A RESURGENT MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES AND BLACK RIGHTS

The killing of George Floyd, at the hands of the Minneapolis police on 25 May, might at the time have seemed just one more dreadful case in the long and sadly routine litany of Black people being killed by US police. But something about this needless and cruel death, widely documented and shared on social media, in a year of particularly toxic US politics, and at a time when people were being told to respect pandemic rules and the authorities enforcing them, resonated.

Anger echoed through the USA and around the world. People rose up to demand justice for George Floyd, and for the many other victims of brutal and racist police treatment. Black people – among them many young people, women, LGBTQI+ people – insisted on telling their own stories of their experience of racial injustice, making clear that police killings and violence were part of a broader system of structural and ongoing injustice. People called for ingrained and sustained practices of racism and white supremacy to be swept away. They demanded a reckoning with the impacts of colonialism and slavery, no historical legacy but rather something that they are forced to encounter as an everyday contemporary reality. People sought radical change in policing practices that had often originated as a means of racial control in systems of racism, colonialism and slavery. They also called for change in the social and economic structures that determine access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, social services and wealth distribution. People mobilised in countries around the world, often but not always under the Black Lives Matter (BLM) banner. In mobilising, people did not necessarily follow a template established by US activists, but rather adopted the tactics that best fit each context and most helped them to capture the spotlight and obtain attention for grievances and demands that had long gone unheard. Around the world people insisted that, yes, the USA had a racism problem, but so did their country, and so urgent action was needed there too.

These testimonies of exclusion and demands for action were not new. In country after country, people spoke to experiences of lifetimes of struggle, and the campaigns mounted built on decades of activism. But the rapid spread of protests that came in the wake of George Floyd’s killing, with people mobilising on every inhabited continent, brought renewed energy and vigour to those demands. The sheer scale and weight of protests generated an unprecedented shift in awareness and acknowledgement of the problem of systemic racism and white supremacy. The protests forced open conversations in ways that had not been possible before, creating a noticeable shift in public discourse, away from discussion of racial discrimination and towards a recognition of systemic racism, refocusing attention on political, economic and social structures and processes rather than only individual attitudes and behaviours. The global movement pushed the question of systemic racism, and of police brutality as one of its most vicious expressions, to the top of the agenda, in ways that made it impossible to ignore any longer. It challenged the holders of political and economic power to take a position and commit to at least the first steps of change. It forced many white people to recognise white privilege, and to realise that treating racism as someone else’s problem only contributes to perpetuating it.

Many of those who mobilised will keep up the pressure so that the response this time goes beyond mere acknowledgement that there is merit to their cause and changes go further than the symbolic. Shifting the narrative is key, but it is not enough. The shifts achieved in discourse during 2020 need to be followed by the implementation of a policy agenda that tackles the systemic causes and effects of racism and addresses ongoing and long-entrenched disparities in political and economic power.
The origins of Black Lives Matter: from social media to the streets and centre stage

2020 brought a resurgence and global expansion of the decentralised BLM movement and a renewal of demands for racial justice, equality and an end to impunity over police brutality long made under that banner.

The affirmation that ‘Black lives matter’ was first uttered in July 2013, on Facebook. Upon hearing that the vigilante who had killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Miami Gardens, Florida, had been acquitted by the courts, civil rights activist and writer Alicia Garza wrote a straightforward post on the social media platform: ‘We don’t deserve to be killed with impunity. We need to learn to love ourselves and fight for a world where black lives matter.’ Within minutes, her friend and community organiser Patrisse Cullors attached the hashtag, and #BlackLivesMatter was born. A third friend, activist Opal Tometi, put together a website and opened social media accounts, and the slogan spread.

From this moment grew a diverse and diffuse movement. The three founded the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, a decentralised network of different local initiatives. But this was just one of many initiatives that formed and flourished under the BLM banner, which encompassed the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of over 50 groups in the USA, and a wide array of other groups around the world identifying with the slogan.

A year later, #BlackLivesMatter became a mass movement in reaction to the killing of yet another Black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. His death came only a month after a Black man, Eric Garner, was killed in New York City by white police officers who kept him in a chokehold, refusing to hear his repeated words, ‘I can’t breathe’. That phrase was quickly taken up, not just in hashtags but on banners and placards, in protests against police brutality across the USA and around the world.

BLM protesters soon became a regular street presence, mobilising each and every time a Black person died at the hands of the police. The police killings followed a common pattern: an assumption that a Black person must be doing something criminal; a violent police response entirely disproportionate to the assumed offence; the denial of police complicity and defence of the perpetrators; impunity and the refusal to offer justice; a steadfast inability to learn the lessons; repeat. Such a pattern could risk turning those killed into mere statistics, so part of the response was to demand recognition of the individuality of each life lost: activists ensured that each murdered Black person – usually men, but sometimes women and children – was seen as a unique life forever lost by urging people to #SayHisName.

BLM mobilised to demand accountability and police reform whenever police officers implicated in the killings of Black people were acquitted or walked free.
of investigations. Over time, protesters started to put forward what initially may have seemed a radical and implausible demand: defund the police. This demand entails that resources be reallocated away from police departments that disproportionately subject Black people to intrusive policing practices, put them under surveillance, criminalise them and subject them to violence, and rather put towards local-level services and policies that help realise Black people’s rights.

Technology reproduces racism. Surveillance is passed under the guise of innovation, but it is a policing tool, and policing is central to the aims of white supremacy. Policing and police brutality are built into our systems. In the 18th century there were lantern laws that mandated Black people to carry candle lanterns while walking the streets after dark and not in company of a white person. These have not truly disappeared but rather evolved into more modern forms of surveillance of Black people.

As you move through US history you find the same kinds of iterations of Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation. There used to be all these different kinds of clauses that not only relegated Black people to the status of second-class citizens but also prohibited them from even participating in basic forms of society. Nowadays you can find these by looking at voting rights and clauses put in place to continue to prohibit Black people from having a voice, along with all kinds of regulations and restrictions limiting access to housing, among other things.

Thinking about abolition is an exercise of imagination. As Walter Benjamin would put it, imagination is a terrain of struggle, so critiquing these systems is a first step to then think about how to get closer to claiming our freedom.

Kim M Reynolds, Our Data Bodies, USA

Calls to defund the police went further than previous efforts to reform law enforcement and criminal justice systems with the aim of making discriminatory and violent practices towards Black people harder. In recent years, persistent calls for reform led to the introduction of some changes in US policing, including implicit bias training, the development of de-escalation tactics, bans on particularly controversial policing practices and the hiring of more officers of colour. Following the police killing of Michael Brown, many police administrations introduced body camera technology as a way of monitoring police action, sometimes in the face of police resistance, and with mixed results. None of these went far enough and could not address much deeper, systemic issues. Clearly, police killings of Black people continued. White supremacists and militia members continued to feel at home in the police force. It was clear that more far-reaching changes were needed.

The movement entered US homes through televised sports events in mid-2016, when American football player Colin Kaepernick staged the first of many protests by kneeling instead of standing while the national anthem played.

1 Quotations cited in this chapter either come from interviews with civil society representatives or from a webinar convened by CIVICUS to enable a range of activists to contribute to this report. These are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews are available here. A recording of the webinar, ‘Challenging systemic racism: #BLM in the USA and beyond’, is available here.
refusing to honour the flag of a country that oppresses and kills Black people and people of colour. Few things garner as much public attention as sports, and his dramatic gesture brought a predictable backlash from soon-to-be President Trump and his followers. Kaepernick was effectively frozen out of his sport in 2017. Megan Rapinoe, iconic captain of the all-conquering US women’s soccer team and outspoken advocate for LGBTQI+ rights, also took up the gesture in 2016, and was dropped from the team as a result. But soon so many other sportspersons repeated the gesture that it was impossible to take action against them all. Street protesters also started to take the knee. Kaepernick was recognised for his courage in starting this wave of acknowledgement of violence against Black people by being named an ‘Ambassador of Conscience’ by Amnesty International; in accepting the honour, Kaepernick pointed to the structural nature of racial injustice in the USA and described police killings as ‘lawful lynchings’.

The advent of Donald Trump to the presidency brought with it a rapid deepening of political polarisation, giving succour to white supremacy. Trump and his followers were never anything other than deeply hostile towards the BLM movement, portraying those mobilising as terrorists and unpatriotic thugs, and demanding the sacking of anyone taking a knee. This rhetoric enabled harsh policing of protests and motivated violent white supremacist groups.

Encouragement for white supremacy came from the presidential podium, with Trump normalising actions and discourse that civil rights groups had spent decades combatting. After the white supremacist ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, in which counter-protester Heather Heyer was killed by a self-described white supremacist, President Trump’s response was that there were ‘very fine people on both sides’, suggesting a moral equivalence between white supremacists and those protesting for rights. In the presidential debate in October 2020, when asked to condemn white supremacist groups such as the Proud Boys, Trump instead called on the group to ‘stand back and stand by’, a response that the group’s members
celebrated as an acknowledgement of their aims, and which they turned into a slogan.

Against this top-down stoking of racism, the BLM movement offered a grassroots-up and decentralised approach, in which protests were locally ignited with incredible speed. The BLM movement views itself as a ‘leaderfull’ rather than a leaderless movement: a movement made up of a plethora of local organisations and energised by the work of a plurality of diverse local leaders, including a sizeable proportion of female, young and LGBTQI+ organisers who are challenging the intersecting layers of exclusion they are subjected to and making common cause. Behind this lay decades of reflection and practice by Black feminist and LGBTQI+ activists and thinkers rejecting the established notion that civil rights movements must be founded on the leadership of strong, charismatic men.

With diverse connections to communities, deep reservoirs of community trust and the ability to mobilise rapidly by deploying social media tools, local BLM organisers across the USA not only mobilised in the face of police killings as they occurred but also focused on related issues and sustained longer-term campaigns: to overturn the New York City Housing Authority’s ‘permanent exclusion’ policy, which enabled people convicted of a crime to be barred from living in public housing; to demand an end to Chicago’s gang database, biased by design against Black and Latinx people; to bail out low-income Black women on Mother’s Day in Atlanta.

BLM campaigns often found common ground with those who mobilised against the USA’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, which played a high-profile role in implementing the Trump administration’s policies of deliberate humiliation and expulsion of undocumented migrants. Solidarity with Abolish ICE and Occupy ICE protests organised around a shared understanding of the USA as a ‘carceral state’: a country characterised by systematic control through incarceration, asserted through institutions, practices and ideologies that overwhelmingly target Black people, people of colour and Indigenous people.

What many of those who mobilised saw was that police brutality, while one of the most visible and violent expressions of systemic racism, was just the tip of the iceberg: underneath the surface lay fundamental issues of political, economic, social and cultural disempowerment that could not be ignored. This was reflected in a protest chant that increasingly gained strength and substance: ‘No justice, no peace’.

**THE NEXT WAVE: THE STRUGGLE OF A GENERATION**

As the next wave of BLM protests rose in 2020, it was clear that this was the rights struggle of a generation.

In February 2020, a 25-year-old Black man, Ahmaud Arbery, was killed by a retired police officer and his son as he jogged in his regular exercise routine through his neighbourhood just outside Brunswick, Georgia. The two white men followed Arbery and shot him three times, allegedly because he ‘looked like’ a robbery suspect; the circumstances led Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms to call his killing a ‘lynching’. The local prosecutor who initially took the case argued that the two men had been justified in chasing down and killing the unarmed Black man, whom he baselessly referred to as a ‘criminal suspect’; it was later revealed that the prosecutor had been implicated in the aggressive and flawed prosecutions of at least two Black women, one of whom was wrongfully imprisoned for over a decade on subsequently discredited forensic evidence. It seemed that Black lives did not matter at any stage of proceedings. Arbery’s killers were only criminally charged in early May, after graphic video of the killing had been released. The Georgia prosecutors who first handled the case were then placed under investigation.

In March, soon after Arbery’s death, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old paramedic, was killed while asleep in her home in Louisville, Kentucky when three police officers raided the apartment. Plainclothes police fired 32 shots when Taylor’s partner, Kenneth Walker, shot once, believing them to be intruders. The three police officers faced no charges for the killing. Protests demanded justice for Breonna Taylor along with a ban on ‘no-knock warrants’ of the kind that had enabled the police to enter the apartment.

People were still struggling to come to terms with the killings of Arbery, which would have passed unnoticed were it not for a providential video recording, and Taylor, which made it abundantly clear that Black people were not safe even inside their own homes, when George Floyd was killed. Floyd died when
a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota pinned him to the ground and knelt on his neck for the extraordinarily draw-out time of eight minutes and 46 seconds, during which he repeatedly pleaded for his life, even repeating Eric Garner’s final words: ‘I can’t breathe’. This act of deliberate cruelty happened in public view and was fully captured on video. But while the officers involved, who it quickly became apparent had been involved in other violent events when on duty, were fired, they did not initially face criminal charges. The president of the city’s police union even announced his intention to reinstate them. The police officer who killed Floyd was charged with second-degree murder only after outrage was sparked by the release of the video depicting his actions. Three other officers involved in Floyd’s arrest were eventually charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder following further protests against impunity.

The day George Floyd was murdered, 25 May, had begun with another event, thankfully not resulting in the loss of life but one that in its own way offered a timely encapsulation of white privilege. When Christian Cooper, a Black bird enthusiast, asked a white woman to put her dog on a lead in an area of New York’s Central Park where this was required, her reaction was to call the police and claim that a Black man was threatening her. What made this a story that travelled and opened up conversations about racial realities were the assumptions that seemed to underly the woman’s response: that the police would be on her side even though she was the one breaking the law; that the hostility and potential violence the Black man could expect from the police was a weapon to be casually deployed against him; and that Black people are perceived as threatening simply for being in spaces or doing things that are seen as the preserves of white people. Fortunately the worst-case scenarios were avoided because Christian Cooper videoed the exchange, which captured his calmness and dignity in the face of racial hostility. But the video, watched 45 million times, touched a nerve.

As the news broke of George Floyd’s killing, from 26 May it became apparent that a tipping point had been reached. Protests broke out immediately across the USA as people demanded that the killings stop. Protests came, of course, during the ongoing context of the pandemic, and the scale of the protests made distancing impossible. The kind of danger experienced by Black people on a daily basis came to be perceived by millions as outweighing the risks associated with taking part in a massive demonstration. The urgency of the issue meant that concerns about infection had to be pushed to one side. By then it had also become clear that the same system of exclusion and violence that enabled police brutality and impunity was also killing Black people in another way: as they were disproportionately living in conditions that made distancing and precautionary sanitation impossible, disproportionately doing jobs that could not be done from home and disproportionately less able to access healthcare, Black Americans had higher rates of infection and where more likely to die from COVID-19 than their white counterparts. Research published in August indicated that Black US citizens were infected with the virus at three times the rate of white ones, and twice as likely to die as a result. In taking public action, Black people were taking a risk, but risk was the everyday reality of their lives.

The protests never seemed to stop. For month after month, thousands of protests were held in cities and towns across the USA. And as discussed below, the US protests were just one part of a greater, global wave of mobilisation. Between 26 May and 22 August alone, the US Crisis Monitor ACLED
Over 7,750 demonstrations had been held under the BLM banner across more than 2,440 locations in all 50 US states plus Washington, DC. In many local communities, protests doubled as acts of remembrance for past victims of police brutality, and for the latest ones who, even amid the wave of mobilisations, continued being added to the grim toll. In Atlanta, another Black man, Rayshard Brooks, was killed while in police custody on 12 June, prompting renewed citywide protests. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, the police shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, in August sparked outrage and led to several nights of protests, including acts of vandalism that brought severe and indiscriminate repression. In October, the killing of Walter Wallace, Jr. in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania led to several days of protest that spread beyond Philadelphia, including to New York and other cities.

On 19 June, tens of thousands of people commemorated Juneteenth, marking the anniversary of the day in 1865 when Abraham Lincoln’s September 1862 Emancipation Proclamation was finally read in Texas, freeing slaves in a portion of the last un-emancipated state. Although not a federal holiday, 47 states and Washington, DC mark the date, and many Black people in the USA view 19 June rather than 4 July as the true Independence Day. In 2020, people celebrated Juneteenth with anti-racism marches and rallies, bike rides, concerts, music parties and, with eyes on November, voter registration drives. In some locations, including Atlanta and Minneapolis, celebrations doubled as homage to those killed by the police, including Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, along with others killed since the protests began, and as opportunities to reiterate demands for justice.
In Louisville, thousands also took to the streets on 23 September after Kentucky’s Attorney General announced that his office would not charge any police officers for the shooting of Breonna Taylor. Only one officer involved in the incident was indicted by a grand jury and charged with wanton endangerment. Protesters in more than a dozen cities mobilised following the grand jury’s decision.

By July, The New York Times recognised that BLM ‘may be the largest movement in US history’: several polls suggested that between 15 and 26 million people had by that point participated in US BLM protests. According to an analysis by the media outlet, an average of 140 demonstrations were being held each day, with turnout ranging from dozens to tens of thousands.

The national conversation unleashed by the BLM protests brought change in places where progress has long been blocked, including in academia. In June 2020, two women, Shardé Davis, a Black assistant professor at the University of Connecticut’s Department of Communication, and Joy Melody Woods, a Black doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, decided to act in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. They came up with the hashtag #BlackInTheIvory, aimed at getting Black people to tell their stories about racism in academia. They quickly knew they were not alone, as thousands of people came forward to share their experiences of discrimination. The wave of testimony forced education institutions across the USA to take part in a conversation that they had been avoiding for decades and brought about some change, such as significant funding of Black-studies departments and the promotion of Black-studies scholars, and the introduction of requirements for all students to take an ethnic-studies course or a class about systemic anti-Black racism.

While academic discourse was seen as perpetuating racial stereotypes and systemic exclusion, the US military came to be increasingly viewed as a force that entrenches systemic racism both domestically and abroad, historically and in the present day. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, military spouses across the US organised and marched in support of BLM. Black, white and Hispanic people, some military veterans themselves, spoke up against the partisan instrumentalisation of the armed forces to repress the BLM movement, and called for acknowledgement of racism within the US military, where Black people are disproportionately employed, accounting for 18.7 per cent of all enlisted members, but excluded from leadership, making up just 8.8 per cent of officers. In early June, faced with the possibility that the military would be ordered to help suppress the protests, the Joint Chiefs Chairman called for an internal dialogue on racism, the right to peaceful protest and the core values of the military. Dana Pittard, a Black retired general with an array of medals to his name, spoke up about his own experiences of racism within the military, calling for change to combat institutional racism, in the military and in US society as a whole.

During a Pride rally held on 28 June 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, people demand respect for Black Trans lives and community control of law enforcement. Photo by Brandon Bell/Getty Images
BACKLASH AND VIOLENCE

BLM protests were overwhelmingly peaceful; as documented by ACLED, in more than 93 per cent of protests connected to the movement, participants did not engage in violence or destructive activity. Violent episodes took place in fewer than 10 per cent of the locations that experienced protests, and in most such instances, such as in Portland, Oregon, violence was largely limited to specific city blocks. In various instances, there was evidence that violence was instigated by infiltrators, often connected with the police and white supremacist groups.

In some cases the violence was symbolic, with vandalism of statues and monuments celebrating Confederate leaders, slave owners and colonial figures. As with similar actions in other countries (see below), this marked a refusal by people to live alongside the retraumatising symbols of their subjugation and a declaration that the country needed to place rights for Black people above the remembrance of racist histories. Historians drew attention to the histories of the monuments themselves, making clear that many Civil War memorials had not been put up in the immediate aftermath of the 1860s conflict but rather a century later, as the civil rights movement gained momentum; their celebration of the Confederacy was part of a campaign to perpetuate racial segregation and remind Black people of their continuing disempowerment. In taking forward the struggle of the civil rights movement, BLM made a dent on this symbolic reinforcement of racial injustice: in early 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks almost 2,100 statues, symbols, placards, buildings and public parks dedicated to the Confederacy, and the movement to take them down, reported that at least 160 Confederate symbols had been taken down or moved from public spaces across the USA in 2020.

But in polarised times, symbols are intensely contested, and the Trump administration assigned itself the mission of protecting not the people living under conditions of structural racism but rather the physical memorials to the architects of the system that oppresses them: in Washington, DC, 400 National Guard troops were activated to guard monuments and infrastructure, and President Trump signed an executive order to impose 10-year sentences on anyone found damaging statues or monuments.

Although incidents of violence focused mostly on monuments rather than people, this did not stop President Trump unleashing a bombastic and unsubstantiated narrative portraying BLM as a criminally violent and extremist movement. These views were systematically reinforced by media coverage that often disproportionately focused on isolated cases of vandalism and violence instead of the overwhelmingly peaceful character of the protests. Trump continually made false claims about protesters, whom he depicted as ‘agitators’, ‘rioters’, ‘looters’ and ‘thugs’. BLM protests were presented as linked to radical left-wing groups, and particularly with the so-called Antifa movement, a label that refers to a diverse collection of individuals who think of themselves as anti-fascists, but which the Trump administration positioned as a ‘terrorist organisation’. The sad result of the Trump administration’s propaganda and the cloud of deliberate disinformation that it helped spread was that polls began to show that a sizeable number of Americans believed that most protest participants were violent and destructive, and therefore increasingly disapproved of the movement. Some police departments, such as [image of protesters]
Chicago’s, seized the opportunity to ramp up their surveillance of protesters and implemented a social media monitoring\footnote{social media monitoring} initiative, on the grounds of preventing looting.

This pervasive narrative enabled a heavy-handed and often militarised police response to the protests. Overall, ACLED data\footnote{ACLED data} indicated that BLM protests were more heavily policed than any other demonstrations, and that the security forces disproportionately used force while intervening in them. More than nine per cent of protests associated with the BLM movement were met with government intervention, compared to three per cent of all other protests in the same period. At the height of the protests, in July, government intervention was recorded in nine per cent of all anti-racism demonstrations; in contrast, in July 2019, before the latest wave of BLM protests had begun, it was recorded in just two per cent of demonstrations.

What this meant is that the state was unleashing a further wave of state violence on Black people protesting against state violence. President Trump approved of the violence; in May, as the great wave of protests began to unfold, he tweeted threats\footnote{threats} that protesters would be greeted by ‘vicious dogs’ and ‘ominous weapons’. In several cities and towns that became protest hotspots, protesters were met by law enforcement officers wearing riot gear and using disproportionate force\footnote{disproportionate force}. Police dogs, a historic tool of racial control, became a regular presence at BLM protests. Abuses were committed by a range of law enforcement departments, from state and local police to federal agencies and the National Guard, and included beatings, the indiscriminate use of teargas and pepper spray and the firing of less-lethal ammunition such as rubber bullets and sponge rounds. Protesters reported that the escalation of violence usually came without warning, resulting in injuries, and was accompanied by mass arrests.

By 2 June, at least 23 states had deployed National Guard\footnote{National Guard} troops in numbers that, according to news media, rivalled the number of US troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. On that day, the Associated Press reported that at least 11 people had been killed so far in protests, and around 9,000 people\footnote{9,000 people} had been detained for participating in demonstrations, mostly for violating the curfews that multiple cities introduced in attempts to limit protests. An Amnesty International report\footnote{Amnesty International report} documented 125 separate incidents of police violence against protesters in 40 states and Washington, DC between 26 May and 5 June.
alone. Over the course of a single week in early June, arrests in Los Angeles topped 3,000. On just one day, 1 June, over 300 people were detained for curfew violations, rioting and burglary. That was the day when, notoriously, the Attorney General ordered law enforcement officers to use teargas against peaceful protesters near the White House so that President Trump could stage a photo op while holding a bible outside a local church.

In New York, where multiple groups organised decentralised rallies, vigils and marches, on 31 May a person was injured after a police car deliberately accelerated through a crowd of protesters. This was one of several incidents during the year in which police appeared to use their vehicles as weapons against protesters. Videos posted on social media also showed police officers responding to protests by forcefully arresting identified medical professionals, destroying medical stations and throwing out supplies, including drinking water.

Excessive police force was also used against protests that continued for several days in Atlanta after the killing of Ahmaud Arbery. Teargas was used and dozens were arrested. After several peaceful days of protest, on 29 May rioters broke windows and graffitied and vandalised the CNN Center building and nearby vehicles. The state governor responded by declaring a state of emergency, implementing a curfew and calling in 500 officers of the Georgia National Guard.

The polarised and at times toxic climate meant that media workers were targeted when covering BLM protests. By 3 June, the Freedom of the Press Foundation had already documented over 230 incidents, including 153 assaults and around 40 instances of damage to equipment or newsrooms. By the end of the year, the US Press Freedom Tracker had verified more than 930 reported incidents across 79 cities, including 295 physical attacks affecting 331 journalists, 115 arrests and criminal charges affecting 111 journalists, 73 instances of equipment damage affecting 56 journalists and 16 equipment searches and seizures affecting 16 journalists who were covering BLM protests. In several instances journalists were attacked after showing their credentials and identifying themselves as media professionals. More often than not, the source of this violence was the police; most of the damage to equipment happened during arrests, while most of the physical violence experienced by journalists was the result of the security forces firing teargas and rounds at protesters. Sometimes the violence levelled against journalists came because of their proximity to protests, but at other times it seemed they were intentionally targeted.

Some attacks were impossible to conceal because they happened live on air. A Louisville TV reporter was shot with pepper bullets while reporting live. A Black CNN reporter was arrested and led away in handcuffs as he and his crew provided live coverage of a protest. In Washington, DC, an Australian correspondent and her camera operator were attacked by anti-riot officers on 1 June. In Minneapolis, a photographer was blinded in one eye by a rubber bullet and at least two journalists were struck with crowd control ammunition by police in riot gear. In separate incidents in Denver, Colorado, at least two journalists were injured when they were struck by less-lethal weapons used by the police. Some journalists were caught in clashes between protesters and law enforcement officers, as was the case of MSNBC reporter Jo Ling Kent, who was hit by a flashbang grenade while covering a protest in Seattle, Washington.
But the police were not the only source of violence. Emboldened and enabled by the official rhetoric, anti-rights groups and individual extremists also struck back against the BLM movement. Groups of armed counter-protesters often disrupted BLM demonstrations, and confrontations between groups of protesters and counter-protesters became a common occurrence; it seemed clear that far-right groups were mobilising explicitly to intimidate protesters through a show of armed force.

Sometimes the violence was all too real. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, an armed extremist shot an unarmed protester on 15 June, as he and other alleged members of a civilian militia tried to prevent protesters from removing the statue of a colonial governor. Recent years have seen vehicle attacks against crowds become used as a common weapon of violent extremists around the world, and this tactic was adopted by white supremacists, who launched dozens of car-ramming attacks into protest crowds. Many of these were perpetrated by people with law enforcement or military training, and by people affiliated with various far-right militias and hate groups, although some had no such prior affiliations, suggesting they had been newly mobilised by hate speech and disinformation.

An initiative to protect violent extremists was pushed in Florida, whose governor proposed anti-protest legislation that, among several provisions, would criminalise protests obstructing roadways and provide immunity for drivers who strike or kill protesters ‘if fleeing for safety from a mob’. Alongside this attempt to criminalise protesters, and following a battery of laws passed in recent years to restrict environmental and climate protests (see this report’s chapter on environmental and economic activism), in response to BLM protests further anti-protest bills were proposed in several state legislatures.

The different ways the police treated Black protesters and the counter-protesters that mobilised hate against them was plain to see. When a Proud Boys counter-protest harassed a BLM protest in New Port Richey, Florida, police dispersed the confrontation, but fined only the BLM protesters; the fines were only dropped in response to the outrage they provoked. In perhaps the most chilling example, in August, a self-described militia member shot dead two people protesting at the death of Jason Blake in Kenosha. In contrast to the harsh and violent treatment of Black protesters, he was allowed to walk away freely from the scene, and a police officer even thanked him and gave him water.

As well as such counter-protests, several far-right groups staged their own protests over the course of the year, gaining an unprecedented and, worryingly, increasingly normalised, public presence. The relatively lenient policing approaches accorded to many far-right protests, including several in which heavily armed groups assembled in public spaces explicitly to challenge pandemic rules (see this report’s chapter on democracy under the pandemic), further emphasised the disproportionate brutality that BLM protesters risked experiencing and the systematic inequalities they encounter in exercising their protest rights. The minimal state violence that greeted the storming of the Capitol building by a pro-Trump mob in January 2021 just offered further evidence of a truth revealed again and again in 2020.

A participant in the Final March to The Polls held in Los Angeles on 28 October 2020 holds a sign calling to defund prisons and fund communities. Photo by Rich Fury/Getty Images

A participant in the Final March to The Polls held in Los Angeles on 28 October 2020 holds a sign calling to defund prisons and fund communities. Photo by Rich Fury/Getty Images
‘Defund the police’ proved to be no mere rallying cry or impractical fantasy. Awareness grew of the need to reverse the flow of the growing militarisation of the police and the long-term incarceration boom, trends that manifested irrespective of which party was in charge, and with consequences disproportionately placed on Black people.

The momentum generated by the 2020 wave of protests, and the acknowledgement won by at least some holders of office that structural racism is indeed a problem, made some progress possible. As local administrations began to think about how to re-budget in the light of the pandemic, there was an opportunity for activists to assert alternatives to current high levels of police funding.

In New York City, in anticipation of city council budget meetings relating to the following fiscal year, about 100 people camped outside City Hall for a week in late June. Protesters demanded the reduction of the police department’s budget by US$1bn, following weeks of debate on police divestment. Messages such as ‘we keep us safe’ were spray-painted on the street outside City Hall. As the day of the budget vote approached, hundreds more joined the protest, before it was violently repressed on 30 May as police tried to clear the area.

On 7 June, with hundreds of people gathered outside, Minneapolis City Council pledged to begin the process of dismantling the existing police department, which was deemed unreformable, and replace it with a new system of public safety, while also shifting funding to social programmes targeted at communities of colour. Other city administrations followed suit and announced plans to restructure their police departments. For the first time a serious conversation began at high levels about how the police are organised and held accountable, and whose interests they serve.

By the end of the year, however, many of these efforts had begun to falter. In the case of Minneapolis, the initiative had been watered down to bring only modest cuts to the city’s 2021 police budget. What was clear was that the struggle to replace a policing system that perpetuates white supremacy with one that keeps everyone safe, and to shift resources towards racial justice and human rights, had only just begun. Policing remains embedded in a bigger system of structural inequality, and ongoing pressure and vigilance will be essential in the years to come.
Social justice and political voice

As well as focusing on police brutality, policing practices and mass incarceration, BLM mobilisations put other vital issues on the agenda, including those of food security, safe and affordable housing, reproductive care and trans rights. In the context of a pandemic unprecedented in living memory and that disproportionately impacted on Black Americans, actions such as the Strike for Black Lives manifested a shared understanding that the fight against police brutality must connect with a broader call for racial equity. On 20 July, thousands of workers across the USA walked out of their workplaces in protest. Those who were unable to leave their jobs were encouraged to take a knee or break away for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, in tribute to George Floyd.

As the US presidential elections approached, President Trump doubtless saw the protests as an opportunity to bolster his faltering electoral campaign around a Richard Nixon-style ‘law and order’ message, a racially coded dog whistle that often helps galvanise the support of a section of white voters. But the energies unleashed by the protests also played out in unexpected ways. The racism that was being denounced in the streets was understood as entrenched in all of society’s systems, including the electoral system and the institutions of representative democracy, which in an election year came under the spotlight as never before.

Hope rose that the energy generated through street-level protests could shift into the electoral sphere, having a lasting effect on policy by tilting the balance of power in decision-making spaces. Racial justice activists from all over the country joined forces to challenge the voter suppression efforts that have increasingly minimised Black influence. They worked to mobilise Black voters to vote out racist officeholders and get more people of colour elected. Black electoral candidates and political groups focused on racial justice experienced an unprecedented surge in donations. Thousands more people pledged their support for and volunteered in efforts to overcome voter suppression and mobilise voters on the ground. In key battleground states such as Georgia, and in the face of sustained voter suppression attempts and baseless claims of fraud, Black people’s renewed efforts might just have made all the difference.
Although voter suppression is a longstanding phenomenon in the USA, efforts to prevent or discourage some groups, and particularly Black people, from exercising their voting rights have increased over the past decade. Dozens of states passed laws that made it harder for people to vote. Yael Bromberg of The Andrew Goodman Foundation describes this process:

In 2013, the Supreme Court eviscerated a key sunshine provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. That safeguard mandated that states with a demonstrated history of voter suppression must get approval before changing their election laws. With the safeguard eliminated, the floodgates to voter suppression were open. The number of polling places shrank: 1,700 polling places were shut down between 2012 and 2018, including over 1,100 between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections. Strict voter identification laws were passed, making it harder for poor people, people of colour and young people to vote. Other measures like the purging of state voter rolls and the rezoning of election districts further diluted voting power. It’s important to note that all of this happens on the back of the taxpayers – they foot the bill for the backlogged judiciary and the prevailing party’s litigation fees – and on the back of voters – they are forced to accept the results of a rigged election system even though the voter suppression law might be overturned in the future.

Voter suppression today is the equivalent of the fox guarding the henhouse. Those who are privileged enough to define the laws determine who is in and who is out. For example, strict voter identification laws that go above and beyond standard proof of identification swept the nation after the election of President Obama. Alabama enacted strict voter identification, and then shut down driver’s licence offices where one could obtain such IDs throughout large rural sections of the state where Black people reside.

People knew there was a lot at stake in the 2020 elections and this motivated them to vote despite the tremendous obstacles placed in their way. And they made a difference. In the key swing state of Georgia, much of the effort to enable Black people to access their right to vote was led by Stacey Abrams, who knew first-hand the workings of voter suppression, having narrowly failed to become Georgia’s first Black governor in 2016 due to such tactics to focus on the racial underpinnings of the USA’s electoral college system, which in the present day disproportionately favours voters in small states with proportionately fewer Black people and has its origins in appeasing the southern states in which slaves were concentrated. Following the election, Trump’s baseless claims of electoral fraud were racially coded, with cities with large Black populations blamed for carrying out the supposed fraud. Implicit in many of the claims of fraud seemed to be the notion that Black people had somehow cheated merely by turning out to vote in significant numbers; that Black votes ought to matter less.

In the context of the 2020 elections, it was clear what was in play. Republican office holders worked to make it as hard as possible for Black people to vote, because they knew more Black people would vote Democratic than Republican. The message to Black voters was that they should have less of a say in choosing the president and members of congress than white voters. But the upsurge in awareness and questioning of systemic racism brought by the protests shone a sharper spotlight on voter suppression practices. People started...
being used to deter her potential voters. During BLM protests in Georgia, the New Georgia Project actively registered voters in person, and other organisations used similar voter-registration tactics. As a result of these efforts, voter rolls in Georgia increased by over 500,000, 25 per cent of whom were Black voters.

The efforts bore fruit as Georgia switched from Republican to Democratic for the first time in 28 years, helping to deliver the presidency to Joe Biden, with a massive increase in turnout among people of colour. There then came further efforts to register and get out the Black vote ahead of the crucial January 2021 senatorial election, and Black voters showed up in record numbers, switching the two Republican senate seats to Democratic challengers and giving President Biden a senate majority. One of the two new senators was Raphael Warnock, who became not only Georgia’s first Black senator but also the first Black Democratic senator from a former Confederate state since the post-Civil War Reconstruction era.

At the national level, Collective PAC collected mobile phone data from BLM protesters to serve them ads about registering to vote. According to preliminary survey data, roughly a fifth of all voters across the USA viewed the racial justice protests as the single most important factor when voting in the election.

In St Louis, Missouri, newly mobilised protesters could vote for one of their own, electing a leader of the 2014 Ferguson protests and BLM organiser, Cori Bush, to the House of Representatives. In some of the local ballots conducted at the same time, such as in Los Angeles, voters had an additional reason to show up at the polls: to pass a ballot measure put forward by a group of almost 200 racial justice civil society organisations (CSOs), Re-Imagine LA, that would redirect 10 per cent of locally controlled revenue – about US$1 billion – away from law enforcement and towards communities of colour and alternatives to incarceration; defunding the police had become not a slogan, but a political choice made by informed voters. Further measures to increase police accountability – not necessarily through defunding but rather through the creation of civilian oversight committees and similar mechanisms – were passed in San Diego, San Jose and Sonoma County, California; Columbus, Ohio; Portland, Oregon; Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Kyle, Texas; and King County, Washington. In a slew of states, people also voted to liberalise drug laws that are disproportionately used to criminalise Black people; wherever decriminalisation or legalisation was on the ballot, it was passed.

As much as voter suppression was present this cycle, the response was to overwhelm the system with voter engagement. As expected, election turnout was unprecedentedly high. Initial estimates indicate that youth turnout was even higher this cycle than when the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971 and the base of newly eligible voters suddenly expanded. We simply cannot afford the voter apathy that we have seen in years past.

We cannot forget the power of voting: about 43 per cent of the eligible voter population did not vote in 2016. Current estimates indicate that approximately 34 per cent of the eligible voter population – about one in three voters – did not participate in 2020. How do we maintain this new record-setting voting rate, and even improve upon it, once fascism is no longer on the ballot?

Looking forward, the question is how to maintain this momentum around elections. Activists will be looking for action by the new administration to roll back voter suppression laws. And they will be expecting the newly elected representatives they helped deliver into office to hold good on the promise of change.
THE GLOBAL STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

SOLIDARITY AND STRUGGLE AROUND THE WORLD

On every inhabited continent, people assembled to express their solidarity with US protesters. Often they protested outside US embassies, and many carried George Floyd’s image on their placards and banners.

But as well as protesting in solidarity with US Black people, people highlighted their own urgent issues of structural racism and racial injustice in their societies. Waves of protest rippled throughout the year in response to each fresh act of racially charged security force violence, and other experiences of racism. Like the great climate justice mobilisations of 2019, many of those taking part were young people, motivated to protest for the first time by their growing awareness of an immense and clear injustice.

Fresh impetus, and new support, flowed to long-running struggles for racial justice. More ambitious demands were made, amid a sense that a threshold had been passed and a long-suppressed debate had become possible. People took advantage of the fact that, for once, the mainstream spotlight was focusing on issues of racism. Undoubtedly the spotlight was there because the mass protests were happening in the USA rather than in a global south country where they might have attracted little international attention, but people saw the opportunity to refocus that spotlight on their own demands, to reactivate and revivify their struggles, and to make connections with other ongoing campaigns for justice.

One of the issues almost always addressed by protests was the reality of police brutality as a major expression of racism, as people demanded justice not only for George Floyd but for people from their own communities slain by the police. And as in the USA, protesters often faced state repression and police violence.

Around the world, people also had to push back against official responses, seen time and again, that sought to recognise racism as a problem only in the USA but not at home, and that positioned mobilisations against domestic racism as somehow an inappropriate and politicised foreign importation. In every country, protesters insisted that the USA is no outlier, that everywhere there are institutions, practices and attitudes that embed structural racism and white supremacy, and that these scourges have been left unacknowledged and unaddressed for too long. Everywhere, the first struggle was to be heard and recognised; to have it acknowledged that the problem exists.

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

In early 2021 the BLM movement was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Norwegian legislator who proposed its nomination founded it on its ‘tremendous achievement in raising global awareness and consciousness about racial injustice’, forcing countries outside the USA to grapple with racism within their own societies. He also highlighted that BLM had ‘been able to mobilise people from all groups of society, not just African-Americans, not just oppressed people, it has been a broad movement, in a way which has been different from predecessors.’

Protests held particular resonance in West Africa, one of the major sites from where people were originally brought to the Americas as slaves. Protesters made clear the link between slavery and colonialism and present-day systemic racial injustice, insisting that colonialism was not simply something that happened in the past. In Senegal, a protest carrying deep symbolism was held at the Gorée-Almadies Memorial to the Transatlantic slave trade.

But elsewhere, despite this history, the authorities tried to put a halt on protests. In Accra, capital of Ghana, an attempt to hold a small BLM vigil in June was stopped by security officers who claimed that the event had not been authorised; the organisers disputed the claim and pointed out that they had supplied hand sanitiser and masks to those taking part. In The Gambia, anger was fuelled by an episode of US police violence that struck close to home, when Gambian citizen and US resident Momodou Lamin Sisay was shot dead by police in Snellville, Georgia, just days after George Floyd’s killing. However, a planned protest on 8 June was banned on the grounds of pandemic rules; activists instead handed over a petition to the US embassy demanding
an investigation of the killing. The authorities finally allowed a protest to take place outside the US embassy later in June. But then activist Madi Jobarteh was summoned for questioning after making remarks in an interview comparing impunity in the USA with the failure of The Gambia’s government to investigate the domestic police killing of Gambian citizens. The events, as elsewhere, suggested that protests might be tolerated when they focused on the USA, but could become more controversial and contested when they drew attention to issues of domestic police brutality and inequality.

Another place where protests had particular resonance was of course South Africa, where the legacy of the racist apartheid regime continues today, as seen in the denial of rights and prevention of life opportunities, amid a landscape of vast inequality. Close to three decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa is a country with an overwhelmingly Black population but where wealth is still disproportionately concentrated in the hands of a small number of white people. Protesters spoke up about their determination to be part of a global anti-imperialist movement.
They sought to put the focus on the legacy of brutal policing under apartheid, readily apparent in present-day police practices.

A BLM protest was held outside the parliament building in Cape Town on 3 June, both as an expression of solidarity and in homage to local victims of police brutality and systemic racism, including Collins Khosa, a South African man who died after being beaten by soldiers enforcing pandemic restrictions in April. By June, it was reported that 11 people, one of the highest levels in the world, had been killed by the police in the context of the enforcement of pandemic restrictions. All of the dead were Black men. People also saw that while protests that comprised mostly Black people were policed brutally in 2020, when those protesting were mostly white people, demonstrations met with more passive policing.

The South African police under apartheid had a brutal nature. For many Black people the police are still a force and not a service by virtue of how they operate. While South Africa inherited a democratic system, the policing system in South Africa simply defends white supremacy and works within the confines of apartheid. Biases are in the open. When white people protested because they wanted to be able to go to the beach the police were smiling at them, engaging with them. But when Black people who are evicted on a daily basis dare protest, the police response is quite different. During pandemic lockdowns many people were evicted and shot by the police.

As seen in the Marikana massacre, when dozens of protesting miners were killed by the police, Black people fighting for their rights in South Africa are met with the barrel of the gun. It shows who this system works to defend. The system is set up to protect property rights.

Axolile Notywala, South African activist

Beyond the USA, the rest of the Americas was convulsed by protest. Across the USA’s northern border, tens of thousands took part in protests across Canada, where people expressed their anger at Canadian police brutality and state violence, including towards Canada’s Indigenous First Nations peoples, a major focus of Canada's protests, and demanded police and prison reform. In a vigil in the city of Calgary, the names of people killed by the police in Canada and the USA were read out. In Quebec province, people protested at a claim by the province’s premier that racism is not a major problem, a statement that denied the lived experience of many Quebecois people.

The hashtag #JusticeForRegis trended, demanding accountability for the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a Black woman who fell to her death in May from a 24th storey apartment in Toronto while the police were present; her family rejected a police investigation that concluded there had been no police involvement in her death or racism towards her. Proving the power of intersectionality, a Pride day protest in Toronto mobilised to call for a cut in police funding, bringing together diverse groups with experience of police repression, including trans rights and Indigenous rights activists.
As the year unfolded in Canada, many other protests demanded justice for people excluded on the basis of race: in June, people protested at the high and rising suicide rate among First Nations peoples and demanded better mental health provision. In August, people marked Emancipation Day, which commemorates the start of the abolition of slavery, and called for it to be made a public holiday across Canada. Protests also greeted Canada Day, on 1 July, as people called out injustice against the First Nations peoples who had been repressed since Canada’s colonisation. Among other protests in August, migrant workers protested at their lack of recognition and exclusion from support under the pandemic (for more about migrants’ protests around the world in 2020, see this report’s chapter on challenging exclusion). September saw academics and students from several universities walk out of classrooms in a Scholar Strike against racism and police brutality, instead offering online teach-ins on brutality and violence. Protests mobilised in October in support of First Nations fishers under attack from giant commercial fishing companies, and against institutional racism in the healthcare system following the death of an Indigenous woman, Joyce Echaquan, who had faced racial insults even as she pleaded for help from hospital staff.

Canadian protests were not exempt from the kind of police repression seen in the USA. In November, police raided a protest camp in Ottawa where people were demanding Black and Indigenous rights, arresting 12 people, on the day when the protesters had been due to meet with police representatives to discuss their concerns; protesters accused the police of acting in bad faith. In December, police removed the tents occupied by protesters in a Defund the Police protest outside the city hall in Hamilton.

In multiple Latin American countries too, the scale of people’s experience of domestic racism propelled them to the streets, and police repression often ensued. Such was the case in Brazil, whose Black population experience long-term and systemic exclusion. As in the USA, Brazilian protesters made the link between the failure of the country’s president, right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, to get to grips with the pandemic, and the disproportionate impacts of that pandemic on Black lives. Brazil’s repressive state machinery responded with predictable violence. A peaceful anti-racism protest in Rio de Janeiro, calling out human rights violations committed by the police in informal settlements, was met with tear gas, and as protests against racism and for democracy spread to at least 13 cities, detentions followed.

In November, a further wave of protests was sparked by the killing of a Black man, Beto Freitas, by private security guards working for a branch of the Carrefour supermarket in the city of Porto Alegre. Video footage of the lethal beating, which took place just ahead of Brazil’s Black Awareness Day, was widely circulated. Anger at the killing was further fuelled by a statement by Brazil’s vice president that the killing nothing to do with race, because, as he expressed it, ‘there is no racism in Brazil; that is something that they are trying to import from elsewhere.’ People protested outside the supermarket where the killing had taken place and in cities including Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where thousands marched. In Porto Alegre, as protesters insisted that racism was a reality, chanting ‘Black Lives Matter’, police officers fired tear gas. While Carrefour said it would end its contract with the private security contractors, protesters pointed to the ongoing experience of racism and brutality towards Black Brazilians.
Sheila De Carvalho of the Black Coalition for Rights makes the point that, just as racism in the USA did not start and end with President Trump, Brazil’s problem of racial violence may have intensified with the rise of the far right under President Bolsonaro, but it reflects deep and long-running foundations of systemic racism:

Brazil has a 57 per cent Black population, and most are dwelling in poverty. We account for about 80 per cent of the people killed by the police and we are disproportionately incarcerated. And now we have the situation related to the pandemic that brings a lot of concerns about economic issues. We are even seeing the return of hunger, which affects the Black population the most.

But in Brazil there seems to be a kind of apathy towards these issues. When there are international cases like those of Michael Brown, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, they have repercussions here. But when the same happens here, it seems that people don’t care. We are talking about children that are being killed by the police and even worse, by paramilitary forces.

This denial-driven disparity between foreign racist outrages and those that take place in Brazil means that it can take significant international attention for many Brazilians to recognise domestic racism. Even high-profile murders such as that of Marielle Franco, the Black feminist activist and Rio de Janeiro council member who was killed by paramilitaries in March 2018, would go unnoticed if it were not for the attention they get from the international community. This means that there is an ongoing need for international institutions, and international civil society, to focus on and demand accountability for racist violence in Brazil.

You all have heard about Marielle Franco. If it wasn’t for the international community creating a big case around it, it would have been long forgotten by now. Soon it will be three full years in which we have not had an answer to the question of who killed Marielle Franco. But we can count on the international community to mark the date and keep insisting on policies to protect other Black representatives who face similar risks.

The international community is the sole space where we are finding some people who care about these issues, so we are focusing on building transnational connections among movements and organisations and using the international human rights system more. We think it is important to raise awareness about these issues on a global scale.

It is important to create these connections because we are living through similar problems, and we are all suffering the effects of structural racism in our countries. We need to speak up about the Black genocide, which is not only a Brazilian situation or a US situation, but is the experience of Black people globally.

The approach taken by the Black Coalition for Rights is two-pronged, focusing on simultaneous action at both the local and the global levels, underpinned by better networking between diverse responses. As in several other contexts, including the USA, an important step will be to get white Brazilians to acknowledge and talk about the realities of racism.

We are trying to create communities and come together in networks. We are organising in a regressive context, as we have our own Trump, President Bolsonaro, who is a racist, wants to have Black people killed and talks about this very openly. Black movements and organisations that didn’t work together so well in the past are now coming together to take political action and take care of our community, because the current situation is of total lack of institutional support from the government. We are clearly on our own.

We organise systems of support for our communities to fight for public policies that could tackle the major issues we are dealing with, not just institutional and police violence and mass incarceration, but also hunger, poverty and health. Because Black people are being not only economically affected by the pandemic but also are dying from COVID-19 in record numbers. Brazil is only behind the USA in number of COVID-19 deaths, and most of the dead are Black people.

Bolsonaro is a difficult moment in our history, but it is creating openings in some parts of the society. One major strategy is to speak up about racism and about the situation and build an alliance with white people and with white media to increase our dialogue with other publics instead of just speaking among ourselves.
Of course, this is a consequence of all the struggles and fights that Black movements have led throughout history, because as a result of them now there are Black people in certain spaces, there is a Black middle class, there are Black people in congress, in the judiciary, in private corporations. Not in big numbers, but we are present there, and this can bring the fight against racism to other spaces. We are putting our together resources to do just that kind of political action, because as Black organisations, we don’t receive a lot of funding. We are bringing our issues to the United Nations (UN) and to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR). It is us talking about us, not speaking through intermediaries. This has to make a difference.

Violent policing of pandemic restrictions was a problem in Colombia, where protesters demanded justice for Anderson Arboleda, an Afro-Colombian man who died after being repeatedly beaten by the police for breaking quarantine in May. Further protests mobilised in September against police brutality, in this case committed against a white man, Javier Ordóñez, who died after being violently arrested. Police brutality was in turn amply demonstrated in the response, with the police using teargas and less-lethal firearms and grenades against protesters. It was reported that at least 13 people died in the ensuing violence, even though the mayor of Colombia’s capital, Bogotá, stated that the police had been told not to use firearms. Again, part of the challenge protesters faced in Colombia was winning recognition that racism is a domestic problem.

When the George Floyd case erupted in the USA, a very similar case happened in Colombia. However, while the Floyd case triggered a lot of indignation among Colombians, the case of Anderson Arboleda, also killed by the police, did not provoke much indignation. In Colombia, racism is viewed as a phenomenon that happens elsewhere, but not in our own country. If non-Afro-Colombians do not accept that there is racism in Colombia, we won’t overcome the problem.

Three things are needed. First, more education on racism, not only for Afro-Colombians but for the rest of the population, who need to understand what racism is and that it really exists. Second, transnational networks to give visibility to what is happening in Colombia. Third, audio-visual, cultural and artistic tools to have an impact at both the local and the global levels. We need to generate more discussions and take them out of classrooms and onto the streets, not only by holding marches but also by staging cultural and artistic performances to raise awareness of what racism is, what its manifestations are and how it can be tackled.

David Murillo, DeJusticia, Colombia

A planned protest in Cuba in June after the police killing of Hansel Ernesto Hernández Galiano, a Black man, was suppressed, with many of those planning to protest being detained in their homes and subjected to internet cut offs. Cuba offers an extreme case, in that the government insists that as a legacy of its revolution racism no longer exists. Political repression is
therefore exerted against protests that make clear that racism is still a reality, and that point to the attitudes of the ruling party as one of the reasons why racism goes unrecognised and therefore remains unaddressed.

In Barbados too, people marched both in solidarity with US protesters and against the systemic racism that Black Barbadians continue to experience. Black Barbadians called attention to the barriers that deny so many of them access to education, healthcare and social mobility, and the racial privilege that white Barbadians continue to enjoy, 55 years after independence, that consistently remains unacknowledged.

The Dominican Republic was another context where people mobilised both in solidarity with Black people in the USA and to call attention to their own issues of domestic racism. In the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, people of Haitian descent experience deep and systematic discrimination, and constitutional change in 2010 effectively stripped generations of people of Haitian descent of their Dominican citizenship. On 9 June, Reconoci.do, a network that defends human rights and promotes the effective integration of Dominican people of Haitian descent into Dominican society, mobilised in an event to commemorate George Floyd, but faced a vitriolic backlash and a police response that took the side of those trying to stop them.
Haitians, and any Black people who are assumed to be Haitians, experience racism on a daily basis, as Elena Lorac of Reconoci.do explains:

The problem of access to nationality in the Dominican Republic has exclusively affected people whose parents or grandparents came from Haiti; this is not a general problem for foreigners. It is a reflection of structural racism because it is the Dominican people of Haitian descent, or those who are perceived as such due to the colour of their skin, who experience this violation of their human rights. This was recognised by the IACHR after a visit to the country, when it confirmed that it had not received any complaint from a descendant of non-Haitian foreigners who had experienced difficulties in being recognised as nationals, getting registered in the civil registry or receiving identity papers.

In the Dominican Republic it is believed that all Black people are Haitians. If I am Black and have curly hair I am constantly questioned even if I have identity papers, and if I am unable to produce an ID, I can be deported because I am assumed to be Haitian. There have been cases of Black Dominicans who have been deported because of their skin colour. Dominican women of Haitian descent who do not have papers and go to a hospital to give birth are treated as foreigners, fuelling the myth that Haitian women are occupying all beds in our hospitals, when most of these women are not Haitians but Dominican Black women of Haitian descent. There is obviously a problem of systemic, state-sanctioned and unrecognised racism.

The systematic exclusion this fuels disproportionately heightened the impacts of the pandemic on people of Haitian descent.

The lack of recognition of something as basic as nationality creates enormous difficulties in accessing other basic rights such as health and social aid. The pandemic has magnified the difficulties faced by these vulnerable populations, confined in bateyes, small villages located in the vicinity of sugarcane plantations, where there is no production or work. Many of these young people are chiriperos, that is, day workers, employed sporadically to do whatever is available, and the pandemic left them with nothing. They do not have access to any of the social aid programmes developed to alleviate the effects of the pandemic because they do not have IDs and do not appear in government records.

This repeated experience of racism meant that when protests burst into life in the USA, they resonated in the Dominican Republic, bringing a domestic response.

We consider ourselves part of a global movement. Many times we have been told that the BLM movement was caused by something that happened in the USA and that it was not our concern; however, as vulnerable and stigmatised people we understand that this is an issue that directly affects us and that we must address. In reaction to events in the USA, we joined other CSOs to organise a commemoration. It was not strictly a protest demonstration, as restrictions on public gatherings had been imposed in the context of the pandemic, and we respected the mandated quarantine. And it was not only a demonstration of solidarity either, as George Floyd’s death had resonated in our context, where we have experienced similar situations of police abuse.

Along with other CSOs we organised an activity in memory of George Floyd. The idea was to make a ritual gesture, a collective wreath. Our convening slogan was ‘A Flower for Floyd’, and it was a call for each person to bring, whenever possible, a flower and place it as part of the offering. Our account of Floyd’s death also made reference to police and institutional violence many Black people, both migrants and Dominicans, experience in the Dominican Republic, so as to highlight that this is a situation we are also going through.

As in the USA, protests brought a backlash from well-organised forces pushing back against any attempts to realise Black rights. In the days ahead of the event, members of an ultra-nationalist anti-rights group, Antigua Orden Dominicana (Old Dominican Order), took to social media to call on its supporters to defend the Dominican Republic against the Haitian ‘invasion’, and protest organisers were targeted with online smears. Nationalist group members attacked those protesting, and as in the USA, the police seemed to take the side of those defending racism rather than challenging it, snatching protest materials and threatening and detaining protesters.
Every time we demonstrate on the issue of nationality and racism, there are always counter-demonstrations, and since the police never protect us, these groups generally prevail and we are forced to suspend or terminate our activities. This was the case with the event we planned to honour George Floyd.

Since the moment we announced the Flower for Floyd event, several ultra-nationalist groups threatened us through our Facebook page. They accused us of wanting to generate violence and of boycotting the country by bringing up issues that are not of its concern. We received such levels of threats that many people thought that we would not be able to carry out the activity. Days before the event, the leader of Antigua Orden Dominicana threatened us through a video in which he warned that if we carried it out there would be bloodshed, since the event would take place in Independence Park, dedicated to the Fathers of the Nation, which they would not allow.

On the day of commemoration, 9 June, these groups were present. It was not the first time that this happened. In 2017, during an activity that we carry out every year, they also showed up and a similar situation ensued.

On 9 June, these groups came to attack the activists that were taking part in the event, and when the police finally intervened it was to detain our fellow activists. Every time we hold a protest related to the issue of nationality and racism, the state comes in and represses us.

The state has been consistently telling the world that there are no stateless people here, that there is no racism or xenophobia, that everything we say is a lie and that we are on the payroll of international CSOs who want to harm the country.
BLACK LIVES MATTER EVERYWHERE

In Europe, one of the largest mobilisations was seen in France, where despite a ban on large gatherings an estimated 20,000 people gathered in Paris in June, marking the memory of Adama Traoré, a Black man killed by the police in 2016. People saw a clear parallel with the killing of George Floyd. Anti-racism protests, as well as health worker protests, were tacitly allowed to go ahead by the authorities despite the ban. Assa Traoré, Adama’s sister and the force behind the French BLM movement, made clear that the protests were intended not just to demand justice for her brother or improve policing practices, but also to raise awareness of systemic racism in a state where officially any racial differences are subsumed under the French identity, to the point that official statistics on race are not even gathered. The scale of the problem is indicated by the fact that the far-right National Rally party has won the support of at least one in five voters in multiple elections.

In Germany, a protest of a reported 15,000 people mobilised in Berlin, with police using teargas following clashes when they blocked the route of the protest march. In evidence of an underlying problem, protest organisers reported that Black participants had been disproportionately targeted for
Italian protesters demand justice for Willy Monteiro Duarte, a 21-year-old Black man killed in the suburbs of Rome in September 2020. Photo by Stefano Guidi/Getty Images
Protests mobilised in several other German cities, including Frankfurt and Hamburg. Around 15,000 people protested in Copenhagen, capital of Denmark, with protests in other Danish cities, and flashmob protests continuing in the following weeks. Protests in Norway focused on racial profiling and police brutality, with around 12,000 people assembling in the capital, Oslo. Large-scale protests were also seen in Croatia, Italy and Spain.

While in some contexts the urgency of the issue motivated people to put their concerns about possible exposure to the virus to one side, in other countries protesters were able to observe distancing. Such was the case in Latvia, where young people held a symbolic small and distanced protest. In Finland, people broke up into small groups and marched under police supervision to try to respect pandemic protocols. Attempts to respect pandemic rules by limiting protests to 50 people in Sweden were however overwhelmed when many more people than expected turned up, including around 8,000 people in the capital, Stockholm, causing police to step in and break up the protest.

In many contexts, protests broke emergency rules, but local authorities opted not to intervene, in tacit acknowledgement of the importance of the issue and people’s overwhelming need to speak out, and as a way of avoiding confrontation with security forces that could fuel violence and lead to further experiences of police brutality. As in the USA, experience of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Black people and the targeting of Black people for police violence in the enforcement of pandemic rules further motivated protests.

In the Netherlands, over 10,000 people took part in a June protest in Amsterdam. Here too, a much smaller protest had been intended: the Mayor of Amsterdam had given permission for a 300-person protest to take place, but decided not to intervene when it became clear that the protest would be much bigger, on the grounds that the issue was of vital importance; this brought criticism from political opponents that the Mayor was not enforcing pandemic protection measures because the protest aligned with her views. Protests were also held in other Dutch cities.

Protests in Belgium mobilised in solidarity with the US protests, and against police violence and racial profiling at home. A civil society documentation project during the pandemic provided further evidence that police brutality is an everyday problem in Belgium, capturing numerous examples of police abuse of pandemic powers that disproportionately focused on the most disadvantaged areas in which Black people and other excluded groups are concentrated, with over half of those consulted reporting that they had experienced discriminatory police treatment. A protest in July further revealed a key social faultline, as around a thousand students in Brussels took a stance against a headscarf ban imposed by a university, under the banner #HijabisFightBack, making the point that the ban discriminated against them both as women and as members of a religious minority.
Hundreds of people took part in a BLM protest in Taiwan in June, where as well as expressing solidarity with Black people in the USA they focused on ongoing discrimination against Taiwan’s Indigenous peoples, who have been deprived of much of their ancestral lands. Taiwan also saw an International Workers’ Day protest by migrant workers, protesting at their difficult working and living conditions and the impacts of the pandemic. In Japan, thousands of people took to the streets of Osaka and Tokyo in July to protest against racism. As well as showing solidarity with US protests, people protested about the rarely acknowledged subject of racism against biracial Japanese citizens and against non-Japanese people resident in Japan. With Japan’s population ageing, more people have come from other countries to work, but they experience discrimination and can be on the receiving end of police violence. Japan still lacks a comprehensive anti-discrimination law and there is considerable denial about the problem. Among the cases that angered protesters was the police’s brutal treatment of a man of Kurdish origin in May.

In repressive Turkey, where little dissent can be expressed, the state took a predictably hard line against efforts to demonstrate on the issue. In June an attempt at a small protest in solidarity with US protesters was dispersed, and the state reported that at least 29 people had been detained. In Sri Lanka, over 50 people were arrested at a protest, even though they had worn masks and relocated from the original protest site outside the US embassy to a location further away. Excessive force was used against the protesters and they faced a range of charges, including violating pandemic regulations.

In West Papua, a former Dutch colony that was absorbed into Indonesia following a controversial referendum, and where a rising separatist movement seeks independence, the global protests had a resonance with West Papuans who are the subject of police brutality and racism from dominant Indonesian population groups. Eden Armando Bebari, a 19-year-old student, was shot dead by Indonesian security forces while fishing in his hometown in April. His death had gone largely unacknowledged until protests over the killing of George Floyd prompted Eden’s friends and fellow students to take action. Their hashtag, #PapuanLivesMatter, refocused public attention on racial discrimination and brutality against West Papuans. A speaker for the Indonesian People’s Front for West Papua stated that the global BLM movement gave ‘a new understanding to the Indonesian public to be more concerned to address racism against West Papuans.’

Tens of thousands of people protested in New Zealand too. Among the demands there was a call for an end to a trial period in which some police were armed, a rarity in the country; trials had taken place in neighbourhoods with large Maori and Pacific Island populations. Protesters faced greater problems in organising in Australia, where at a BLM protest in Sydney in July, six people were arrested, including a protest organiser, and around 50 others were ordered to disperse, on the grounds of breaching pandemic regulations. Protest organisers suggested that they were being singled out for action in a context where social gatherings, including at sporting events and retail centres, had been allowed to resume. The protest was organised in collaboration with the family of David Dungay, an Indigenous man who died in 2015 while being
restrained in a Sydney jail despite repeatedly saying those same words heard in the USA: 'I can’t breathe’. Protest organisers gathered over 100,000 signatures on a petition calling for those involved in his death to be charged.

Given the breadth and variety of the global anti-racism mobilisation, counter-protests in backlash were inevitable, just as had been seen in the USA. In Canada, one such occasion saw a white nationalist rally held in Edmonton in September, leading to violent scenes of confrontation. A small but vocal far-right counter-protest movement mobilised in the Netherlands too.

In June, Portugal experienced what was said to be its first contemporary far-right protest, as over 1,000 people gathered in the capital, Lisbon, with many holding signs bearing the slogan ‘Portugal is not a racist country’. Among those protesting were members of the Chega political party, formed in 2019, which became the first right-wing populist and nationalist party to win parliamentary seats since the restoration of democracy in 1975, and whose leader has a track record in denying the existence of racism in Portugal; when one of three Black women of African heritage also elected in 2019 suggested that pillaged art be returned to Portugal’s former colonies, Chega’s response triggered hate speech and racist slurs.

The far-right mobilisation came in backlash to a much larger series of BLM protests in Lisbon and other major cities that brought thousands to the streets earlier in June, with the police opting not to intervene, perhaps surprisingly given previous experiences of police brutality towards Black-led protests. The scale of the demand for change in Portugal was also indicated by an earlier protest in February, when people protested against the police’s mistreatment of excluded groups, racism and the government’s failure to act on these. That protest followed the violent arrest of a Black woman, Cláudia Simões, for the minor offence of failing to produce a travel card on a bus. She was left bruised and reported being subjected to racial abuse by police officers.

Despite the denials of counter-protesters, Cláudia Simões’ experience, and a 2020 surge in far-right racist threats and violence, show that racism is a problem in Portugal, even if it is not often acknowledged. Such was the case in the many countries where people were moved to mobilise in 2020 to insist that the call that Black Lives Matter had deep and urgent relevance in their societies, and not just in the USA.
In India, the #BlackLivesMatter battle cry quickly became repurposed as #DalitLivesMatter. In doing so people pointed to the hypocrisy of Indian citizens, including celebrities and influencers, bemoaning US racism and expressing their support for BLM protests, but overlooking the everyday and long-term racism at home. One of the grimmest manifestations of that racism is violence against Dalits — a broad term designating the communities of around 200 million people at the bottom of the Hindu caste system — with hundreds of murders of Dalits registered over the past couple of years alone.

To the proponents of #DalitLivesMatter the parallel was clear: the violence against Dalits, just like the violence Black people experience in the USA, stemmed from deep and underlying systemic forces. Under longstanding inequality, the exercise of violence, including police violence, by those placed higher on the social ladder against those designated as inferior by birth is normalised. Despite constitutional and legal changes Dalit lives continue too often to be viewed as worthless and therefore disposable.

The entrenched nature of the problem made it unsurprising that people denied the legitimacy of the movement even while expressing support for BLM in the USA. When people characterised violence against Dalits as caused by factors other than caste, they made similar arguments to those in the USA ascribing the violence Black people experience to reasons other than race. But the reality of violence, particularly for Dalit women, for whom exclusions based on patriarchy and caste intersect (see this report’s chapter on challenging exclusion) was surely hard to deny in October following the gang rape and murder of a 20-year-old Dalit woman in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. These dreadful acts, and the forced cremation of her body, ordered by the authorities, triggered the outrage of millions across India.

As people mobilised in protest, local government authorities in Hathras turned everyday denial into active policy, declaring the outrage to be an ‘international conspiracy’, imposing a COVID-19 containment zone on the city, and deploying hundreds of police officers to prevent protesters from entering the city centre.

Ever since Dalits first organised to advocate for their rights they have been systematically shut out of the conversation by the Indian state, at all levels. A case in point is that of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), a coalition of international human rights groups, development agencies, national Dalit solidarity networks from Europe and national platforms in caste-affected countries, which remains shut out of the global conversation, as it has so far failed to obtain consultative status to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), a status that allows CSOs to take part in UN processes. Ever since IDSN requested ECOSOC status back in 2007, the state of India has abused the rules of the ECOSOC Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations to block its accreditation request with continuous questioning, requests for additional information and further delays.

The great efforts the Indian state has put into silencing IDSN and other organisations and activists intent on making Dalit lives matter indicate precisely the size of the problem that it is trying to conceal. Those engaged know they face a long struggle. As one student who mobilised in protest put it, ‘this is a fight that will go on for years’.
Imagine being in prison? The ‘crime’? Speaking up and standing for what you believe in. CIVICUS is sharing the stories of people behind bars and urging people to call on governments to protect rights, uphold justice and stop harassing and imprisoning human rights defenders across the globe. Human rights defenders are asking you to #StandAsMyWitness.

13 February 2021 marked the 900th day in detention for Dalit rights activist Sudha Bharadwaj, accused of inciting violence. Sudha tells her story:

I am a human rights lawyer, with a focus on protecting the rights of Adivasi (Indigenous) people in the state of Chattisgarh. I also served as the General Secretary of the Chattisgarh People’s Union for Civil Liberties.

I was arrested in August 2018 and I’m accused of inciting Dalits at a public meeting together with ten other human rights defenders, leading to the violence in Bhima Koregaon village in the Pune district of Maharashtra on 1st January 2018.

Me and the ten others were charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act between June and August 2018. Others include Surendra Gadling, Rona Wilson, Shoma Sen, Sudhir Dhawale, Mahesh Raut, Vernon Gonsalves, Arun Ferreira, Varavara Rao, Gautam Navlakha and Dr Anand Teltumbde. Police subsequently claimed that the human rights defenders had links with ‘unlawful organisations’.

I am being detained in Mumbai Byculla Women’s Jail where an inmate had tested positive for coronavirus. I am diabetic and have hypertension. I am seeking bail from the High Court after the special National Investigation Agency court in Mumbai rejected my appeal on 29 May 2020.

Take action. Call for Sudha Bharadwaj’s release.
RECKONING WITH THE SYMBOLS OF COLONIAL LEGACIES

In former colonial powers, countries with histories of slavery and countries that were colonised, the 2020 wave of protests brought with it an attempt to reckon with colonial legacies, and the ways in which those legacies are commemorated and made visible. It was not only in the USA that enduring representations of colonial pasts and slavery – street names, the names of institutions, statues – came under renewed and accelerated scrutiny. These interrogations of history were not new: in recent years the #RhodesMustFall movement mobilised powerfully against the commemoration of Cecil Rhodes in South Africa and the UK, while on the Caribbean island of Martinique, a statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais, wife of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, had been made headless in protest against her role in the slave trade as far back as 1991; the rest of the statue was brought down by protesters in July 2020 after the French government refused to remove it. Similarly, in Barbados, another formerly enslaved island, the statue of Admiral Horatio Nelson was targeted over his support for the slave trade. An online Nelson Must Go petition attracted 10,000 signatures, a high number given the country’s circa 287,000 population. In response, in July the government agreed to move the statue to a less prominent location.

In Canada, statues of the country’s first prime minister, John A Macdonald, were targeted; Macdonald is remembered by many for his key role in the formation of Canada, but is also criticised for policies towards First Nations peoples that have been described as ‘cultural genocide’ and for racism towards Black people and people of Chinese heritage; he also founded the police force that today mobilises violence. In Montreal in August, a group of protesters called for the police to be defunded and pulled down a Macdonald statue.

In the UK, in Bristol, a city that was built on the slave trade, protests focused on the memorialisation of 17th century slave trader Edward Colston. In June, protesters toppled a 19th century statue of Colston and threw it into the waters of the harbour. Shortly afterwards, in London, another slaver statue, of Robert Mulligan, was removed from outside the Museum of London Docklands, which is based in a former sugar warehouse and hosts an exhibition on slavery in the sugar trade.

In the UK everyone points to the USA and claims the situation is not as bad here. But as an empire, Britain played a role in creating this system in the first place. We need to educate ourselves about the connections between the empire and oppressive structures. It is important to see the realities of racism on the ground: the fact that in some parts of London young Black men are being stopped and searched up to 40 times more often than their white counterparts and that our prison system is even...
more imbalanced than that of the USA in terms of the number of people of colour who are incarcerated.

That speaks to internal levels of systemic racism, but also calls for an anti-imperialist view. There is a quite large population of Caribbean heritage in the UK, so we are learning more about the fact that prisons in the Caribbean were first built by the British, and that the policing system we currently experience in Britain was originated in the colonies to control the local population.

Kelsey M, Community Action on Prison Expansion, UK

In Belgium too, protesters called for a reckoning with the country’s colonial past, a subject that had previously rarely entered mainstream debate. The Belgian imperial project, centred on what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was run with particular brutality and cruelty, accounting for millions of deaths, as a lucrative personal fiefdom of King Leopold II. The vast wealth ruthlessly extracted is manifested in the monumental buildings of major Belgian cities, a present-day reminder of a barbarous past. In June an estimated 10,000 people came together outside the Palace of Justice in Brussels, many of them wearing masks, in a protest that was tolerated by the city government. While the protest was mostly peaceful, towards its end a confrontation broke out between police and protesters, and security forces used water cannon and detained over 150 protesters.

Attention turned to the many sites and spaces where Leopold II is commemorated. Leopold II has a presence, through statues and names, in many city centres and neighbourhoods, inserting the official version of Belgium’s colonial history into people’s everyday lives. In contrast, there is no official space where that history is interrogated and the experience of colonised peoples is remembered. Tens of thousands signed an online petition to have all Leopold II statues removed. In June, one such statue was taken down in the city of Antwerp after it had been set on fire. In Ghent, a bust of Leopold II was removed after being vandalised.

In the neighbouring Netherlands, protests further challenged the tradition, seen in both the Netherlands and Belgium, of Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) in which, in the run-up to Christmas, white people wear blackface makeup and curly wigs in caricature of Black people. In recent years these practices, which appear to date from the 19th century when the Netherlands was still active in the slave trade, have attracted growing controversy, on the basis that they perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black people and are at odds with the modern, multicultural realities of the countries in which they are enacted. The debate has become polarised, with far-right groups making a show of defending the practice. At the same time the cultural assumptions and lack of inquiry that used to lead the majority of the white population to view the practice as essentially harmless have increasingly been questioned and challenged.

The June protest in Amsterdam was led by the Kick Out Zwarte Piet group, along with Black Queer and Trans Resistance Netherlands, in a show of the power of intersectional action, and there seemed to be a sense afterwards that the global scale of the 2020 protests and the deep questioning of structural racism and white supremacy they brought had moved the debate along. A survey published in November suggested that support for the tradition had fallen from as high as 83 per cent in 2013 to barely half in 2020.
across the Netherlands began to remove books featuring the character from their shelves. In August, Facebook banned blackface images, included Zwarte Piet, on Facebook and Instagram, and in October Google banned all pro-Zwarte Piet websites and YouTube videos from making money from advertising, potentially undermining the dismal cycle in which people profit from the traffic that extreme views generate.

Each of these moves sparked backlash: in Belgium, the right-wing populist and nationalist Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party, which makes heavy use of Facebook to recruit support, characterised the move as an attack on national traditions. In the run-up to the festive season, sizeable counter-protests mobilised against Kick Out Zwarte Piet protests in the Netherlands. Protesters accused the police of failing to assure their safety in the face of aggression by counter-protesters, causing one protest in the city of Eindhoven to be moved online for safety reasons.

In Switzerland as well, people started to interrogate the connections to the slave trade of Alfred Escher, a 19th century figure pivotal in the development of modern Switzerland, and the role played by slavery in building the country’s wealth. In Hamilton, New Zealand, the statue of naval captain John Hamilton, after whom the city was named, was removed in June following Maori protests, which pointed to his role in bloody 19th century battles for territory with Maori people, in which many were killed.

Protests against these historical symbols of racism and white supremacy, at least in global north countries, quickly brought criticisms that people were trying to erase history, and dire warnings that little of historical value would be left standing. Following the fall of the Colston statue in the UK, far-right groups, always ready to manufacture outrage and division, opportunistically mobilised to ‘defend’ other historical statues, such as those of Winston Churchill, which no groups had seriously called to be removed. The danger this raised for movements against racism was of being drawn into a culture war on territory chosen by far-right groups and characterised by disinformation: of expending precious energies in insignificant battles that would not serve to challenge racism and advance rights, and of losing sight of how to bring about the change that matters.

It is important to acknowledge that it was not only people in former colonial powers who were keen to have a fresh conversation with history. People living in countries on the receiving end of colonialism made similar demands. In Uganda, over 5,000 people signed a petition to rename streets that still carry the names of people and institutions involved in brutal colonial repression. Similar demands were made to rename a key street in Khartoum, capital of Sudan, named after a slave trader. In South Africa, home of the #RhodesMustFall movement, people targeted and defaced the statue of Paul Kruger, a 19th century Afrikaner leader, in Pretoria.

The charge that protesters were trying to erase history is simplistic. Rather, in cases such as the removal of the Colston statue, people showed a deep awareness of and engagement with history. They asserted the idea that history is not fixed or immutable, and the past has an ongoing interaction with the present, as Black people every day are forced to live alongside the symbols of their historic oppression that continue to be reproduced and embedded into today’s systems of exclusion. To experience this can be a daily encounter with...
re-traumatisation and dehumanisation. History means more than monuments and street names, and these are blunt instruments of commemoration that need to be accompanied by a continuous investigation and interrogation of who gets to decide what history and which narratives matter. If history is written by the victors, then in 2020 protesters insisted that it was their time to write it and past racists had no right to determine what matters for the rest of time. Rather than attempting to shut down debate through an insistence on ‘political correctness’, as people were often accused of doing, they were urgently trying to open up conversations about the realities of their struggles.

The toppling of statues can offer a cathartic moment, but it is surely a signal that processes of dialogue and debate are absent and that people are frustrated at not being heard time and again. It suggests the need for new processes that enable a conversation to be held around big questions about how to make societies, political systems and economies work for everyone, rather than be based on the exploitation of Black people and other excluded groups, and as part of this, how to decolonise institutions. This conversation needs to include an acknowledgement that history can and should be interrogated and deepened, and that there are neglected histories, such as Black history, that must be respected and shared. This requires a better understanding of what Black history is, starting with an acknowledgement that it is not only a history of colonialism, enslavement and oppression, but also a history of how Black people survived, resisted and flourished.

In Bristol, the Colston statue only spent a few days sunk at the bottom of the harbour. It was retrieved, and will not return to its plinth but rather be relocated to a museum, where it will be displayed alongside protest placards, telling the story not just of a long-dead slave trader but of the contemporary people who forced their way into the narrative. A similar fate likely awaits Antwerp’s deposed Leopold II statue. History is enriched as a result.

BLM protests were initially triggered by police brutality, as a violent and lethal manifestation of systemic racism, and in turn protests were confronted with further acts of brutality. The focus on police brutality found echoes in other countries, where finding common ground with BLM protests, people demanded action and accountability on their own issues of police violence and abuse of rights.

In early June, hundreds of people in Guadalajara, Mexico, protested against police brutality and demanded justice for Giovanni López, a man who died from a head injury after being detained. He died in early May, but outrage erupted after a video surfaced on 3 June, in which bystanders appeared saying that López’s only infraction was to not be wearing a mask. In addition to the head injury, he also sustained a bullet wound while in custody. During the 4 June protests, groups of protesters vandalised buildings and damaged police vehicles, while the police fired teargas. Journalists covering the protests reported being attacked by police.

The following day, people gathered outside the state Attorney General’s office in Guadalajara to demand justice. They were again met with police repression, including arbitrary and illegal detentions. Protesters described being taken...
by plainclothes officers in unmarked cars, beaten and mistreated, robbed of personal belongings, threatened with being disappeared, held for hours and then left on the outskirts of the city without any means of returning home. The next day, the whereabouts of over 20 people were still unknown. Following social media pressure, six young protesters were released from detention on 9 June.

Following a protest outside the US embassy in Mexico City in solidarity with BLM on 4 June, another demonstration was organised in the capital the next day, with a focus on police violence in both Mexico and the USA. Some protesters vandalised shops and banks, and around 400 police officers were deployed. Protesters took to social media to denounce the excessive force the police used; video footage showed anti-riot officers beating a teenage girl, an act of aggression for which two officers were later detained. After the protesters highlighted these abuses of their right to protest, on 7 June, local authorities announced they would establish a protocol for the policing of protests in Mexico City to avoid abuses against protesters and journalists.

Across a series of African countries, where the police work as agents of repressive state control, the call to end police brutality also resonated. In Kenya, the antagonistic relationship that the police maintain with the public can be seen as a legacy of British rule: today’s security forces stand in continuity with colonial forces, their attitude and mission unchanged. On 8 June, 200 people peacefully marched through the Mathare informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital, to protest against police brutality and the spike in extrajudicial killings that followed the establishment of a dusk-till-dawn pandemic curfew. A protester whose friend was shot dead by the police explained the rationale of the protest: ‘The police have killed us more than corona.’ Protesters identified in common cause with the US BLM movement, affirming that their community stood in solidarity with Black people and people living in poverty in the USA in a shared struggle for dignity.

A further protest was held in Nairobi on 7 July of people angered by the continuing wave of police abuses in the context of the enforcement of pandemic restrictions. By that stage at least 22 people, including a 13-year-old boy, were reported to have died as a result of the police’s violent enforcement of emergency rules. The police fired teargas and arrested around 30 protesters, claiming that they had not practised distancing.

The situation was similar in neighbouring Uganda, where the police often act as the brutal agents of ruling party repression under President Yoweri Museveni’s 35-year rule. It was no surprise that in the run-up to the contested January 2021 general election the police were often deployed to repress opposition candidates, CSOs and protesters. In October, Nana Mwafrika Mbarikiwa, a women’s rights activist, was arrested and detained when she held a protest against police brutality in Uganda’s capital, Kampala. But what was new in 2020 was that this event sparked a cascade of testimonies and videos of police violence, shared with the trending Twitter hashtag #EndPoliceBrutalityInUganda; story after story told of brutal acts being committed against protesters and opposition supporters.
Nigeria was home to Africa’s biggest movement against police abuses. A major wave of protests erupted in October, calling for the abolition of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), under the banner of #EndSARS. The protests were sparked by the sharing of an online video showing SARS officers dragging two men out onto the street and shooting one of them. The rapid spread of the video triggered an avalanche of people’s stories of harassment and brutality by SARS officers. The parallels and currents of inspiration with the protests in the USA and around the world were clear: if Black lives matter, then they need to matter in Black-majority countries, and the authorities in those countries need to hold by their fundamental duty to protect rather than endanger the lives of their people. In Africa’s most populated country, Black lives should matter.

Sadly, police brutality is a long-entrenched problem in Nigeria, and people have been protesting against it for years. While the protests of 2020 saw #EndSARS trending on Twitter around the world, the slogan was first used in 2017. SARS was set up in 1992, when Nigeria was still under military rule, and has been accused of acting as though democracy never returned. It has long been seen as effectively acting as a gang of its own, indistinguishable from criminals. SARS has been blamed for extrajudicial killings, disappearances, rape, torture, corruption and blackmail, among other serious crimes. Nigeria’s young, urban population shared a common experience of being targeted by SARS on the basis of how they dress, the technology they carry, the vehicles they drive.

Nelson Olanipekun of Citizens’ Gavel, a Nigerian civic tech organisation, points to the underlying issues, and the way in which BLM protests and police abuses committed during enforcement of pandemic rules brought anger to a head:

The global protests triggered by the death of George Floyd renewed the call for police accountability in Nigeria and people started sharing stories of their encounters with police officers. Coupled with pre-existing local issues, the US incident that resonated globally enhanced the local voices who were speaking up against police brutality. We were able to contribute by addressing the complaints that citizens reported to us and continuing to work to ensure culpable officers are held accountable.

As the pandemic started there was an increase in police brutality related to the enforcement of lockdown measures and compliance with sanitary protocols. Interactions between citizens and police officers increased and resulted in more complaints against police officers. By April, it appeared that police officers had killed more people than COVID-19. Additionally, the brutalities committed by SARS continued during the pandemic, and the authorities continued failing to prosecute officers who committed torture and violent crimes, mostly against young men from low-income backgrounds.

In common with many of the protests documented above, many of those mobilising were young people, often protesting for the first time. They expressed their anger at the targeting of young people by SARS officers, and to the deteriorating economic situation under the pandemic, with rising food prices, and ongoing high levels of youth unemployment. People came together who had not previously found common ground. Mass street protests captured
attention and the #EndSARS hashtag was picked up and spread by Nigerian celebrities, influencers and the country’s widespread and vocal diaspora, who were called on to support #EndSARS just as they had expressed support for BLM, and did so. British-Nigerian actor John Boyega, for example, who made an impassioned speech at a BLM protest in London in June, tweeted his support for the #EndSARS movement in October. Led by people from the Nigerian diaspora, #EndSARS solidarity protests mobilised in other countries, including Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK. An impressive voluntary response, within Nigeria and from the diaspora, mobilised to raise funds to provide protesters with food, water and medical supplies. Some people used bitcoin to donate, as a means of avoiding state scrutiny. Hundreds of lawyers volunteered to provide legal support to people arrested while protesting. People took to social media to document police repression.

To some extent, the protest pressure told. Within days, the government moved to disband the unit, but Nigerians remained sceptical and continued to protest. Several past government promises of police reform had come to nothing, and many believed that SARS would simply be reconstituted under some other name, while those who had committed crimes would continue to enjoy impunity. The setting up of a new unit in place of SARS seemed to confirm these suspicions. Protests went on, fuelled by the further sharing of videos in October showing more police killings, making clear that nothing had really changed. In October, over 10,000 people took to the streets to force Lagos, Africa’s greatest metropolis, into gridlock. A further protest blocked access to the Lagos airport. Protesters started to take on bigger issues and call for more comprehensive reform. They demanded the immediate release of all those arrested, justice for the victims of police brutality, the prosecution of accused officers and even an increase in police salaries as a deterrent to widespread bribery.

October also saw protests focused around Nigeria’s Independence Day, on which the country celebrated the landmark of 60 years of independence. The Coalition for Revolution, which first mobilised in 2019, convened protests across Nigeria under the banner of #RevolutionNow, focusing on issues of misgovernance and the particular flashpoint of fuel and electricity prices, which brought earlier protests in September. These protests were met with a heavy-handed police response, with an estimated 60 people arrested and a journalist assaulted. Planned protests in August to commemorate the first year of #RevolutionNow were also dispersed by the security forces with numerous arrests; several of those detained reported being subject to violence and humiliation by police officers.

People’s scepticism about the reality of reform were confirmed by the violent response to protests. By mid-October, at least 10 people had been killed and dozens more injured, although the authorities denied that any deaths had occurred. As protests continued, the government imposed a 24-hour curfew in Lagos and other cities and states. And then on 20 October came a day of notoriety as soldiers opened fire with live ammunition, reportedly killing at least 12 people in what became known as the Lekki Toll Gate Massacre. People had peacefully occupied the vast site and disrupted traffic. The response was lethal. Graphic video footage of security force shootings of peaceful protesters brought widespread condemnation, but when Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari called for an end to the protests in a televised address, he failed even to acknowledge the shootings, while the army initially tried to deny that it was present. Protesters claimed that armed groups of unemployed men, paid by the authorities, had also infiltrated protests and unleashed violence. The authorities continued to play down the number of killings, and a wall of silence was thrown around hospitals treating the wounded. Police spokespeople denigrated protesters as criminals. The authorities now characterised the protests as subversive. The protests had become dangerous because they had started to call on the government to redistribute power.

Ultimately, and with grim irony, protests against overbearing state violence and for freedom and dignity were suppressed, with a combination of lethal and excessive violence, arrests of protesters and repressive measures that included fines of media outlets that covered the protests and the freezing of bank accounts of protest leaders and organisations, which had been used to raise and receive funds to support protests; in a signal of the aggressive approach being used, those who accounts were frozen were ludicrously accused of ‘suspected terrorism financing’, and some people had their passports seized.

Following the Lekki Toll Gate Massacre, many people felt too fearful to protest, many self-censored and some fled abroad. For now, impunity prevails over the crimes of 20 October. After granting the minimal concession of rebranding SARS, the government seemed to believe it could pull up the drawbridge and
Protesters in London, UK, hold a solidarity march in response to the Nigerian police opening fire on #EndSARS protesters in October 2020. Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Images
carry on as usual. This looked like an out-of-touch government, unable to connect with the lived experiences and motivations of Nigeria’s many young people. But the issues remain, as does the anger. As seen in the resurgence of BLM in the USA and around the world, protests are likely to return and demands will likely be rearticulated when the conditions become ripe again. Demands for accountability and justice over the Lekki Toll Gate Massacre will not go away either.

BLM: EARLY IMPACTS AROUND THE WORLD

The changes the protests of 2020 sought are profound, and require the overturning of political, social and economic structures of systemic racism and white supremacy that have been in place for centuries. Any changes that resulted in 2020, such as electoral shifts caused by the mobilisation of Black people ahead of the US elections and moves in some US local administrations towards defunding the police, are a small part of what needs to happen. But some progress was made, around the world as well as in the USA.

Canada’s extensive protests brought high-level acknowledgement. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was one of thousands who kneeled for eight minutes and 46 seconds – the length of time it took the police to kill George Floyd – at a protest in June, and he went on to publicly acknowledge the reality of racism in Canada as well as the USA. As the first wave of protests unfolded, Canada’s public safety minister acknowledged the need for police reform and action at the disproportionate imprisonment of Black and Indigenous people.

In New Zealand, following the protests, the head of the police committed to not extend the pilot programme of arming police, and the Green party, at that time a member of the coalition government and a continuing partner of the majority government that resulted from the October election (see this report’s chapter on democracy under the pandemic), expressed its support for BLM and called out discrimination against Maori and Pacific Islands peoples, pointing to their disadvantaged status in education, healthcare and housing, and their over-representation in prison.

In the Netherlands, as public perceptions shifted, Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who had previously defended the Zwarte Piet tradition and had himself dressed up as Zwarte Piet in the past, announced that he now understood that this practice could make Black people feel discriminated against, and admitted that racism was a problem in the Netherlands. In Belgium, King Philippe expressed his ‘regrets’ about colonial acts of violence and brutality, and acknowledged the reality of present-day discrimination, in a letter to Félix Tshisekedi, President of the DRC, on the 60th anniversary of the DRC’s independence. While this stopped short of the expression of an apology, which might open up the potential for demands for reparations to be taken forward, it marked a historic break with past practices of denial of the brutal practices of colonialism and even of lauding Leopold II.

Belgium’s parliament established a ‘truth and reconciliation commission’ to examine the country’s colonial past. In the UK, London Mayor Sadiq Khan, himself a regular target of racism, announced the establishment of a commission to review London’s landmarks and focus on improving diversity, including in public arts and place names. In January 2021 it was revealed that across the UK almost 70 tributes to racists, slave traders and colonisers, in the form of statues, street names and other memorials, had been removed or changed or were in the process of being so.
None of these shifts would have come without the mass protests of 2020 communicating the urgency and importance of making Black lives matter, and the ways in which protests plugged into longstanding struggles and ongoing civil society initiatives to challenge the structures, practices and attitudes of systemic racism and white supremacy. But the question of course remains that of what real change might follow from these acknowledgements of protest pressure, or whether impacts would stay at the symbolic level.

Pressure that mobilised online against social media companies also brought some acknowledgement. Campaigns pointed out the role of social media platforms in sharing hate speech, which goes beyond that of being mere conduits, as algorithms designed to keep eyes on pages feed people sensational and extreme content, thereby amplifying it, and reward it through advertising revenue, making hate a lucrative business. The Stop Hate for Profit group was one initiative set up after the killing of George Floyd, calling on Facebook in particular to moderate and take down hate speech. In response to this pressure, huge companies pulled or paused their Facebook advertising. Corporate titans such as Coca-Cola, Diageo and Unilever hit Facebook, which makes around 98 per cent of its income from advertising, where it hurts.

Online, brands also quickly signalled their support for BLM, changing their icons, expressing their support for Blackout Day, an annual day designed so that Black Americans can show their economic power by withholding their spending or shopping only at Black-owned businesses, and issuing statements that acknowledged that racism is structural and that they need to do better to combating it in their companies. Sports teams around the world started following the US example of taking a knee to express their opposition to racism; when the English Premier League restarted after a pandemic pause in June, its global audience in 188 countries saw its superstar players halt at the start of every game to take a knee. This was different to the days when pioneering players got dropped for doing so.

These were important acts of public acknowledgement of the existence of structural racism and white supremacy, but at the same time they caused concern that the political edges were being rubbed off a movement that offers a direct challenge to political and economic power. To result in real, far-reaching change, acknowledgement and action must go further than feelgood sloganeering, social media likes and self-interested corporate positioning.

Perhaps more importantly, for the first time many white people understood and acknowledged that they could no longer simply opt out of conversations about racial injustice, and they needed to play their part in recognising and beginning to tackle systemic racism. More people came to understand that white silence is complicity in white supremacy, and that white privilege is something that needs to be acknowledged, unpacked and challenged. The many white people marching in solidarity in protests around the world spoke not of a desire to co-opt or whitewash protest anger, but to acknowledge the need to listen and engage.

Change cannot end with sportspeople taking a knee, or a politician offering a careful choice of words that stops short of an apology, or a statue being toppled. Such moments can carry significant symbolic meaning and help challenge the invisibility that comes with being excluded, but the ultimate
measure of change is whether people are able fully to access and enjoy their civil, political, social and economic rights irrespective of any aspects or markers of their identities. As part of this, it will become clear that change is happening when those who commit racist acts can be safely challenged and held to account on their behaviour, however powerful they are and even if they are part of the machinery of policing.

By that measure, our societies are a long way from where they could be, and need to be. The problems thrown under the spotlight in 2020 are not new; they are structural and systemic. The engagement to overcome them must therefore be sustained. But nor was the anger seen in 2020 new, and neither will it go away. People will keep demanding radical change until they succeed in making it happen.