The incident fuelled further protest violence. Another **day of grim strife** on 24 September saw at least four people killed when the police opened fire on a student protest, and at least 22 people killed and 65 injured in a riot reportedly provoked by a teacher using a racist term about a student; protesters claimed that there too the police **opened fire**.

The crackdown included a campaign of arrests. Six activists were **arrested** at the end of August and charged with rebellion; if found guilty they could face 20 years in jail. **More arrests** followed in September, including of independence activist Buchtar Tabuni and civil society leader Steven Itlay, while charges of incitement and racial discrimination were brought against human rights lawyer **Veronica Koman** for posting tweets on rights violations in West Papua. Koman, who experienced heightened online abuse following the charges, fled to Australia, but potentially faces extradition to Indonesia. Journalists were also **harassed** online for reporting on the protests and the internet shutdown.

The proposed law changes that provoked protests remain pending at the time of writing, and for many in civil society, post-election Indonesia seems poised between two potential directions. For many, alarm bells had rung in the run-up to the election by President Jokowi's choice of a conservative running mate. Jokowi has been accused of giving different messages to different audiences: positioning himself internationally as a reformer who will deal with human rights abuses but domestically appeasing the conservative religious voices that are asserting themselves politically, **blocking** investigations of past human rights abuses and failing to protect the rights of excluded groups, notably religious minorities and LGBTQI+ people; repression of these groups has increased under his government and can only worsen if ultra-conservative voices continue to gain political influence. President Jokowi's prioritisation of infrastructure development has also seen the cultivation of closer relations with China. **T King Oey** of **Arus Pelangi** relates some of these concerns:

*There has been a two-track development in Indonesia. Indonesia has become more part of a global society, more integrated in terms of technology, but at the same time people's minds have become more conservative, due to the influence of fundamentalists. Fundamentalists have had more chances to preach, and to organise in all kinds of groups and organisations.*

*The dividing line is between following a hardline interpretation of the Quran or not. Despite its secular appearance, Indonesia has become a de facto religious state.*

*President Jokowi won re-election, but it seems he felt he couldn't do it without the support of the moderate Muslims, as he took an Islamic cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, as his running mate. Ma'ruf is a fairly conservative cleric who has made all kinds of negative pronouncements against LGBTQI+ people. It's a mystery for many people, even for supporters of President Jokowi, why he was chosen over all other candidates.*

*For LGBTQI+ people, now President Jokowi has won re-election, it remains to be seen whether the coming five years will bring any improvement. We don't believe President Jokowi is against LGBTQI+ people, and on some occasions, he has said that the rights of LGBTQI+ people should be protected. But this is the kind of thing he has said when he has been interviewed by the BBC. It is a message for the outside world, rather than for a domestic audience.*

*In his first term, President Jokowi prioritised a focus on the investment climate, emphasising massive infrastructure projects, such as ports, roads and power plants, and reforming the bureaucracy to remove obstacles against investment. Just recently he has announced that his second-term priorities are the same. He said nothing about human rights. Many were hoping that he would be less cautious in his second term. It remains to be seen how committed he will be to human rights.*

At the year's end, most of the issues that had sparked protests were still unresolved. The question remains one of which way the Jokowi presidency will lean: will the president's second-term legacy be one of respect for human rights, space for civil society and a willingness to dialogue with dissenting and excluded groups? Or will it be one of enduring corruption, growing social conservatism and unchallenged impunity for human rights violations? Civil society will continue to push for the better outcome.

## SOLOMON ISLANDS: POST-ELECTION PIVOT TO CHINA

Another country that saw post-election violence and where the cultivation of closer relations with China was controversial is the Solomon Islands. Parliamentary elections on 3 April passed **peacefully** enough, but their aftermath was violent, exposing significant social and political problems.

When parliament met on 24 April, Manasseh Sogavare was **chosen** to serve as prime minister for the fourth time. The decision came despite an injunction backed by a rival candidate, delivered to parliament just before the process to choose a prime minister began, calling for it to be postponed. The opposition candidate had questioned Sogavare's eligibility to take on the role. When the process went ahead regardless, 15 of the 50-person parliament boycotted the vote and walked out.

“IN HIS FIRST TERM, PRESIDENT JOKOWI PRIORITISED A FOCUS ON THE INVESTMENT CLIMATE, EMPHASISING MASSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS. JUST RECENTLY HE HAS ANNOUNCED THAT HIS SECOND-TERM PRIORITIES ARE THE SAME. HE SAID NOTHING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS.”

T KING OEY





Permission for an earlier protest, on 18 March, had been **turned down** by the police. But now protests quickly broke out in the capital, Honiara, led by a group of young men, who **marched** to parliament and called on Prime Minister Sogavare to stand down. A substantial police response saw roadblocks and checkpoints set up across the city. Teargas was used to disperse crowds that evening, as rioters vandalised a hotel and several cars. Over 30 people were reported to have been detained. Protesters also headed to Honiara's **Chinatown** and threw rocks. This had been the scene of widespread violence targeting the Chinese community that virtually destroyed the area following the 2006 election.

The elections were the first since a 14-year-long security mission led by Australia and New Zealand, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, left the country in 2017. It had arrived in 2003 when the government appealed for help in the face of rising conflict along ethnic lines over land issues. What the protests showed is that while peace has largely returned, major problems remain.

The protests highlighted the existence of many unemployed urban young men, often living in informal settlements, who feel no one listens to them and so are quick to protest; if they are denied the right to a peaceful protest, as happened in the period after the election, **violence** may break out as an alternative. The unrest also highlighted concerns about ongoing **corruption** and the lack of political voice, since voters have **no direct say** over who becomes prime minister: many candidates stand as independents and then form loose political groupings following elections, a process that opens up the potential for shady deals and trade-offs. The election also failed to do anything to challenge the consistent exclusion of women in political life, with only **two women** elected compared to 48 men. Both had been elected before, meaning that no new women entered parliament.

The role of China was a contested issue throughout 2019. The Solomon Islands was long one of the few states that still recognised the state of Taiwan rather than mainland China. The government of China makes extensive efforts to persuade states that recognise Taiwan to switch allegiance. Allegations have long been made about the role of Chinese donations in the politics of the Solomon Islands. In September, the Solomon Islands

government duly **switched**, ditching Taiwan to recognise China. The move, so soon after an election campaign in which no mandate for the change had been sought, sparked further, peaceful, protests, as well as political unrest, with several ministers who disagreed with the switch either **sacked** or resigning from the cabinet.

The presumption could only be that the significant financial support Taiwan had given to the Solomon Islands would be replaced by resources from China; commitments of Chinese infrastructure and commercial projects duly **followed**, but many were concerned about the lack of accountability over Chinese projects and the potential for corruption. Some Solomon Islands politicians later reported that both China and Taiwan had offered **large bribes** to try to win support; the government of China had been thought keen to get the deal done before its celebration of 70 years of communist rule on 1 October.

The government then turned on civil society, after CSOs, working through the national CSO umbrella, Development Services Exchange, organised a petition calling on Prime Minister Sogavare to resign over the decision. The petition, signed by over 2,000 CSO members, **pointed out** that the switch of recognition from Taiwan to China had been done without any public consultation. The government's response was to characterise civil society's actions as unlawful and **accuse** CSOs that signed the petition of lacking proper registration and legal authority, and of fraudulently receiving funds. CSOs reported that the government's threats to investigate CSOs were having a **chilling effect** on their work.

What the elections and their aftermath, including the ongoing controversy over the country's relationship with China, have proved is that issues that divide people – over decisions about resources and people's ability to have a real political say – have not gone away in the Solomon Islands. It will take more than occasional elections. If any benefits that flow from the government's pivot to China are to help all the country's diverse peoples, rather than be captured by political and economic elites, then the government should stop picking fights with civil society; instead, it should work with them to ensure democratic oversight and accountability.

### 3. RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND NATIONALISM: POLITICAL SHIFTS IN AUSTRIA, DENMARK, ESTONIA, FINLAND, HUNGARY, INDIA, ISRAEL, SLOVAKIA, SPAIN, TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



People protest against police brutality during demonstrations against the Citizenship Act. Credit: Imtiyaz Khan /Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



Successive editions of this report have tracked the spread of right-wing populism and nationalism in multiple contexts, and its impacts on civil society.

Wherever these forces prosper, it is bad news for civil society. Right-wing populists and nationalists encourage societal division, pitting sections of the population against each other and narrowly defining who constitutes ‘the people’ that they claim to speak for. They attack excluded groups. Civil society in comparison stands for universal human rights and social justice, seeking to serve humanity as a whole, and often actively working to realise the rights of excluded groups. This means the two camps are always likely to be at odds with each other. As a result, right-wing populists and nationalists often attack civil society as a source of alleged ‘globalist’ and leftist values, or as agents of foreign powers. Further, right-wing populists and nationalists do not value the kind of ongoing democratic oversight, airing of dissent and respect for minority viewpoints that many in civil society strive for. Although they may gain power by winning elections, they **attack** the rule of law, and the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression on which civil society relies. Wherever such forces win power, civil society therefore becomes more restricted.

A commonly expressed hope is that right-wing populist and nationalist leaders might moderate their language and behaviour following electoral victories; the assumption might be that they ramp up the rhetoric performatively for electoral gain and then need to build bridges following divisive campaigns. But time and again – across Europe, in India, the Philippines and the USA – this has not happened. While their tactics are intended to cause outrage and disruption, many far-right politicians are not opportunists but rather true believers in the causes they espouse, and an electoral victory functions as a mandate and affirmation, emboldening them. In such circumstances, because human rights and democratic freedoms come under attack, the classical civil society role of holding power to account becomes even more important. It also becomes much harder to do.

Capitalising on and helping to create a loss of trust in established institutions, including mainstream political parties, the media and CSOs, the far right continued to make gains in several places in 2019. But they

also experienced several reversals, and from these some key tactics for potential civil society response can be discerned.

## INDIA: THE PRICE OF UNCHECKED NATIONALISM

Populist nationalism – framed around an aggressive and hostile conception of India as a monolithically Hindu country – has been very effectively stoked and utilised by India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), working hand in glove with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a mass voluntary and paramilitary Hindu nationalist force, has changed the face of Indian politics.

India’s general election – held in phases across its vast terrain from 11 April to 19 May – was the world’s biggest-ever exercise in democracy, with almost 615 million people turning out to vote. But there was little to celebrate. Following a campaign marked by disinformation and divisive messages from all the major parties, Prime Minister Modi was the resounding winner, increasing his majority to claim a second term in power. With victory confirmed and as the year went on, India’s elected government took an increasingly autocratic turn, as it seemed ever more bent on refashioning India – and who is considered Indian – in its own image.

The coalition of electoral support the BJP has forged comes at a cost. The BJP has united many Hindu voters across caste lines and so, superficially, could be said to have brought people together across the egregious social divisions that once divided them; but it has united them behind an increasingly narrowing vision. The BJP **disproportionately** draws its support from constituencies with high concentrations of Hindus and poorer and less educated people, and attracts less support from constituencies with high Muslim populations. This is because it has built its constituency by vilifying other excluded groups, and particularly India’s Muslim population. India is a country where most of the world’s major religions are represented in huge numbers, but the BJP and RSS have popularised a vision of Indian nationhood that increasingly denies India’s Muslim population – at around 172 million people or over 14 per cent of Indians – membership.

As part of this strategy, civil society that defends rights, including the rights of excluded groups and Muslim people in particular, or that espouses a

different, more inclusive notion of Indian nationhood, is attacked. The run-up to the elections accordingly saw **numerous** arrests and detentions of civil society activists, as well as violent attacks on activists and journalists by BJP supporters. There was no let-up after the election, but rather an intensification, as a freshly empowered government stepped up its attacks. In celebration of his renewed power, Prime Minister Modi's victory laps were to remove rights from populations in two states with high concentrations of Muslims: first Jammu and Kashmir and then Assam. These moves demonstrated an intensification of the ruling party's aggression towards Muslim Indians.

Jammu and Kashmir, on India's border with Pakistan and China and in a region the three countries dispute, was granted special status under **Article 370** of the Indian Constitution when it joined the state of India. These granted the majority-Muslim state internal autonomy and a distinct identity – until the central government unilaterally acted to end the agreement in 2019. On 5 August it announced that Article 370 had been revoked. That following day, the BJP-dominated parliament passed a new law to divide the state into two union territories, meaning that they were now ruled by central government rather than their own state government.

In moves that brought widespread civil society **condemnation**, the announcement was preceded by heavy movement of troops into Jammu and Kashmir, while visitors to the region were advised to leave. The day before the announcement, the central government imposed a curfew in the region, banned public meetings, closed universities, introduced restrictions on movement and placed several political leaders under house arrest. They also cut off the internet and mobile and landline phone access. In the following days, thousands were **detained**, many held **far distant** or with their whereabouts unknown, and there were many reports of torture. The central government's actions looked like those of a newly confident ruling party picking a fight with and making an example of a region the existence and autonomy of which did not conform with its narrow version of Indian identity.

**Natasha Rather** of the **Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances** describes the experience of people in Jammu and Kashmir:



People protest against the Citizenship Amendment Bill in Delhi, India on 7 December 2019. Credit: Javed Sultan/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



*The announcement of the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status was accompanied by widespread restrictions. There was an increased deployment of Indian armed forces at all roads and intersections across the valley, and the unyielding troops strictly restricted the movement of people. For the first few weeks, people were not even able to reach hospitals and doctors. Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, which bans public gatherings of more than four people, was imposed despite a curfew being in place since the night of 4 to 5 August. This prevented people from organising protest gatherings and meetings.*

*According to a government report dated 6 September, more than 3,800 people had been detained since 5 August and only about 2,600 of them were subsequently released. Those detained include political leaders from both pro-India and pro-independence parties, civil society members, lawyers and protesters. Leaders and politicians have been under house arrest. Hotels and government guesthouses have been turned into detention centres. Many leaders and civil society members have been lodged in jails in India.*

*There has been an extensive use of the Public Service Act to detain people, especially young people. Many young people were detained without being formally charged and were released only after the signing of community bonds. Many young people and most political leaders continue to be detained.*

In the face of repression, people in the region did not fall silent. On 9 August, in their tens of thousands, they **protested** after Friday prayers in defiance of the near-total **military lockdown** in Kashmir's main city, Srinagar. In response, security forces **shot** live ammunition into the air and fired pellets, rubber bullets and teargas. The Indian government **denied** even that protests had taken place and described reports as 'fake news', in the now customary catchphrase of authoritarian politics. Natasha relates the protests that occurred despite the restrictions, and the curious combination of denial and repression with which they were met:

*Despite the severe restrictions imposed on the movement and*

*assembly of people, there were many protests across the valley of Kashmir, with people taking to the streets and shouting slogans demanding freedom from the Indian state. The Indian media has claimed there were negligible protests, making it seem like there is normality and acceptance of the Indian state's decisions. Since local media have not been able to report on these protests, stories from them have not come to the fore. There were many protests in Kashmir valley, but due to the communication blockade and restrictions on the movement of journalists and media, news of protests from other districts went largely underreported.*

*Protesters were met with excessive force by the Indian armed forces. For instance, on 9 August, several people were injured during **protests** in the Soura area of Srinagar. A doctor confirmed that at least 53 young people were treated for injuries in Soura. Reports also emerged that five people have been killed in separate incidents as a result of excessive use of force by law enforcement officials in the policing of protests since the start of the clampdown.*

The communications **shutdown** made it particularly hard to get news of repression and resistance out of the region. Full internet access – at slow speeds – was only restored after **seven** months, although even then, people were concerned about surveillance. It made it hard to counter government propaganda; after 60 days of lockdown, local journalists staged a sit-in **protest**, and after 100 days they held a **protest march**, highlighting their inability to report from the region. The **impacts** of the shutdown on the everyday lives of the region's eight million people were profound. People were cut off from communication with each other and their families outside the region, and from essential services they normally access online. Many were doubly cut off: afraid to leave their homes, even to **attend prayers**, and unable to communicate online from inside their homes.

Ironically, these measures did not make the region feel more a part of India; they isolated it and made clear that it was a zone of peculiarly restricted rights. UN human rights experts **condemned** the communications shutdown as a 'collective punishment' meted out on everyone in the region, regardless of any suspicion or evidence that they might have committed a crime, and

the UN's Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, said that the unusually **draconian shutdown** could set a dangerous precedent for other states. Not content with its communications shutdown in the region, the central government also asked Twitter to **suspend** some well-known journalists, on the grounds that they were spreading 'disinformation'; Twitter was

reported to have **blocked** almost one million tweets at the government's request, causing activists to accuse it of being **complicit** in state censorship.

Natasha describes the impacts of the communications shutdown and the ways in which people from civil society were repressed:



Kashmiri journalists protest against the continued communication blockade imposed by the Indian authorities after the revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. Credit: Yawar Nazir/Getty Images



“OWING TO THE SHUTDOWN OF INTERNET SERVICES AND CURBS ON THE MOVEMENT OF JOURNALISTS, IT HAS BEEN A HUGE CHALLENGE FOR JOURNALISTS TO COLLECT AND FILE STORIES. ... THE COMMUNICATIONS CLAMPDOWN IS PREVENTING CIVIL SOCIETY FROM CARRYING OUT ITS WORK.”

NATASHA RATHER



*The communication clampdown greatly affected the work of journalists and activists. Owing to the shutdown of internet services and curbs on the movement of journalists, it has been a huge challenge for journalists to collect and file stories. The administration set up a Media Facilitation Centre in Srinagar where journalists were allowed to access the internet and email their stories. No such facilities were available in other districts of Kashmir. Newspapers in Kashmir have been publishing with a reduced number of pages. Journalists have been forced to rely just on state-issued press briefs once or twice a week, without any means to verify the stories. There has been news of journalists facing reprisals for filing stories on Kashmir’s ongoing situation.*

*Civil society in Jammu and Kashmir has been under threat and dealing with a very precarious situation, as many civil society members have been detained and jailed under the Public Service Act. In this way the Indian state has put pressure on Kashmiri civil society to remain silent about the current situation, and therefore their space is completely choked. There is a lot of resistance and criticism of the communications clampdown that is preventing civil society from carrying out its work.*

Those who tried to speak out continued to be targeted. In September, Kashmiri activist Shehla Rashid was **charged** with sedition, along with a range of other charges, including promoting religious enmity and intending to provoke riot, after posting a series of tweets from Kashmir that described house raids, arbitrary detentions and torture. Government supporters also accused her of spreading ‘fake news’. It was not the first time she had been **targeted**. When Kashmiri women, including the relatives of detained politicians, **mobilised** in protests the following month, over a dozen of them were detained.

Repression in the region is **not new**, and there have been many previous communications shutdowns, as this is something of a favoured government tactic, but these actions marked a whole new level in isolating and targeting the region. Natasha details the earlier tensions and repression during 2019, including around the election:

*During the first half of 2019, Jammu and Kashmir witnessed continued and increased violence and heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, following a militant attack on the Central Reserve Police Force convoy on the Jammu–Srinagar highway that resulted in the killing of 48 Indian soldiers in February. Following this attack, Kashmiri people living in various cities and towns of India became targets of hate crimes. Thousands of Kashmiri students were forced to flee from their colleges and universities and return to Kashmir. People living in Jammu and Kashmir feared the attack would have dreadful consequences – which turned out to be true.*

*The frequency of cordon and search operations (CASOs) and crackdowns increased in the aftermath of the attack. CASOs are a form of harassment that breach people’s right to privacy. According to*

*a report by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons and Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, at least 177 CASOs were conducted by the Indian armed forces in Jammu and Kashmir, which resulted in the killing of at least 118 militants and four civilians and the destruction of at least 20 civilian properties.*

*In February, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and the Kashmir Chapter of Jamaat-i-Islami were banned and hundreds of their leaders and workers were arrested.*

*Ahead of the elections, 100 additional companies of soldiers were deployed in Kashmir and mass arrests of political and religious leaders were carried out. During polling days there were complete shutdowns, violence and killings.*

*Internet shutdowns have also been a common practice in Jammu and Kashmir. Internet services were curtailed 51 times in the first half of 2019.*

*The autonomy guaranteed to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution allowed the state a certain amount of autonomy – its own constitution, a separate flag and freedom to make laws – but it had been greatly eroded before revocation of the special status.*

While the region is no stranger to repression and its special status had gradually been compromised, the fear among some now is that rules that prevented outsiders from buying land in the region will be **swept aside**, allowing the state to promote a social and ethnic engineering project by encouraging its supporters to move into the region. Natasha identifies this concern:

*There have been concerns attached to the revocation of Article 35a, which permitted the local legislature to define who are permanent residents of the region. People have speculated that demographic changes might be underway, designed and strategised along the same lines as the occupation of Palestine, including the demographic*

*changes introduced by Israel in Palestine. While there are fears of demographic changes, the majority's response has been not to fight against revocation of the state's special status, as this would have meant legitimising the occupation of the region. The larger struggle is for the right to self-determination.*

Kashmir was not the only place where the BJP seemed intent on changing the demography. The state of Assam in northeast India, which borders Muslim-majority country Bangladesh, was the testing ground for what seemed another drive by the government to marginalise India's Muslims. Under the guise of a move against 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh, the authorities compiled a register of citizens. In essence, people had to prove they or their parents had lived in the state before March 1971, when Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan began.

This presented a major challenge to many. Birth certificates only became a legal requirement in 1969, meaning that many older people do not have official papers. Those least likely to have the correct paperwork are the poorest and most excluded people, who are likelier to be Muslims, as well as women. These excluded groups also have the lowest levels of literacy and least capability to navigate the complex bureaucracy required to obtain their papers.

When Assam's official list of citizens was published in August, around 1.9 million people had been **excluded**. Many had been left out on the basis of minor errors made by state officials in documents issued decades ago. People who had lived in Assam their whole lives suddenly faced the prospect of becoming stateless, deemed to be non-Indians. Those assessed to be non-citizens risked being stuck into detention centres, several of which the government was reported to be building. Civil society struggled to help as many people appeal as possible, while criticising the appeals process as being opaque and biased: a scramble was on to **train paralegals** to support appeals and help people track down proof of their status.

Broader processes were at play throughout 2019, as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act was introduced, becoming law in December. The act offers a way for people deemed to be 'illegal migrants' from Afghanistan,



Bangladesh and Pakistan to become Indian citizens – but only if they are Hindu or one of several minority faiths, namely Buddhist, Christian, Jain, Parsi and Sikh. Notably absent from this list is the Muslim faith, leaving no route to citizenship to Muslims deemed ‘illegal migrants’; people identified as ‘illegal migrants’ may be deported or jailed. The government also announced plans to roll out Assam’s citizenship verification process nationwide and establish a National Register of Citizens. India’s Muslims

could face having to prove they are legitimately from their country, or become stateless, with no alternative route open to them under the amended citizenship law; non-Muslims who fall foul of registration would still be able to seek citizenship under the new law’s provisions.

The Act set a troubling precedent: in a constitutionally secular state, for the first time religious identity was being used as a basis for citizenship. As



Indian Muslims rally against the Citizenship Amendment Act in Mumbai, India on 28 December 2019. Credit: Imtiyaz Shaikh/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



Indian students of the Jamia Millia Islamia University march in New Delhi on 18 December 2019, after the Supreme Court postponed hearing pleas challenging the constitutionality of the Citizenship Act. Credit: Imtiyaz Khan/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

such, it seemed another part of the BJP's deliberate exclusion and othering of Muslim people. It was discriminatory by design: the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights **criticised** the law as 'fundamentally discriminatory' in nature and apparently undermining of the constitution's guarantee of equal rights. While offering a route to citizenship for some categories of non-Hindus, the government was at the same time trying to deport Muslim Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar, where they face potentially genocidal conditions. The government was in effect saying that everyone could find a place for themselves in India but Muslims. These are

dangerous sentiments in a country that has seen repeated bouts of ethnic and religious violence, and they could only fuel prejudice and unrest.

Protests against the measures took place throughout the year. They were particularly pronounced in Assam, where different **protests** were held both against the religious concept of citizenship and against further migration into the region. The Act was passed on 12 December and entered into force on 10 January 2020; the passing of the law was greeted by the largest **protests** since the election. As in many of the protests of 2019 challenging



economic inequality ([see section](#)) and exclusion ([see section](#)), women and young people were to the fore. **Students** of all faiths and backgrounds protested in Assam, where they mobilised in defiance of a curfew, and across India. Students also protested against the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, corruption and **economic concerns**, including unemployment. Universities became protest sites. Young **women** put themselves on the frontlines of protest in a way not seen before, insisting that women's rights and the end of patriarchy be part of any protest demands, and pointing to the gendered aspects of the new law, as women disproportionately do not have official papers and are more likely to be illiterate. A **protest camp** – made up mostly of women of all generations and different faiths – began in the capital, New Delhi, in December and continued until the COVID-19 lockdown. Many were protesting for the first time. Millions of people mobilised in protests weekly, offering **songs and poems** in the face of repression.

Ahead of the law's passing, the authorities had worked to penalise criticism. In January police brought **sedition charges** against three people for holding a public meeting opposing the citizenship bill. The following month, three Indigenous activists were charged with sedition after they participated in a rally against the bill. Also in February, student leader Thokchom Veewon was charged with sedition for a Facebook post criticising the bill. And then when the protests came in force at the end of 2019, the **crackdown** was predictable. Violence and **excessive police force** left **at least 27 people** dead, including several apparently killed by live ammunition. The police also used teargas and batons against protesters. Hundreds of people were **detained**, including several prominent figures opposed to the citizenship law; thousands more were preventively detained, given warnings and released. Such were the levels of detentions that in New Delhi a sports stadium was turned into a temporary jail. There were numerous reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention. Internet shutdowns were imposed in protest hotspots, including Assam and New Delhi, and as it had in Jammu and Kashmir, the government invoked a **colonial-era law**, Section 144 of the Penal Code, to suppress gatherings of more than four people.

The hatred and division the government had stoked had bloody consequences in February 2020, when **violence** erupted between Hindu

and Muslim communities in New Delhi. Rhetoric had intensified in the run-up to Delhi state elections on 8 February 2020, in which the BJP was – unsuccessfully – trying to oust the Aam Aadmi Party, an anti-corruption party, from the governance of the National Capital Territory. One BJP politician **described** the women gathered peacefully in the protest camp as 'terrorists', and other protesters were called 'traitors'. Such language helped enable the **violence** that was unleashed when a mob organised by a BJP official intervened to remove a group made up mostly of women who were blocking a road in protest against the citizenship law. Violence quickly spiralled and within a few days **at least 38 people** were reported dead. Mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were targeted. Journalists covering the unrest were attacked. The police were criticised for doing little to prevent the violence.

None of these tragic events were accidental; rather, it was the consequence of a ruling party demonising a specific group of people for its advantage. India's embattled civil society will continue to do what it can to urge the BJP to moderate its language and actions, use its majority responsibly, respect rights and govern in the interests of all of India's peoples.

## ISRAEL: DEADLOCKED ELECTIONS IN A NATIONALIST RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Nationalism was also to the fore in Israel's two deadlocked elections in 2019, as incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and challenger Benny Gantz's Blue and White Alliance fought out two effective dead heats in April and September. Seeking to recruit support from the right, both leaders competed to position themselves as hardline nationalists. In this race to the bottom, Palestinians and Israel's Arab minority came under attack, as did the civil society that defends their rights and urges an end to Israel's continued occupation and settlement of territories it took control of in 1967's Six-Day War.

In April the two parties each won 35 seats in the 120-member Knesset, Israel's parliament. Israel's highly proportional voting system means that coalition governments are the norm, and this gives considerable leverage to a multiplicity of smaller parties. Many of these are ultra-Orthodox,

nationalist and hardline right-wing parties, which have typically backed Netanyahu. Netanyahu was tasked with forming a coalition, but after more than a month had to admit he was unable to do so, instead pushing through a vote to hold a second election. This political manoeuvring enabled Netanyahu to continue serving as prime minister pending the re-run election, and prevented Gantz being named as prime minister designate and given the opportunity to form a coalition.

The September vote saw Likud losing six seats, dropping down to 32, and Blue and White losing two but climbing narrowly ahead on 33. Smaller parties picked up seats, including ultra-Orthodox and hardline conservative parties, but also the Joint List, an alliance of several parties largely representing the Arab population, which emerged as a potentially influential bloc. Evidently Arab people had voted in **larger numbers** than before, sending a defiant message in response to their vilification. When they voted in April, Arabs had been exposed to intrusive security cameras set up in polling stations in their neighbourhoods.

There were various scenarios for how a coalition government could be formed: Netanyahu sought to appeal to the right and ultra-Orthodox parties by calling for a strong Zionist government, while others proposed a broad unity coalition between Likud and Blue and White, something that could only be possible if Netanyahu stepped aside, which he had no intention of doing. Netanyahu wanted far-right parties to remain part of any coalition, while voices from the left called for dialogue with the Arab parties. Both Netanyahu and then Gantz were ultimately unable to form a government. The Knesset voted for a third election as an attempt to break the deadlock, held in March 2020.

One of the stumbling blocks to coalition formation was the introduction of a bill to limit the exemption of ultra-Orthodox students from Israel's compulsory military service, an issue that had caused the April election to be brought forward. This apparently minor matter became a defining one for various political groupings. Ultra-Orthodox parties want to retain their special privilege, while some other parties, including hardline but secular nationalist parties, want the proposed law to go further, and there is considerable public anger at the exemptions currently granted.

The other significant backdrop against which the elections took place was the progress of corruption charges against Netanyahu and associates. Allegations included those of receiving money and gifts from wealthy business leaders, and of conspiracy with media owners and companies to trade business advantages for favourable coverage of Netanyahu. Police investigations started in December 2016 and two years later police recommended that bribery charges be brought against Netanyahu and his wife, Sara Netanyahu. In November 2019, Netanyahu was formally indicted for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. The suspicion had to be that Netanyahu was seeking to renew his hold on power before investigations and charges progressed, his support waned as a result and his position became untenable. Netanyahu continued to claim the charges were trumped-up and politically motivated, and in January 2020 asked the Knesset to grant him immunity, before withdrawing his request.

While political games were being played, human rights were being abused. As well as the increasingly vicious personal insults hurled at each other by the two leaders, language towards Palestinians and the Arab minority grew ever more aggressive. Netanyahu in particular engaged in increasingly virulent language about Palestine and Arabs, seeking to secure his support on the right. When an agreement between Blue and White and the Joint List seemed plausible, Netanyahu **described** this as a 'historic danger to Israel's security' and claimed that Joint List politicians were allied with militant groups. In another sign of how divisive rhetoric had entered the political mainstream, in September a chatbot on Netanyahu's official Facebook page was **suspended** for hate speech after spreading anti-Arab messages.

But while the two sat a little apart on the political spectrum – Netanyahu on the right and Gantz positioning as more centrist and liberal – both could be seen to be trying to win over the more extremist voters. Gantz is a former army head who boasted on the campaign trail of his military exploits against Palestinians. For many Palestinians and Arab Israelis, the question of who would become the next leader of Israel held **little interest**. Both men only promised to intensify the occupation.

Netanyahu sought to boost his support on the right by promising to annex all existing settlements, making the lands occupied by Israel formally part



of the state, including a vast swathe of the West Bank; this would be a clear defiance of international law, which has consistently ruled the occupation illegal. He promised to build new settlements in East Jerusalem, which would make Palestinian communities enclaves surrounded by Jewish settlers. Just ahead of the March 2020 election, Netanyahu **announced** a plan to build 3,500 new homes between two predominantly Palestinian areas, effectively cutting them off from each other. These were inflammatory plans that could only serve to perpetuate the conflict. The impact would likely be to make a potential Palestinian state, and therefore any peace process that recognises both Israel and Palestine as states, untenable. But rather than oppose these plans, Gantz **accused** Netanyahu of stealing his ideas. It seemed that the settlers, a relatively small population group, were the most important voters in the country.

In seeking to stay in power, Netanyahu also sought and received backing from President Trump, who in January 2020 **announced** a 'peace plan' that was little more than a compilation of far-right Israeli demands, while the previous November the US government broke with international consensus by disputing that Israel's settlements in occupied territories were illegal.

**Amit Gilutz of B'Tselem – The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories** describes recent attacks on Palestinian rights and civil society under this political race to the bottom:

*Benjamin Netanyahu's government has been joining forces with other reactionary and populist governments around the world, aiming to create new alliances that would diminish the ability of the international community to act effectively against the occupation. These alliances, together with the green light Israel sees coming from Washington, including through a series of unilateral measures the US administration has taken against Palestinians, has emboldened the pro-settlement camp in Israel, as well as the government, to step up its efforts in the dynamic process of gradually taking over more and more Palestinian land and resources, while pushing Palestinians into enclaves that are detached from one another and from resources needed for a sustainable future.*

*The recent Israeli governments – each more extremely right-wing than its predecessor – have for years engaged in a campaign aimed at silencing criticism of their policies in general and specifically stifling any debate about the occupation. Not only are human rights organisations such as B'Tselem targeted: anyone critical of the government, whether they be journalists, academics, or artists, easily becomes the target for incitement through smear campaigns and legislation designed to narrow the space available for political or even cultural action. At the same time the government is engaged in intensive international lobbying aimed at cutting funding for CSOs. This process is the predictable consequence of the prolonged occupation itself, now in its 51<sup>st</sup> year. It is paralleled with another push to erase the occupation, namely the formal annexation of the territories, which the current government seems to be keener on than previous ones.*

“THE RECENT ISRAELI GOVERNMENTS – EACH MORE EXTREMELY RIGHT-WING THAN ITS PREDECESSOR – HAVE FOR YEARS ENGAGED IN A CAMPAIGN AIMED AT SILENCING CRITICISM OF THEIR POLICIES IN GENERAL AND SPECIFICALLY STIFLING ANY DEBATE ABOUT THE OCCUPATION.”

AMIT GILUTZ





Israelis protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv on 25 May 2019. Credit: Amir Levy/Getty Images

*A case in point is the plan to forcibly remove the Palestinian community of Khan al-Ahmar, which is a war crime under international law. For decades Israel has created a coercive environment for dozens of Palestinian communities in the West Bank, hoping they will give up and leave, as if by their own volition, while stopping short of directly loading them onto trucks and dumping them elsewhere. These are the kinds of images that would damage the PR efforts of a state that purports to be a democracy, while at the same time controlling millions of subjects with no political rights. In the current political climate, Israel seems to be nearing a point in which this consideration will no longer stop it, although the planned forcible transfer of Khan al-Ahmar's residents is for now on hold, thanks to international pressure.*

Among attacks on civic space, Israeli security forces carried out **raids** on

the offices of Palestinian human rights CSOs in September and October. In November, the Israeli authorities **closed down** several Palestinian organisations based in Jerusalem, including a TV channel. Another tactic that intensified in 2019 was the **closure** of bank accounts of Palestinian CSOs, including on dubious grounds of connection to terrorism, as the Israeli state and pro-Israel groups sought to make it harder for Palestinian CSOs to fundraise internationally, including by seeking to have them blocked from international crowdfunding websites.

In November, Human Rights Watch's Israel and Palestine representative, Omar Shakir, was **forced to leave** Israel after the state refused to renew his visa. This was one of several recent examples where the state blocked access to international visitors who could provide human rights oversight, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in



the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Michael Lynk, who was **denied entry** in July, as had happened repeatedly since his appointment in 2016. The authorities also sought to stop witnesses to abuse from getting out to share their stories: Amnesty International researcher Laith Abu Zeyad was **stopped** from leaving the country and travelling internally in November and informed he was subject to a travel ban. These actions could only make it harder to monitor rights violations.

Meanwhile the deadlocked interim government was unable to pass a budget, meaning that even CSOs not directly targeted by the state were beginning to suffer: the Israeli Civic Leadership Association, a CSO umbrella body, **reported** that no government contracts were being awarded, meaning that services were not being provided and CSOs that provide services were not receiving resources.

Limits on civil society's oversight capacity went hand in hand with the continued use of lethal and excessive force by security forces against the weekly protests held in Gaza throughout 2019. The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory released its **report** on protests of 2018 in February, finding there were reasonable grounds to believe that security forces had committed international human rights violations that were war crimes or crimes against humanity. But the abuses continued regardless. During March and May alone, around 305 people were **reported** to have been killed by Israeli security forces, and violence ran through the year. On one single day, 21 June, 114 people were reported **injured** at a protest due to the security forces' use of live ammunition, shrapnel, rubber bullets and teargas canisters. The following week, on 28 June, a further **122 people** were reported injured. Several of those injured were journalists covering the protests. In November, Israel's **response** to around 400 rockets being fired into its territory from Gaza, resulting in no Israeli fatalities, was to launch airstrikes that killed 34 people, around half of them civilians.

The third election in March 2020 also proved inconclusive. Likud picked up four seats, but at the expense of smaller parties rather than Blue and White, whose number of seats was unchanged. The Joint List gained two more seats, with the Arab turnout again **increasing** in response to hostility, making them clearly the third force in the Knesset. At the time of writing,

a surprising and unwieldy coalition between the two antagonists seemed **on the cards**, with a novel arrangement proposed to enable both party leaders to each serve a spell as prime minister. Such an arrangement would seem to offer ample opportunity for backdoor political manoeuvring, and its early collapse into a fourth election would not be surprising. Amid all the politicking, the danger remains of more lowest-common-denominator appeals being made that fuel hatred, promote division and enable attacks on civil society.

## ESTONIA: THE FAR RIGHT ENTERS GOVERNMENT

Far-right nationalists are on the rise in Estonia, and entered government following the March parliamentary election. The Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) came third, increasing its vote by almost 10 percentage points and winning 19 seats in the 101-person parliament.

The party is based on ethnic nationalism, opposed to migration and the Russian language – Estonia has a Russian-speaking minority – and hostile to LGBTQI+ rights and abortion. Following negotiations on the formation of a new government, EKRE controversially joined a coalition with two other parties, becoming part of government for the first time and taking control of five key ministries: finance, interior, environment, rural affairs and foreign trade. A deal between the two largest parties had been on offer, but in choosing to hang onto office rather than give up his position, Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, whose party came second in the election, went back on a pre-election promise not to enter into a coalition with EKRE. The **coalition deal** included a commitment to refuse any refugees allocated by the EU and hold a referendum on defining marriage as being solely between a man and a woman.

Entry into government did not cause EKRE politicians to moderate their rhetoric towards those with whom it disagrees; as elsewhere, if anything, it made them more confident. Two EKRE ministers made gestures commonly seen as **white supremacist** signals when they were sworn in. One of them – new Minister of the Interior Mart Helme – **spoke out** against gynaecologists, accusing them of 'murder of the unborn' for killing children. He also **accused** the state broadcaster of bias and said that biased journalists should be taken off air.

This was the classic right-wing populist playbook in action, in which politicians select targeted enemies and lash them with performative outrage. The tactics are common, and so are their effects: division and heightened abuse towards their targets from followers of populist politicians, which produces a chilling effect.

Predictably, following EKRE's verbal attacks, reporters received violent threats on social media, including threats of sexual violence targeted at women journalists. Concern also arose over **political interference** in journalism. A newspaper reporter **quit** after being told to tone down an article criticising EKRE. Several other journalists left their jobs out of concern about potential censorship or repercussions for reporting that EKRE disagreed with.

CSOs were another predictable target. CSOs advocating for human rights and the rights of excluded groups **reported** being on the end of an escalating smear campaign and attacks, including from members of the government. Mart Helme suggested that state funding to CSOs should be **cut**. The fear raised among civil society was that the CSOs likely to lose funding would be those standing up for human rights, particularly for EKRE's targets – migrants and refugees, LGBTQI+ people and women. EKRE politicians have repeatedly **criticised** CSOs for helping LGBTQI+ people and migrants and refugees, and for taking the government to court to defend rights. In November, a right-wing media channel started a **petition** calling on the state to stop funding some key LGBTQI+ and women's rights CSOs.

Public pushback quickly mobilised. People **protested** as coalition talks took place, and **carried on** protesting when the new government was formed. Weekly protests were held against EKRE's involvement in government and in defence of rights. Hundreds of people marched in the capital, Tallinn, and the city of Tartu, and a grassroots social media **campaign**, *Kõigi Eesti* (Estonia for All), **sprang up**. Around 10,000 people came together in a concert organised by the movement in April.

The new movement itself became a **target** of attacks and disinformation from EKRE and its supporters. Regardless, it will continue to try to hold the party to account and work to resist the normalisation of extreme right-wing perspectives in the country's politics.

## SPAIN: PARTIES OF THE LEFT STAND AGAINST FAR-RIGHT ADVANCES

Like Israel, Spain held two elections in 2019, in April and November, separated by a political deadlock, and like Estonia, the far right made advances. Each vote saw a leap in support for right-wing populist party Vox, which entered the Congress of Deputies for the first time in April, winning 10 per cent of the vote, before rising to finish third, winning 52 of the 350 seats, in November.

Vox was founded in 2013, but attracted little support until 2018, when it won seats in the regional Andalusian Parliament. Ironically, despite boosting its profile in a decentralised regional election, Vox is an ultranationalist party. It gained prominence by positioning itself in rigid opposition to the Catalan independence movement, seeking a centralised rather than devolved Spain. Like other far-right parties, it is also xenophobic and opposed to migration, is stridently anti-Muslim and strongly opposed to advances in women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

One of Vox's key positions is its **opposition** to Spain's 2004 Gender Violence Law, a breakthrough that came after years of civil society advocacy and created special courts and rehabilitation centres for women victims of violence. In an act of performative outrage in November, Vox **refused** to sign a declaration by the city council of Madrid condemning violence against women, the first time a party represented in the capital failed to do so. Vox positions the law's special protection for women as discriminating against men and children, and wants to give stronger legal recognition to the notion of the 'natural family', framed around heterosexual marriage and women's role as mothers.

In pushing this position Vox has cultivated religious support and closely **connected** with ultra-conservative Catholic forces, notably the *HazteOír*.org (Make Yourself Heard) group, which acts as a shock troop for anti-rights attacks, frequently spreading offensive **messages** against women's and LGBTQI+ rights – including notoriously branding feminists as 'feminazis' – creating profile for the issue that Vox is then able to capitalise on.



In common with the rise of right-wing populist and nationalist parties across many European countries, the increase in support for Vox indicates broader currents of disenchantment. **Núria Valls** of the **Ibero-American League of Civil Society Organisations** locates the rise of Vox within both specific Spanish discontent with established politics and wider international trends:

*The widespread rejection of the political system that was established following the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the 1970s led to a significant deterioration of the two traditional parties: the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and the Popular Party (PP). These political parties were very used to bipartisanship and ruling with the support of large majorities. When other parties appeared on the stage, pacts and coalitions became necessary, which until then had only been a feature of local politics. It became necessary to include more minority parties and nationalist parties from the country's periphery, which does not always pay electorally.*

*Traditionally in Spain it was considered that there was no extreme right because the PP encompassed the entire right wing. But Vox emerged with great force and with a Francoist, aggressive anti-human rights discourse, presenting itself as the guarantor of the unity of Spain against separatism.*

*An element of this turn has to do with the anger that a section of the population feels toward politics. Corruption of political parties has had a great impact on society, as people think that politicians are in politics only to enrich themselves. There is no idea of politics in the broader sense as linked to the common good.*

*In particular, there is a bloc of young people who see a very difficult future for themselves. They have very low expectations and view a vote for Vox as an anti-system choice. This is the vote of those who think that migration will deprive them of jobs and state resources, and that gender policies are an exaggeration. Vox is very apt at using social media with direct messages often based on falsehoods that are reaching the population.*

*This is a worrying phenomenon that is not only happening in Spain. Extreme right parties arise in times of citizen frustration in the face of economic and social inequalities in a globalised world. There is an international movement – which spans Brazil, France, Italy, Norway, the USA and many other countries – that focuses on stigmatising and criminalising migration and so-called ‘gender ideology’. The support for these speeches by some religious congregations should also be analysed.*

*These parties use democracy's rules to promote an anti-human rights ideology. It is paradoxical that democracy, which was born under the values of participation and respect for rights, is currently being used to strengthen and foster an ideology that is totally opposed to those values.*

“EXTREME RIGHT PARTIES USE DEMOCRACY’S RULES TO PROMOTE AN ANTI-HUMAN RIGHTS IDEOLOGY. IT IS PARADOXICAL THAT DEMOCRACY, BORN UNDER THE VALUES OF PARTICIPATION AND RESPECT FOR RIGHTS, IS CURRENTLY BEING USED TO STRENGTHEN AND FOSTER AN IDEOLOGY THAT IS TOTALLY OPPOSED TO THEM.”

NÚRIA VALLS



Spaniards could be forgiven for lacking trust in established politicians. The April election was held after the minority PSOE government was unable to get its budget approved. It had taken over the previous year when the PP government had lost a confidence vote following the exposure of a massive **corruption scandal** involving leading PP officials, who were found guilty of accepting bribes in return for the distribution of public contracts. Unsurprisingly, the April vote saw the PP's support collapse, with the PSOE placed first. However, the PSOE was unable to conclude a deal to govern in partnership with the party to its left, Unidas Podemos, a party that had its origins in the mass **anti-austerity protests** first seen in 2011. The deadlock resulted in the second election.

The vote of both PSOE and Unidas Podemos dipped a little in the November election, but this time they were able to put aside their differences to form a government, perhaps aware of the impatience of Spanish voters to have a conclusion of some kind, and of the growing threat of Vox. Another striking feature of the November election was the collapse of the centre-right Ciudadanos party: it came third on an increased vote in April, only for its support to implode in November, leaving it placed a distant sixth on only 10 seats. These results suggested a volatility and a movement away from the centre ground. They meant that there was more than one story from Spain's twin elections of 2019: as well as the rise of Vox, Spain started 2020 with a coalition left-of-centre government. Núria relates the background to this outcome:

*After the first elections the PSOE felt uncomfortable when negotiating with leftist and independent parties. On top of this, the personal ambitions of the leaders of both the PSOE and Unidas Podemos made a pact impossible at that time.*

*The PSOE misread the polls and believed that a second election would give them the majority, and therefore the possibility of governing alone. But ahead of the November elections, people were angry because, as they saw it, due to their leaders' personal egos parties had not done their job, and instead had made us waste time and money. All of this further deepened dissatisfaction with politics.*

*Despite the good results obtained by Vox, it was the left that won the elections and this time they worked fast. In just 24 hours a pact between the PSOE and Unidas Podemos was forged, which had previously been impossible to achieve. People found it hard to understand why what a few months ago had been impossible was now possible. But what is important is that the formation of a government was prioritised against the feeling of instability and paralysis that has prevailed in recent years. Faced with this broad pact among leftist parties, the right wing reacted with a very aggressive discourse, strongly rooted in the Francoist tradition.*

*Governing will not be easy, but it promises to be a very interesting experience, which offers the possibility of creating change. It will be a very broad government, with 22 ministerial portfolios, notably characterised by gender parity.*

The prominence Vox achieved forces civil society to think about how best it can respond and work to ensure rights for all in the face of attacks. Núria suggests that a change in tactics may be needed:

*Organised civil society was caught a little off guard. On the one hand, we did not believe that electoral support for Vox would be so strong, and on the other hand, we had a debate about whether we should respond to them, and therefore give them more media coverage, or whether it was best to ignore them. The second option prevailed, among political parties as well. And the strategy of ignoring them contributed to the increase in votes for Vox. There was nobody left to respond to their expressions bluntly and with clear arguments.*

*Now civil society debate revolves around the need to defend human rights clearly and forcefully and respond to any expression that hurts or stigmatises any population group.*

*In the territories where it is governing together with the PP and Ciudadanos, such as Andalusia, Madrid and Murcia, one of Vox's first actions has been to press for the end of aid to organisations working with women or vulnerable groups.*

*We are experiencing a risk of regression in freedoms and therefore it is necessary for us to work in a more united way than ever as civil society. A clear communication strategy must be developed to reach*

*all people. Often we in civil society remain locked in our own spheres and find it hard to take our message beyond our circles.*



Protesters hold a banner that reads 'Freedom for political prisoners' during a rally against the trial of Catalonia's pro-independence leaders on 16 February 2019 in Barcelona, Spain. Credit: Victoria Rovira/Agencia Press South/Getty Images



## CATALONIA QUESTION REMAINS

The issue of Catalonia's **independence** is also not going to go away, and will remain a question that causes stark divisions, within Catalonia and across Spain. In both elections, people in Catalonia again largely chose as their representatives Catalan rather than pan-Spain parties. Núria describes how the Catalonia issue has come to dominate Spanish politics in ways that benefit Vox:

*The way the situation in Catalonia has been handled has been a breeding ground for the acceptance of increasingly right-wing discourse, justified in the need to preserve the unity of Spain.*

*The political conflict in Catalonia had radicalised the positions of parties present at the state level, which entered into a sort of competition to show who was the most Spanish. Even leftist parties do not dare to speak in recognition of Spain's national plurality because the media, and particularly those from the capital, Madrid, criticise them aggressively.*

*Ciudadanos, a seemingly liberal party, which not long ago thought it would soon be in government, practically disappeared given its meagre results. Ciudadanos had focused its discourse on territorial conflict and on the unity of Spain. Voters who prioritised this issue preferred Vox, which has a more radical stance.*

Demands for Catalan independence have long been made on cultural, political and economic grounds. The economic crisis that unfolded across Europe and many other parts of the world from 2008 sparked anti-austerity protests and gave fresh urgency to those claims. Catalonia is Spain's wealthiest region, but as harsh austerity measures were enacted across Spain, people started to question why they should bail out the rest of the country and ask if they would be better off as an independent state.

Catalan independence parties from different parts of the political

spectrum came together to seize on this momentum, and their campaign culminated in the independence **referendum** of 1 October 2017. The referendum took place despite being ruled unconstitutional and banned by the Spanish state, and amid heavy repression by national security forces, which saw the closure of polling stations and violence that left hundreds injured. It produced a vote in favour of independence, although many opponents of independence boycotted the poll, and it was followed by the Catalan government unilaterally declaring its independence.

The reprisals from the Spanish government were swift and harsh: several independence movement leaders were detained or fled abroad to avoid jail, and the central government imposed direct rule. The state's reaction effectively helped recruit continuing support for Catalonia's independence movement. Many people believed that they had made a democratic choice that was not being respected.

The question was not settled in 2017, and nor did the repression end. In **February** and **March 2019**, large-scale protests were held against the **trial** of 12 Catalan independence leaders. March also saw Vox hold a **protest** in Barcelona against independence, accompanied by counter-protests that led to clashes and several arrests.

The arrest in September of nine people linked to the independence movement, on charges of planning violence, sparked further **protests**, while 600,000 people marched in Barcelona on Catalonia's independence day, 11 September. And then on 14 October, the Spanish Supreme Court **sentenced** nine of the Catalan civil society leaders who had helped organise the 2017 referendum. They received jail terms of between nine and 13 years for sedition, disobedience and misuse of public funds. The verdict provoked a furious response. Thousands of people marched on Barcelona airport intent on occupying it, causing the cancellation of over 100 flights before being dispersed by security forces with baton charges and rubber and foam bullets, which **injured** a reported 37 protesters. It was a prelude to a sustained spell of **violence**, in which groups of protesters put up barricades, vandalised public property,

torched cars and threw projectiles at security forces, and security forces sprayed teargas. There were running street battles between police and protesters. A reported 51 people were arrested across Catalonia over two days.

Young people were to the fore in the protests, angered at a national political establishment they saw as refusing to listen to them and disenchanted with traditional forms of protest. As Núria relates, a new social movement emerged, with some similarities to that in the very different context of Hong Kong (see above):

*Young people were the protagonists and adopted a more radical attitude towards repression. In that context, the anonymous **Democratic Tsunami** movement emerged. Inspired by the Hong Kong protests, this movement uses social media to call for large peaceful mobilisations in various locations, such as the border or the airport. The police have tried to discover who is behind this movement, but it really is just an instance of collective empowerment by pro-independence civil society.*

Democratic Tsunami was swiftly targeted. A judge ordered the **closure of its website**, in response to which the group set up a new site at a different address, denouncing the order as state censorship.

In response to the violence the Catalan government called for peace, and 18 October saw a general strike followed by a peaceful rally attended by **over 500,000 people** that shut down the city centre, but also violence later in the day, including clashes near the national police headquarters. This time water cannon as well as teargas, smoke grenades and rubber bullets were used. That same day Quim Torra, President of the Government of Catalonia, went **on trial** on charges of 'disobedience' for refusing to remove independence symbols from public buildings. This meant that the outrage was hardly likely to die down. Protests and violence continued in the run up to the November election.

The situation was undoubtedly polarised. On 28 October, thousands of people **marched** in Barcelona for Spanish unity, claiming to represent

the 'silent majority' that does not agree with independence and rejects violent protests. Opinion **polls** suggest that Catalonians are divided between independence, a more federal solution and the status quo, pointing to the existence of divisions that need to be healed. But what should be clear is that there can be no hope of resolution if the Spanish state continues its heavy-handed approach.

The Republican Left of Catalonia party effectively helped form Spain's left-of-centre government by **abstaining** its 13 representatives in the vote held in the Congress of Deputies on approving the new government in January 2020, which was carried by a simple majority of 167 votes for to 165 against. As Núria concludes, this offers some hope of a less confrontational relationship – something that could take the momentum out of Vox's appeals to nationalism – although right-wing parties in general and Vox in particular will continue to make that difficult:

*At present, following the latest election in which the PSOE and Unidas Podemos required the abstention of the pro-independence party Republican Left of Catalonia to be able to form a government, the picture has changed. The government has pledged to initiate a dialogue with the government of Catalonia and to bring any agreements reached through dialogue to a citizen vote. This will not be easy because right-wing parties, using any judicial remedy at their disposal, are trying to boycott the process. An effort must be made to find a solution for the situation of pro-independence prisoners that facilitates a peaceful and political way out and allows a process of real dialogue to begin.*

Up for discussion could well be the possibility of **reform** to the controversial criminal code measures on sedition, used to jail Catalan independence leaders, as well as the notorious **gag law**, a measure that restricts the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression across Spain that civil society has been urging the repeal of since it was passed in 2015. Civil society will be hoping for cool heads and constructive dialogue, and seeking more tolerant attitudes towards peaceful civil society action and the expression of dissent.

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: A MIXED PICTURE

The European Parliament elections, held across 28 countries in May, offered a mixed picture. Ahead of the elections, right-wing populist leaders had appeared full of confidence, talking up the prospects of a breakthrough. In the European Parliament different national parties work together in broad alliances, and with support declining for the two main centre-right and centre-left alliances that had dominated the parliament since the first direct votes were held in 1979, there was talk of right-wing populist parties being able to form an influential bloc.

The figurehead for this push was Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's right-wing populist League party, and Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister in the coalition government the League formed with the populist Five Star Movement from June 2018 to September 2019 (see below). In April, Salvini hosted an event in Milan vowing to create a new alliance of the far right in the European Parliament, alongside representatives of right-wing populist parties from Denmark, Finland and Germany. The alliance would work together for a fortress Europe, characterised by strong borders and protection for Europe's 'cultural identity'.

Just ahead of the elections the following month, Salvini fronted a **rally** with nationalist party leaders from several countries in Milan. Significantly, this included Marine Le Pen from France's National Rally, one of Europe's longest-established far-right political forces, along with representatives from Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Netherlands, Slovakia. As leaders of these parties stepped up to call for harsh controls on migration, the rally was met with anti-fascist protests.

Both these events were preceded by the **World Congress of Families**, held in Verona in March (see section), with Salvini present. This peak international gathering of anti-rights groups brought together people committed to ending abortion rights and rights for LGBTIQ+ people. There was also **evidence** of international resourcing of extremist politics, with reports of funding being channelled from Russia and the USA to far-right parties ahead of the election via a Spain-based group closely linked to Vox and HazteOir.

However, attempts to form international movements of far-right parties have often run aground. A **move** by Donald Trump's former strategist Steve Bannon to forge a closer alliance of right-wing populist parties ahead of the European Parliament elections attracted much publicity but seemed to **come to little**, meeting with some resistance at what was perceived as an attempt to impose **outside agendas** and evidently failing to understand the points of divergence between European far-right parties.

One obvious challenge is that the ethnic nationalism such parties generally promote often positions neighbouring countries as enemies. Nationalist parties may lose support from key constituencies if they are seen to be prioritising international partnership. Another key issue that splits different parties is attitudes towards Russia and its President Vladimir Putin; Russia favours extreme parties that disrupt the normal functioning of politics and thereby weaken its allies, including by hampering cooperation within the EU and its eastwards expansion, but not all right-wing populist and nationalist parties return the favour by being pro-Russian. Parties also often divide on the extent to which they are prepared to ally with explicitly fascist and neo-Nazi forces, and on their **economic policies**, which can range from heavily state interventionist to pro-free market; some right-wing populist parties that support welfare and public spending for majority populations combined with a hard line on migration have had difficult experiences when working in coalition with economically neoliberal centre-right parties.

At Salvini's launch, who was not in the room was arguably as notable as who was. The hardline nationalist parties in government in **Hungary** (see below) and Poland (see section) were not represented. The UK's populist Brexit Party, and its forerunner, the UK Independence Party, have also tended to keep a distance from other populist parties that are explicitly more ideological.

When the results came, predictions by right-wing populists that they would take a third of the vote and form a powerful group fell short. Undoubtedly their greatest success was in Italy, where the League leapt into first place, winning 34 per cent of the vote. The National Rally came first again in France, as it had in 2014, albeit with a slight loss of support and seats. Vox picked up its first seats in Spain.



In other countries, right-wing populist parties made gains, but so did **green and pro-European parties**, with all apparently taking votes from more established parties. The big story of the European Parliament election in Germany was supposed to be the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany party, but while it increased its vote by four percentage points, this was eclipsed by a surge in support for the Green party, which saw its vote rise by nearly 10 percentage points and its number of seats almost double. Support for Green parties rose in several European countries, including those where right-wing populist and nationalist parties also made gains. In short, there was more than one tale to tell, and the other story, and that most consistently seen across Europe as a whole, was of a green wave of voting that surely reflected the increased attention focused on climate change and the need for action resulting from the climate activism of 2019 ([see section](#)).

Meanwhile right-wing populist parties lost some support in Austria, following the scandal that saw the collapse of the government (see below), and in Denmark, where the Danish People's Party, which had placed first in the previous election, saw its support collapse, losing almost 16 percentage points and three of its four seats.

This meant that the Identity and Democracy group, launched in June to bring far-right populist parties together, mustered only 76 seats, just over 10 per cent of the European Parliament's total, once seats had been redistributed following the UK's departure from the EU in January 2020. It spanned 10 of the now-27 EU members. But it was only the fifth-largest bloc, having failed to edge ahead of the liberal and green groupings, and some key parties remained outside the alliance.

There was still plenty of evidence that domestic issues prevailed during the European Parliament elections: voters for far-right parties promising to strengthen national borders did not necessarily see themselves as part of a broader, cross-European movement, and in the UK's case, where the Brexit Party won the elections and the two main parties haemorrhaged support, voters for a right-wing populist party could be argued to be rejecting the very idea of international cooperation as well as sending a clear message about domestic political dysfunction. The clear message

remained one of a lack of trust among many people in established political parties, but the European Parliament elections indicated there could be more than one beneficiary of political volatility.

## REVERSALS OF FORTUNE IN ITALY AND AUSTRIA

Ultimately Matteo Salvini's ambition may have been his undoing, at least for now. Buoyed by the European Parliament election results and with his party surging to first place in national opinion polls, he sought the end of his governing coalition with the Five Star Movement and **tried to force** another domestic election. An election might have given the League enough seats to govern in partnership with other right-wing and far-right parties. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – appointed as a neutral by the coalition government in 2018 – resigned ahead of a no-confidence vote, **blasting** Salvini for blatant opportunism and self-interest. But instead of an election his coalition partners agreed a new government with the centre-left Democratic Party, putting aside their differences to prevent a likely far-right government. Conte was reappointed as Prime Minister. Salvini **called** for his supporters to march on Rome, but was left sniping on the sidelines and watching his lead in the polls decline as Italy's new left-leaning government was sworn in in September.

The Five Star Movement had long been unhappy with the League's aggressive stance towards migrants, which included **prosecution** of CSOs involved in search and rescue (SAR) operations to save people in the Mediterranean Sea and the closing of ports to prevent SAR ships from docking. In May, for example, the captain of the Sea-Watch 3 SAR vessel was **arrested** and placed under house arrest after docking despite government attempts to block the ship that carried 65 people rescued off the coast of Libya. Salvini ramped up the rhetoric, **accusing** the captain of committing an 'act of war'. In August the authorities fined Italian CSO *Mediterranea* €300,000 (approx. US\$330,000) for operating the SAR vessel *Mare Jonio*, which saved more than 100 people. The following month, the captain of the *Eleonore* SAR ship, operated by Mission Lifeline, was placed under investigation after landing more than 100 people in defiance of the ban. In August, Salvini pushed through a new **security law**, giving the state



People take part in a rally organised by the anti-fascist Sardines Movement in Rome, Italy, on 14 December 2019. Credit: Antonio Masiello/Getty Images

extra powers to stop SAR vessels and increasing punishments, as well as criminalising a range of offences related to protest. Racially motivated and xenophobic acts **soared** under the League-Five Star government as far-right extreme groups became emboldened and political discourse shifted towards them.

The Democratic Party made the dropping of harsh migration policies, particularly the new security law, a condition of forming a coalition.

Marking a reversal from Salvini's approach of demonising migrants and refugees and the civil society that works for their rights, his **replacement** as Interior Minister, Luciana Lamorgese, was a career civil servant specialising in migration, including in planning reception centres and promoting integration. Salvini was placed **under investigation** for potentially defamatory comments about the captain of Sea-Watch 3 and on 15 September, for the first time under the new government, a SAR vessel was allowed to dock **unopposed**, landing 82 rescued people.



A less strident and more inclusive approach to migration was signalled, but Salvini and the League remained a powerful force in Italian politics, and were still ahead of other parties in the year-end polls. In a survey **published** in November, over half of Italians said that racist acts were either always or sometimes justifiable; compared to previous polls, the survey suggested that Italians were becoming more tolerant of racism. October saw **thousands** of people participate in a far-right rally in Rome, with neo-fascist groups present, along with the far-right Brothers of Italy party, which has won increased support. At the year's end Five Star saw three of its senators **defect** to the League, hinting at the fragility and underlying tensions of the coalition, which was marked by numerous disputes between the parties.

But as across Europe, there was another story to tell: in November, thousands rallied in Milan in support of Liliana Segre, a Holocaust survivor and senator who had to be given police protection following a surge in online threats against her after the government passed her proposal to establish a commission on racism and antisemitism. And then late 2019 saw the rise of the '**sardines movement**', which aimed to show that it is not just the far right that can fill public squares. The movement sought to pack public spaces to offer a visible show of defiance to the far right and demonstrate support for equality and tolerance. Huge **rallies** were held in December, with many people holding aloft sardine signs. Italy's unlikely coalition may remain glued together out of a fear of the alternative, but those trying to keep the far right out of power in Italy now know they are not as alone as they might have thought.

The far right also entered government in Austria after the 2017 election, which resulted in a coalition between the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), which came first and third successively. Under the coalition the conditions for civil society **worsened**, with civil society subjected to political smears, loss of consultation and funding opportunities and increased **pressure** on independent journalists.

However, the situation changed abruptly in May when a **video** came to light showing FPÖ leader and Austria's Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian

Strache, ahead of the 2017 election, offering access to public contracts in return for donations to someone masquerading as a contact of a Russian oligarch. In the video he also discussed the possibility of making ownership changes to state and private media to make them more supportive of the FPÖ. Chancellor and ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz declared this to be the final straw, also citing a series of embarrassments over the FPÖ's extremist and racist connections – although these could hardly have come as a surprise – and ended the coalition agreement. Once again relationships with Russia had been a difficult issue for a right-wing populist party to shake off; the FPÖ also had a formal cooperation agreement with President Putin's United Russia party.

The government collapsed once Strache resigned and another FPÖ politician, Foreign Secretary Herbert Kickl, was fired. Chancellor Kurz was then ousted in a no-confidence vote, causing the government to be handed over to a team of technocrats until fresh elections could be held in October. As it moved to distance itself from its former coalition partners, the ÖVP **announced** it would make the banning of the Identitarian Movement – a far-right group whose leader was connected with the instigator of the terrorist killings in Christchurch, New Zealand – a condition of any coalition talks. There were said to be many links between the Identitarian Movement and FPÖ members.

In the August election, the FPÖ's support collapsed by almost 10 percentage points, causing it to lose 20 of its 51 seats. The ÖVP's distancing strategy appeared to have paid off, as it increased its support by six percentage points. But the surprise result of the night, echoing those earlier gains in several countries in the European Parliament elections, came for the Greens, which gained 10 percentage points and put on 26 seats, its best-ever national result. The votes seemed to signal a desire for a different form of disruption to that tested by the right-wing coalition. While the FPÖ, under new leadership, had hoped for a renewed coalition role, the results offered potential for an alternative alignment, and after months of negotiations, for the first time an ÖVP-Greens coalition government was sworn in in January 2020, with Greens leader Werner Kogler appointed as Vice-Chancellor. A new office of minister for climate protection was created, held by former head of the environmental CSO GLOBAL 2000, Leonore Gewessler.





People hold signs that read 'to combat hate, rights for all' during a demonstration by the Sardines Movement in December 2019. Credit: Antonio Masiello/Getty Images

The new alliance will not be an easy one. The Greens face the classic dilemma of transitioning from what many may have seen as a party of protest to one that can show it deserves a share of power. It may have felt duty-bound to step forward to avoid the prospect of another right-wing coalition. But the new government will have to square ÖVP promises of tax cuts with Green demands for investment in climate infrastructure. Its policy platform **combines** a commitment to making Austria carbon neutral by 2040 with harsh policies towards asylum seekers, offering an uneasy compromise for many.

But there is now an opportunity in Austria to show that the Greens can have a positive influence, and a right-of-centre party in government will now be under pressure to take climate action seriously – surely something that must happen if adequate climate action is to be taken across the globe.

As the new government swings into action, there is a need for active civil society engagement to hold it to higher human rights standards than its predecessor, and to demand a change in the previous government's dismal attitude to civil society. There is surely potential for a more constructive relationship.

## MAINSTREAM POLITICS MAKE A COMEBACK IN DENMARK AND FINLAND

While far-right parties from Denmark and Finland were represented at Salvini's April launch of a supposedly powerful European alliance, domestically, politics in those countries also took a different turn.

Denmark's 2015 election caused shockwaves, as the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (DPP) came second on 21 per cent of the vote, with the result that the centre-right Venstre party, even though it came third, was able to form a minority government with its support, on condition of taking a harsh line on migration and border controls. However, in the 2019 elections, held in June, the DPP's support collapsed, falling to under nine per cent and causing it to lose 21 of its parliamentary seats; following its poor performance in the European Parliament elections, this suggested that its peak support might have passed.

The result was a return to government by the Social Democrats, headed by Mette Frederiksen, who became the youngest prime minister in Danish history, with the support of left and green parties based on a commitment to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 70 per cent by 2030. However, it was noted that the Social Democrats took a much **harder line** on migration than they had in the past, embracing many of the hardline policies on migration and religious minorities introduced by the previous administration, under which, as in Italy, **discrimination and hate crimes** soared. In the run-up to the election, violence broke out in a highly multicultural quarter of the capital, Copenhagen, when a far-right group **staged** a burning of the Quran. In a further outrage, in November, on the anniversary of the Nazis' Kristallnacht night of anti-Jewish violence, over 80 Jewish graves in Jutland were **vandalised** by neo-Nazis. These attacks suggested how emboldened Denmark's far right has become, even following the election.

The Social Democrats' adoption of anti-migration policies indicated how right-wing populist parties, even when they appear remote from power, can succeed by changing the territory and terms of the debate, dragging

the mainstream political spectrum rightwards. However, it should also be noted that the more left-wing parties supporting the new government also **gained votes** while running campaigns that emphasised the rights of everyone, and extracted **concessions** from the government on its immigration policies.

In Finland, the Social Democrat party narrowly came first over the right-wing populist Finns party in the April election following a campaigning period marred by a level of **aggression and violence** unusual in Finnish politics, and stridently **anti-migrant** and anti-LGBTQI+ **advertising** from a minor nationalist party. Social Democrat-led negotiations ruled out any involvement in government for the Finns party. The five-party coalition government that resulted was reflective of the fact that no single party commanded more than 20 per cent of the votes. The new cabinet committed to increased public spending and making Finland carbon neutral by 2035.

A change of prime minister in December, when the incumbent lost the confidence of one of the coalition members over his handling of a strike, meant that Finland became, for a time, the country with the youngest prime minister in the world, when new 34-year-old Social Democrat leader Sanna Marin was sworn in as head of the coalition government. Remarkably, this meant that all five parties in the coalition were **headed by women**, four of them aged under 40.

Sanna Marin's appointment marked the latest in what seems to be a current wave of young, progressive women leaders who are arguably changing politics in a range of contexts (*see section*). What this emerging cadre of women leaders are potentially modelling is an alternative form of response to the many discontents of today – to the sense of economic and personal insecurity that many people have, their disconnection from and loss of trust in key institutions of governance and politics: something that acknowledges these concerns as legitimate, but offers an alternative form of response to right-wing populism, nationalism and the cult of the strong, macho leader. As such, they may offer new potential for civil society engagement.

## THE FIGHTBACK: SITES AND CITIES OF RESISTANCE

Everywhere they are active, right-wing populists and nationalists are being met with resistance. This takes a range of forms, from mass mobilisations and social media campaigns to attempts to engage with and persuade voters.

As well as the reversals described above, in 2019, some strongarm leaders faced embarrassing defeats in their own backyards. In Budapest, Hungary, incumbent Mayor Istvan Tarlos, of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, lost the October mayoralty election, **defeated** by Gergely Karacsony, who was backed by an alliance of liberal, centrist and green parties. The opposition also made major gains in local elections across Hungary.

The result in Budapest was the most significant defeat Orbán experienced since he became prime minister for the second time in 2010. Crucial this time, in Budapest and elsewhere, was the decision by opposition parties to come together and endorse a single candidate, connecting with a sizeable constituency of people seeking an alternative to continued Orbán and Fidesz rule. As in Spain, Italy and Austria, it indicated that parties were becoming better at working together to respond to right-wing populism and nationalism.

Voters made their choice, in Budapest and elsewhere, despite a **threat** by Orbán not to cooperate with local authorities that did not choose Fidesz candidates and a negative campaign run against Karacsony. The opposition also had to overcome challenges of limited resources and limited access to mass media, compared to extensive **pro-government media**, in an election campaign marked by **allegations** of irregularities, which included the distribution of free food alongside Fidesz leaflets, vote-buying, and the bugging of and raids on opposition party offices. Compensating for their lack of resources, the winning side prioritised street-level campaigning and social media outreach.

After winning, Karacsony said he would **reach out** to the Central European University in Budapest, an institution that has consistently been **attacked**

by Orbán and has had to move some of its courses out of Hungary as a result. With characteristic xenophobia, Fidesz blamed the defeat on foreign voters resident in Budapest.

Democratic choice is not quite dead yet in Turkey either. The candidate of the ruling Justice and Development (AKP) party lost the mayoralty election of biggest city Istanbul not once but twice in 2019. The March vote saw a narrow win for opposition candidate and relative unknown Ekrem İmamoğlu over the AKP's choice, senior politician and former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. The result was however overturned. Yıldırım had expected to win and both candidates had declared themselves the victor, but as Yıldırım's early lead over İmamoğlu was hauled back on election night, the state broadcaster stopped airing the results. Alleging irregularities, the AKP demanded the election be annulled and run again, and although there seemed no firm evidence of fraud, the initially resistant Supreme Electoral Council caved in and ordered a re-run.

The result of the new vote, held in June, was a huge embarrassment for AKP's strongarm leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who first came to prominence as Mayor of Istanbul, and whose recent years have been marked by an authoritarian intolerance of dissent that has left thousands of activists, **journalists** and others who opposed his rule in jail.

Once again standing as a unity candidate with cross-party support, İmamoğlu won easily this time on a record-winning margin, gaining around 54 per cent of votes to Yıldırım's 45 per cent. The result was surely a verdict on AKP's attempt to overturn the first result, and its negative campaigning. It indicated a public resentment at AKP's tactics, and a desire for rules-based democracy. In pursuing the annulment of the March result, even Erdoğan had overstepped the mark for many, and people grasped a rare opportunity to show dissent and voice opposition.

Civic action was a key part of the result. Ahead of the vote, the İmamoğlu campaign announced it would set up its own **news centre** to report on the election results as an alternative to the state-owned news agency. Lawyers **volunteered** to act as electoral observers, and were deployed at most polling stations.



More than during the March election, İmamoğlu pitched his June campaign as being about the state of democracy in Turkey, and positioned himself as the alternative to Erdoğan and his increasingly authoritarian governance style. His **campaign** was notably more inclusive and optimistic than the AKP's campaign. Economic issues may have been a factor too: economic

**downturn** had set in, particularly in Istanbul, and even in his short first term in office İmamoğlu had been able to **expose** mismanagement and wasted spending under the AKP's mayorship, and financial flows from the city to foundations linked to Erdoğan and his family.



People in Budapest demonstrate against Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on 15 March 2019, during Hungary's National Day celebrations.

Credit: Laszlo Balogh/Getty Images

## LESSONS FOR THE FIGHTBACK

Several of the above examples exposed the existence of social divides, including those structured around age, education levels, income, type of employment and urban-to-rural locations. This suggests a major need by civil society to bridge divides, including urban-rural ones, and connect with people in towns and villages, from where right-wing populists and nationalists disproportionately draw their support. Access to a greater diversity of media in cities may also be a factor: both Orbán and Erdoğan, for example, attack independent media and have their own powerful propaganda channels in state media and media owned by supporters, but it is harder to have a monopoly on media messages in cities than in rural areas. Street-level campaigning is also needed to help counter skewed media.

At the same time, what is clear is that big cities are becoming increasingly **important sites** of resistance and alternatives. Budapest, for example, was also the location of mass anti-government **protests** during 2019. The distinct role of urban centres was emphasised in December, when the mayors of Budapest, Bratislava in Slovakia, Prague in Czechia and Warsaw in Poland **signed** the 'Pact of Free Cities', agreeing to promote core values such as freedom, democracy, the rule of law and social justice in their cities, in the face of the right-wing populism and nationalism that pervades their countries and region. They also called for direct EU funding to go to their cities, rather than via central government, not least so they could be able to play their part in responding to climate change. This showed the possibility of an alternative international response to the international connections right-wing politicians are seeking.

The need this suggests is to look for and understand the complexity behind national-level analysis that may appear only to indicate widespread and ongoing regression. It also suggests that more international alliances can be built between civil society in sites and cities of resistance.

The success of strategies that have pooled opposition voices into a single

candidate to oppose a right-wing populist or nationalist candidate speaks to the need to change tactics in the face of elected tyrants or imminent far-right threats. An ideal scenario is of course to have a diversity of voices competing to represent a wide range of positions on the political spectrum, giving voters the maximum possible choice, but when political parties and leaders do not abide by the rules – when they attack opposition candidates, capture the media in their favour, bend the rule of law, use the mechanisms of democracy to attack democratic values – a different approach may be needed, by coming together behind a candidate committed to upholding democratic freedoms and human rights: this can be seen as an attempt to reset the rules and reclaim the field so that normal political competition can take place in future. Joint action between civic initiatives and political campaigns – and campaigning that emphasises grassroots, street-level action – have had some success here.

Political parties may have to accept that they need to join broad alliances, however uneasy, and make them work, in order to keep the far-right out of power, mindful of the fact that when far-right politicians win positions of power, they tend not to moderate their positions but rather exploit the platform to stoke outrage and win further support. There have also been examples, as in Austria and Italy, of far-right politicians revealing themselves to be motivated by ambition and personal greed, rather than the concerns they claim for citizens. When this happens, there are opportunities to expose them.

Many of the elections of 2019 indicated that the underlying discontents and lack of trust many people have are enduring, but far-right politicians are not the only potential sources of alternatives, and where such figures have won space, they have often been exposed as not having the answers to the problems of the day. Alternate forms of response, including those that prioritise the provision of economic redistribution and climate action, are beginning to be taken more seriously. 2019 showed that the direction of travel is not one way. Civil society can engage with and influence these alternative voices. 2019 showed that there are some positive developments that we can build on.





Tens of thousands attend a rally against the government of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in Prague, Czech Republic, on the day before the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. Credit: Gabriel Kuchta/Getty Images