

HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL REPRESSION

# Human rights and political repression around the world

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A protester raises a poster against the military coup in Myanmar. Photo by MgHla (aka) Htin Linn Aye, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

When we wonder about the health or state of human rights around the world, we usually turn to studying the domestic or international regulations adopted and put in place by states in various geographic areas. While such analysis is essential, it is evident that these are purely formal and academic factors. Nowadays it is not enough just to note how drawing up regulations designed to safeguard human rights and fundamental freedoms has come to a standstill. Instead, we should also look at the evident rollback of many of the gains made over decades of political and social struggles.

From this standpoint, the study we are presenting here seeks to unpack the incidence of political repression in the world and its impact, whether direct or indirect, on human rights safeguards during the period 2015-2020. While these five years have raised many issues in this area, equally we cannot overlook the influence on human rights of the measures put in place to tackle Covid-19. Nevertheless, the continuous rollback over recent years is not only attributable to these measures. This global health emergency has held up a mirror to human rights and enabled us to see that the seams of its system of safeguards have been ripped. This is largely because they were poorly stitched and political repression, or rather political repression in recent years, has ended up pushing us backwards in struggles which we had mistakenly believed we had won.

We are presenting here a number of reports designed to illustrate the worrying situation of human rights around the world against a backdrop of political repression. These reports, six in total, have been arranged by geographical area. The regional groups of the member states of most of the global international organisations have been taken as a starting point, albeit tailored to the realities of the 21st century. We also accept that although the intention is to provide comprehensive coverage, this does not mean that absolutely all the countries in the world have been included. Accordingly, the five geographical areas have been organised into Europe, Latin America, Asia, the Maghreb and Mashriq, Sub-Saharan Africa and, finally, one report providing comparative analysis of the situations and trends in the United States, China and Russia.

These reports have identified the primary trends and forms in which political repression is being enforced in each region. They list the main rights and freedoms and the groups affected, identify those responsible, give examples of specific situations and violations of rights, and attach special emphasis to the restrictions on rights which have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, each report puts forward proposals for putting an end to political repression and ensuring the effectiveness of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

## Europe

In Europe there is a worrying synergy in some EU member states who have sought to undermine the independence of the judiciary in order to avoid accountability. Likewise, the EU itself has continued to externalise border and migration control, thus seriously endangering human rights: thousands of people continue to be exposed to conflict, violence, torture and an uncertain future in conditions of squalor at the gates of Europe. There is also an extremely disturbing trend whereby people who oppose these migration and border control policies are very often targeted by smear campaigns and harassment, including administrative and criminal penalties, evidently persecuting solidarity. This means a growing number of human rights advocates, activists and independent media outlets are being intimidated and prosecuted. Over recent years we have witnessed an outburst of protests and demonstrations which have taken to the streets in large numbers to demand and assert their rights. These essentially peaceful popular movements are an unmistakable call for European governments to respond and shoulder their responsibilities in these issues.

## Latin America

In Latin America, political repression has been ramped up considerably over the past five years. In particular, the threat to life and dignity is directly experienced by the most vulnerable groups who are exposed to deep and historical inequalities in access to opportunities which restrict or hinder the exercise of their rights. The main groups at risk are still human rights activists denouncing abuses of power by governments across Latin America. It is patently obvious that most states are unable to devise public policies benefiting their citizens to address violence, inequality, institutional instability and

impunity. This report pinpoints several predominant causes of human rights violations and political repression: the environmental crisis and territorial disputes; the political and economic crisis and regional corruption; multiple forms of violence and femicide; and freedom of speech and the persecution of social leaders.

## Asia

In Asia, human rights are being used as a political tool to generate a toxic atmosphere which ends up undermining the operation of the few regional cooperation organisations there are. Firstly, attempts are made to rationalise crimes committed against various groups by the injustices suffered by others in an obvious policy of stoking social confrontation. Secondly, there is outrageous silence about crimes perpetrated by allied governments. “Asian values” were traditionally used as a distinguishing feature to downplay the universality of human rights. However, the current trend is to address human rights as a domestic issue and subordinate them to other priorities such as economic growth. The most targeted rights in this period have been freedom of speech, belief, peaceful assembly and association. Unfortunately, they have not been the only ones. Governments manipulatively use hate speech to silence dissenting voices. Repression and human rights violations in Asia thus impact a wide range of groups: religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples; women and children; the LGBTI community; human rights activists; journalists and academics.

## Maghreb and Mashriq

Political regimes in the Maghreb and Mashriq are a relatively uniform collection of dictatorial governments or low-intensity democracies. Where the rule of law is weak or non-existent, the absence of legal certainty means that in addition to legal systems featuring provisions running counter to human rights, officials or simply private individuals breach these rights on their own initiative. Far from being a social transformer working towards greater tolerance and equality, states in the Maghreb and Mashriq often draw on regressive traditions to attract popular support. This entails the preservation of traditions such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and the husband’s right of physical chastisement of his wife. Inequalities in terms of safeguards for human rights and fundamental freedoms are shaped by endogenous factors, including widespread domestic corruption and the perpetuation of economic and social systems securing the interests of one or more elites, such as a number of families, the army or a religious caste. Likewise, the two regions have seen more than six years of armed conflict in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Libya.

## Sub-Saharan Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa, states have been equipping themselves with instruments to attain increasingly higher levels of democracy, political participation, stability and safeguards for human rights. These instruments include Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want*, and two

aspirations expressed in it: Aspiration 3, about building an Africa based on good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law, which includes the commitment to strong and democratic leadership with special emphasis on regional integration; and Aspiration 4, which seeks to achieve a peaceful and secure Africa. While the continent has made progress in good governance over the past decade, the threat posed by the deterioration of an increasingly precarious security situation, coupled with the erosion of human rights and the space for civic and democratic participation, may jeopardise the gains made. In general, political and social freedoms in Sub-Saharan Africa have been shaped by armed conflicts and the transition processes which have taken place there. The main trends and challenges in the infringement of rights and freedoms in the sub-Saharan region as a result of political repression have been identified by taking a snapshot of the violation of the rights of various groups in several contexts: women's rights, electoral rights, violence against a backdrop of armed conflict, violence and repression by police forces, repression of social movements and human rights activists, repression in extractive and environmental settings, repression of freedom of the press/speech, state homophobia and transitional justice.

## United States, Russia and China

Finally, the [comparative report about the United States, Russia and China](#) shows that over recent years there has been a resurgence of tensions between the major regional powers, in particular between the United States and China, with Russia laying fresh claim to superpower status. China has overtly sought to push its political model and become the world's leading economic power, while Russia has seemed more interested in discrediting democracies and expanding its sphere of influence. In all of this, the United States has merely tried to maintain its hegemonic status and global economic leadership.

Hence political repression bears many similarities between China and Russia, where dissent is not tolerated and repression is systematically deployed in both states. This is because they are political systems founded on highly repressive laws, vast security structures and a judiciary with full capacity to control, harass, criminalise and arbitrarily detain dissidents. While civic space is not constrained to the same extent in the United States, political drivers underpin particular processes and structural discrimination and police violence against African Americans persist. US justice and law enforcement agencies have at times been used to persecute advocates of the rights of whistleblowers, migrants and others. There are many differences across the political systems and economic resources of the three states in question, yet there are some common trends, underscored by the official response to the unprecedented scourge.

This is just a small sample of what you will find in these six reports on human rights and political repression in the world over the past five years. We encourage you to read them as they address similarities and differences between various forms of repression which go far beyond the admittedly significant measures taken to tackle Covid-19. They are critical reports, albeit bearing in mind that criticism should always be constructive, featuring proposals to turn trends around and achieve fairer and more liveable domestic and

international societies where political repression is an exception to be stamped out and not the norm.

## Reports on Human Rights and political repression

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Europe at the crossroads: unprecedented threats to human rights exacerbated by the pandemic

Amnesty International

Rights and freedoms in Latin America

Ramón Abraham Mena Farrera

Human Rights in Asia

Ana Ballesteros Peiró

Human rights in the Maghreb and Mashriq

Eduard Ariza

The Human Rights Situation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Progress, Violations and Remaining Challenges in Times of Pandemic

Josep Maria Royo , Celia Murias Morcillo , Iván Navarro Millán

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