

In one of many examples from 2018, Greek workers held a strike to demand better pay and collective wage agreements in November.

Credit: Ayhan Mehmet/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

PART 1

EVERYDAY ISSUES BRING PEOPLE TO THE STREETS

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The reasons people protest are many, varied and often complex, but 2018 offered powerful reminders that people can be brought to the point of protest by everyday, bread-and-butter issues – literally so when people protested about the price of essential foods, as in countries such as Sudan and Turkmenistan. Many of the events of 2018 pointed to the need to understand the essential, everyday and material motivations that can be the starting points for mass action.

Across a wave of Central and West African countries, such as Chad, Gabon and Niger, people were brought to the streets to protest against austerity policies introduced by their governments that made them materially worse off. In some countries – Iraq, South Africa – it was the lack of access to clean water that sparked protests; in others – Ireland, Taiwan – it was housing. In some countries – Djibouti, Ghana, Tunisia – it was the lack of jobs; in others – Jordan, Panama, Ukraine – it was soaring fuel prices. In Nicaragua, proposed changes to the welfare system provided the trigger for major protests about broader issues of corruption and democracy that were met with lethal repression. In France, an attempt to increase fuel prices triggered an extraordinary and sometimes violent wave of protest in the heart of Europe.

Protests sparked by anger about everyday issues are of course often about much more than that. Anger – at food and fuel prices, tax rises, lack of employment and the denial of basic services – often provides the tipping point that unleashes years of pent-up frustration at the denial of voice, the remoteness of governance institutions and political and economic inequalities. Several times in 2018, governments with long-established political leaders and administrations centred around the service of presidential power showed themselves simply unwilling

or unable to respond to protests on everyday issues, and people's frustrations at economic hardship dovetailed with their anger at their exclusion from political influence.

In many cases, the exposure of corruption at the top of government – including in Haiti, Malawi and Romania – provoked deep anger when people contrasted their own poverty and struggles to live with the vast wealth of the elite, the apparent impunity the politically powerful and wealthy enjoy, and their failure to fulfil their side of the social contract. Protests about economic issues sometimes became moments when profound problems of governance and the denial of democracy were exposed, and opportunities to address them could be unlocked. It was because of this that such protests were, time after time, met with brutal repression.

Often trade unions stepped forward to demand collective rights, including in Costa Rica, Fiji and Guinea, but too often, unions faced attacks in return, including in the Philippines and Swaziland. Civil society – particularly indigenous peoples', environmental and land rights defenders – also experienced attacks in retaliation for attempts to exert accountability over large-scale extractive and infrastructure projects and the powerful, transnational corporations behind them. The dangers that unaccountable mega-projects can pose to citizens was tragically made clear when a dam collapse killed several hundred people in Laos; in closed conditions, it was difficult for civil society to offer an effective humanitarian response.

But civil society fought back against transnational economic power: Australian civil society took on the might of the coal industry, Latin

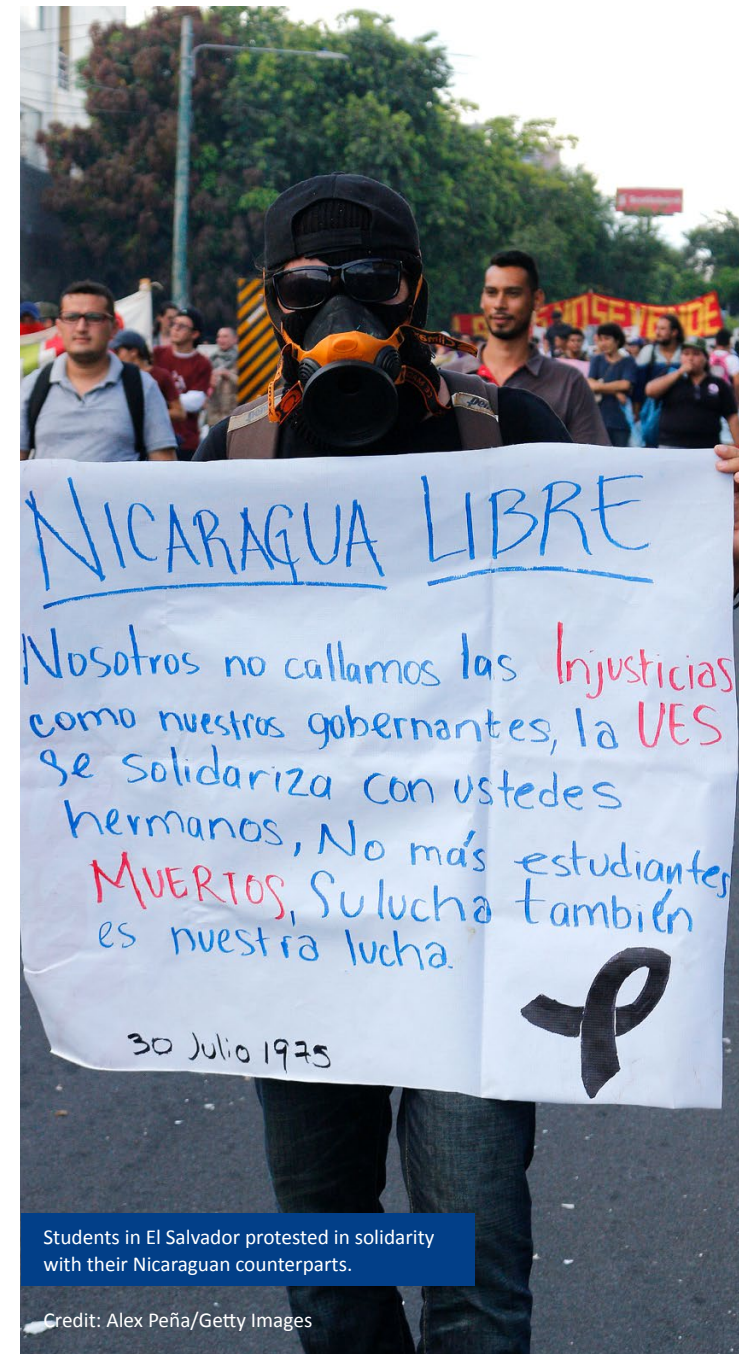
American civil society organised to hold massive Chinese investments in their region to greater scrutiny and Canadian civil society scored a notable victory in its campaign against the environmental impacts of a pipeline project.

NICARAGUA: WELFARE CHANGES UNLEASH ANGER AND DEADLY REPRESSION

In **Nicaragua**, the introduction of an unpopular package of welfare changes that would have increased social security payments while reducing pension benefits was the initial spark for major **protests** that began in April. While the government initially tried to **claim** that there were only a few scattered protests, the reality was that protests quickly spread across Nicaragua's major cities as those taking part were violently attacked by state forces and **pro-government armed citizens' groups**. In the past, violence had proved effective in discouraging protests. But this time, when footage of repression spread quickly on social media, many more disenchanted citizens took to the streets. We asked **Amaru Ruiz** of **Fundación del Río** to describe how the protests spread:¹

I don't think the government, or anyone else, imagined the reaction. Many people, especially students, immediately began to protest in the capital, Managua, and the city of León. All social movements, including the peasants' and women's movements, soon showed their support for the protesting students, and protests became massive. It was a self-convened movement, very diverse, that basically went out to the streets to say: enough. It was no longer focused on a specific grievance but built around a more articulated demand for genuine democracy, based on respect for the popular will, transparent institutions and independent justice.

The government did not expect such reaction. The protests that had been held before, and that had been repeatedly repressed, had taken place in rural, isolated and sparsely populated areas, often out of the reach of the media. But police, paramilitary groups and armed sections of the Sandinista Youths shooting at people in urban, densely populated areas, in front of the cameras: that was something else.



Students in El Salvador protested in solidarity with their Nicaraguan counterparts.

Credit: Alex Peña/Getty Images

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

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As Amaru suggests, and as the persistence and scale of protests indicates, beyond the initial trigger of welfare changes, public anger ran much deeper. Protesters were not only opposed to welfare changes; they also wanted to express their outrage at the pervasive corruption they see every day and the growing authoritarian nature of the government of President Daniel Ortega and First Lady and Vice-President Rosario Murillo. Democratic reform and free and fair elections soon rose to the top of the protesters' list of demands. Amaru details the anger at concentrated economic power that mobilised protesters:

The government became more interested in accumulating wealth. Investments began on behalf of the presidential family, and confusion deepened not only between state and party, but also between party and family. Vice-President Murillo has had more power than any minister. For quite some time now, the Ortega-Murillo family has hoarded top management government positions, while also building an economic dynasty.

*Their business interests have involved contracts and concessions to powerful private investors, both domestic and foreign, approved by the state: concessions for mining, such as Rancho Grande; for plantations, for instance of African palm; and for megaprojects such as the Tumarín Dam on Matagalpa's Rio Grande, the deep-water port of Bluefields and the planned **Interoceanic Canal**.*

Given the depth of public anger, although the government quickly backtracked on its proposed welfare reform, protests continued regardless. They were met with severe repression that included lethal and widespread security force violence, including the use of live ammunition that resulted in daily fatalities over several weeks. Further protests were held to demand justice for those who had been killed, but these in turn were repressed by a government that characterised the protests as an attempted coup and seemed intent on staying in power whatever the body count. A march held on **Mother's Day** in May, in support of women whose children had been killed in protests, led to 16 deaths and around 200 injuries. In June, two students were **shot dead** after a group took refuge in a church, suggesting that nowhere was safe.

According to a **report** from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), between 18 April and 19 June, the state's repression resulted in at least 212 deaths. By late August, the IACHR put this figure at over 300 deaths, although according to civil society sources the number of victims might have been closer to 500. More than 2,000 people had been injured and 550 detained and prosecuted, and at least 144 students had been expelled from university. In response,

the IACHR launched the Special Monitoring Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI) to monitor the implementation of its recommendations and over the following months **granted** precautionary measures to more than a hundred of those involved in protests.

IACHR analysis made clear the pattern that repression followed. Arbitrary detention and disproportionate police force were accompanied by the intimidating and violent actions of pro-government armed groups, encouraged by a persistent propaganda campaign that vilified protesters. In retaliation for their participation, the government even **denied** urgent medical attention to seriously wounded protesters; according to the IACHR, around 300 health professionals were fired for disobeying government orders not to treat them.

People were also **ill-treated** in detention: numerous detainees were kept in the notorious El Chipote prison, where many were denied medical attention and subjected to torture. Meanwhile several officials responsible for the repression, including the director of El Chipote, were rewarded with **promotion**. Women were particularly vulnerable to **ill-treatment** in detention. In October, 17 women political prisoners were **beaten** by a group of armed and masked men who broke into their cell.

The response of the authorities also saw the intensified use of the Criminal Code against civil society activists, while an **Anti-Terrorism Law**, hastily passed in July, contained broad provisions that allowed the state to brand citizens as terrorists for exercising their right to peaceful assembly. Protesters, many of them students or members of peasants' movements, were routinely charged with a variety of crimes including terrorism, participation in a criminal group, obstruction of public services, obstruction of functions, interference with authority, illegal possession of firearms or ammunition, threat with weapons, aggravated robbery, simple kidnapping, attempted homicide and murder. The charge of murder was particularly used to blame social leaders and protesters for deaths during protests. The government blamed protesters for the

violence and claimed that security forces had been attacked and forced to defend themselves.

Activists were smeared and targeted with stigmatisation campaigns, surveillance, phone tapping, interference with communications, threats and physical attacks against them and their family members, intimidation and physical surveillance by police vehicles, hindrance of their freedom of movement, the seizure of their property, interrogations and illegal detention accompanied with beatings, torture and the denial of legal assistance, and acts of aggression perpetrated by groups linked to the government. Sexual attacks, sexual torture and threats or acts of violence against family members, particularly their children, were used against women. Given this, it was not surprising that many human rights defenders **fled**, mostly to Costa Rica, where around 30,000 applications for asylum were reported as having been received by October.

The criminalisation of groups that had long been active before the start of the protests also intensified. Such was the case with the anti-canal movement that opposes the **planned Interoceanic Canal**, which has led hundreds of marches and faced countless episodes of repression over the past five years. **Medardo Mairena**, one of the leaders of the National Council for the Defence of Land, Lake and Sovereignty, was detained and deprived of his freedom twice; on the second occasion, in the context of the protests, he was indefinitely held in pre-trial detention on **charges** of terrorism, organised crime, simple kidnapping, murder, damage to public property, obstruction of public services and injuries. As the year moved on, the government looked to double down on its repression by **cancelling** the legal registration of nine civil society organisations (CSOs), among them those that had **participated** in IACHR hearings.

Even before this wave of protests Nicaraguan journalists had faced threats, intimidation and assault, particularly when reporting on controversial infrastructure projects such as the Interoceanic Canal, and on protests, governmental processes and allegations of electoral fraud.

Alongside the routine intimidation and threats on social media, during the 2018 protests there was a **spike** in acts of aggression, beatings and destruction or theft of the equipment of journalists covering protests, perpetrated by the police and armed mobs. On 21 April, journalist Ángel Gahona was **shot dead** while covering a protest. That same month, Radio Darío in the city of León was **burned to the ground** by a pro-government group. At least four media outlets were reportedly **shut down** during protests.

The repression eventually quelled protests, although further mobilisations came in August, and September saw a one-day **national strike**. Amaru points out that the repression has left key issues unresolved, and calls for civil society solidarity to help address them:

Various sectors within the country are fighting for a civil and peaceful exit from this situation, but the possibility of a resurgence of violence is very real. The president has said that there will be no more dialogue, and if dialogue is truly over, one of two things can happen: either violence increases, or resignation prevails. The latter is not the most viable option: it is only a temporary way out, given that as a result of accumulated frustrations, unresolved tensions will at some point resurface and people will return to the streets. It would be just a way of postponing violence. Truth is, faced with the dilemma of what to do now – to either keep going out and risk getting killed, or stay quietly at home – many will prefer to stay home, while others will continue getting out, and still others will stop protesting and begin conspiring.

We need solidarity with the people who continue to fight in Nicaragua and with those who have left and are doing it from abroad. Likewise, CSOs and social movements that remain active need support in terms of strategy, resources and protection.

Civil society solidarity became even more necessary when, to avoid international scrutiny, the Nicaraguan government expelled the

international monitors it had initially allowed to visit, including MESENI and the **United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**. Space for domestic civil society monitoring collapsed, given the many attacks on civic space. Domestic, regional and international CSOs – including a group of **323 CSOs** – were quick to **condemn** the repression of protests. To continue monitoring the human rights situation, in early January 2019, a group of regional and international CSOs, including CIVICUS, came together to **establish** an International Observatory of the Human Rights Situation in Nicaragua. They will continue to watch and work to hold those responsible for profound human rights abuses to account.

CHAD, GABON AND NIGER: ANGER AT AUSTERITY IN CENTRAL AND WEST AFRICA

Central and West Africa was home to multiple protests against austerity policies in 2018. In Europe, the economics of austerity – public spending cutbacks that disproportionately impact on the poorest and most excluded people and increase inequality – have become increasingly discredited since these were imposed following the economic crisis that unfolded from 2008. They can be seen to have fuelled the swerve towards right-wing populism and economic nationalism (*see Part 3*) that is being seen in so many European countries. Yet in the rest of the world, and particularly prompted by oil price falls from 2014 onwards, austerity policies are still being forced through by out-of-touch political leaders, and pushed on them by international financial institutions. Too often the understandable backlash from those left struggling to survive is being met with repression.



In Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world, a proposed Budget Law sparked protests due to concerns it would increase the price of basic goods and introduce new taxes.

Credit: Scott Peterson/Getty Images

In **Chad** in January, eight CSOs called for protests against the government's austerity measures and the rising costs of fuel, a sensitive issue in a country whose main export is oil; Chad also saw transportation strikes over fuel prices in early 2018. But **protests** planned for 25 January were banned a few days before, with the government ominously sending text messages to all mobile phone users telling them that protests were banned. The government claimed that the ban had been introduced as a counter-terrorism measure, citing Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad area; not for the first time in the region, concerns about terrorism were being deliberately conflated with action to suppress the legitimate expression of dissent.

When protests went ahead regardless, they were met with security force violence, punitive measures and an internet shutdown. Over 140 people, many of them students, were reported as having been arrested; 17 people arrested during the protests **received** four-month jail sentences. Ten political parties that played a role in the protests had their activities temporarily suspended. That same month, a student protest in solidarity with a teachers' strike against the impact of austerity measures on their pay was **dispersed** with teargas, and 60 arrests were made.

In February, **Alain Didah Kemba**, spokesperson of the IYINA ('we are tired') citizens' movement, which brings together young people, CSOs and the media to campaign on socio-economic issues and push for democratic reform, was arrested and tortured while in detention. As the year went on, other activists were arrested when they called on people to take part in protests, and journalists were detained for covering protests.

Following the January protests, major trade unions announced a general public sector strike against cuts in allowances and bonuses that gave workers much less to take home. Protests continued despite the repression. These included a '**Thursday of Anger**' in February against austerity measures, although turnout was hampered by a strong security force presence, and a '**Dead City Day**' in March in support of the

striking public sector workers. International Women's Day on 8 March (see Part 2) also turned into a 'day of mourning' for striking women workers; with schools and hospitals closed, there was little to celebrate. The strike was called off after an agreement was reached in March, but was back on again in May when the deal was not honoured. The strike only came to an end five months later in October when the government made further concessions. During this time, protests continued to be banned and social media access restricted.

President Idriss Déby has been in office since 1990, and indeed boosted his power in April by pushing through a new constitution. It seems clear that public anger in Chad will continue to be met with hostility from an out-of-touch administration that seems more preoccupied with maintaining its enduring power.

Chad's neighbour Niger saw similar protests in 2018, sparked by the Budget Law, passed in 2017. Protesters were concerned that the law would increase the price of basic goods and introduce new taxes. People took to the streets every two weeks in January, February and March, although a March counter-protest was organised by parties that support President Mahamadou Issoufou. As protests continued they made further demands, such as the removal of foreign troops stationed in Niger.

But as the demonstrations continued, protesters encountered increasing state unwillingness to tolerate dissent. During a February sit-in, the Front de l'opposition indépendante, a political party, reported that 10 of its members had been arrested, while a protest against the Budget Law planned for March was banned by local authorities on spurious security grounds. Clashes broke out when the protest went ahead regardless, and 26 people were reported arrested, including four civil society leaders. In July, the four received suspended prison sentences and three were released, while one, Lirwana Abdourahmane, remained in jail after also being sentenced for contempt of court. A TV station was closed down after it interviewed a lawyer representing one of those detained.

A further protest in the capital, Niamey, in April was also banned on security grounds, with clashes again reported and three more arrested when a protest went ahead. Following clashes between protesting students and security forces, a university campus in Niamey was closed. CSOs condemned the protest bans and the wave of arrests of activists. As in Chad, in response to this contestation, the authorities tightened restrictions on the freedom of expression. Journalists were prevented from covering protests. In February, several media outlets blacked out their front pages and screens as a symbolic show of opposition towards tightening restrictions on the media.

In Gabon, union action was to the fore. A series of strikes drew attention to the impacts of the package of austerity measures introduced by the government in February, along with related concerns at the cost of living and anger at government abuse of power. The capital, Libreville, was brought to a standstill by a taxi drivers' strike in February, called over rising fuel costs as well as police racketeering. In response to the austerity measures, a general unlimited public servants' union strike was called in March. Particular demands related to pension rights and the reinstatement of the National Convention of Trade Unions in the Education System, suspended by the government in 2017. In April, public TV and radio staff also went on strike over pay arrears and government interference in their work. But a further planned union protest in August against fresh austerity measures was banned. Later that month, around 28 people were detained as they tried to hold a new protest.

These strikes came alongside others prompted by mistrust and strained relations. A general and unlimited magistrates' strike began in December 2017 and continued into 2018, motivated by a dispute between the judges and justice minister; when judges criticised the minister for interfering, he in turn accused them of corruption. The strike was only resolved in late February, in the judges' favour, after the minister was moved to another role.

The state of continuing unease under the government of President Ali Bongo, whose family has been in power for over 50 years, was signalled by a failed attempt at a **military coup** in early January 2019, raising fears of a fresh crackdown on fundamental rights in response.

KEY CONCERNS: FOOD, FUEL AND JOBS

People's concerns about the high costs of food and fuel, and the difficulties in securing and sustaining a livelihood, brought them to the streets in many more countries in 2018.

Food and fuel shortages became flashpoint issues when the government of **Sudan** passed a budget in January that significantly increased everyday costs for citizens, causing the price of bread to **double** overnight, accompanied by a sharp devaluation of the Sudanese Pound. The move sparked protests, as people blamed the changes on government maladministration, corruption and the costs of the continuing conflict in Darfur. Not unreasonably, they asked why they, rather than their leaders, should pay the price for these.

But in conditions of closed space for civil society – civic space – these peaceful protests were predictably met with security force violence, with teargas and baton charges used and **reports** of killings. Over 300 people were reported as having been detained in the early months of 2018, among them opposition leaders and **prominent human rights defenders**. At least 15 journalists were reported to have been arrested while covering the protests, and several newspapers were blocked from circulation in an effort to prevent news of protests spreading.

In September, President Omar al-Bashir, in power since 1989, appointed a new **prime minister** in an apparent effort to ease the country's economic woes, but the move did nothing to prevent further large-scale anti-government **protests** breaking out in December, fuelled by continuing economic anger and outrage at corruption. Protests started in the northern city of Atbara before spreading to the capital, Khartoum. **Abdel-Rahman El Mahdi** of the **Sudanese Development Initiative** describes these most recent protests:

The protests were initially sparked by the rising cost of living and the increasing difficulties the Sudanese people are facing in meeting their basic needs. Poor economic and fiscal policy coupled with unbridled corruption had led to record high inflation rates, widening

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FOOD AND FUEL
SHORTAGES
BECAME
FLASHPOINT
ISSUES WHEN THE
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Sudanese people protested after the government passed a budget that sharply increased their everyday costs in January, and faced security force violence.

Credit: Stringer/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

poverty and causing critical shortages in basic commodities and services. Shortages of fuel and bread across the country had people standing in long queues for hours. A chronic liquidity crisis where banks and ATMs were only dispensing up to 2,000 Sudanese pounds a day (approx. US\$40) was also making things worse and fuelling a lack of confidence in the banking system and the overall situation.

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

The government's response was once again disproportionate and lethal, with similar tactics to those used against earlier protests applied. Abdel-Rahman describes the government backlash, locating it within the broader repression of civic space in Sudan:

The response of the Sudanese authorities to these peaceful protests was violent and repressive. By January 2019, according to government accounts, 800 protesters had been detained by Sudanese security personnel and 19 people killed in clashes. Other, more impartial sources provided much higher figures. According to Sudanese activists and medical workers, at least 40 people were killed. Those arrested included protesters, journalists, doctors, lawyers and opposition party leaders.

Unbridled violence is being actively practised by the government security apparatus. Accounts of live ammunition fire, beating and torture have grown to the point that it seems that they have become common practice by the security apparatus to manage demonstrations. Videos showing the extent of the brutality are

constantly circulated on social media. Hospitals where some injured protesters sought medical attention have also come under attack by the authorities.

The new wave of protests and the heavy-handed response by the government comes on the back of a long-lasting failure by the regime to uphold democratic values and principles and ensure that civic space is adequately protected and promoted. Over December 2018 and January 2019 civic space has come under relentless attack at the hands of the government. The freedom of expression is under fire, with security services deploying brutal methods to gag the media and silence dissent, harassing and banning journalists from writing, shutting down newspapers and confiscating their print runs as they come off the press.

Internet freedoms have taken a beating. Since the protests began, the government has shut down access to social media throughout Sudan. According to MTN, Sudani and Zain, the three telecommunications operators in Sudan, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social media platforms are only accessible through the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN) service. But even these come with their own connectivity problems and most internet users do not know of their existence or how to access them.

The brutal response to the protests only served to fuel further protests and escalate the demands of the Sudanese people, who are now calling for the resignation of the President al-Bashir and his government.

The state's response seemed sadly predictable, but at some point the cycle of protest and repression in Sudan must surely be broken. Abdel-Rahman concludes by setting out what needs to change:

The current economic crisis facing Sudan is underpinned by a deeper and more fundamental political crisis characterised by bad governance, abuse of power and festering injustices. Years of rule under the dominance of the National Congress Party headed by President Al-Bashir have brought Sudan to the brink of collapse as a state. Today Sudan finds itself at a critical juncture and the need to find its path to a more democratic, just and peaceful state has never been more critical.

Foremost on the agenda should be finding a solution to the severe political crisis that has persevered for several years. Efforts by President al-Bashir and his ruling party have lacked



The Hagana Music Festival, an initiative by the #Anataban movement, brings people from South Sudan and Kenya together with a message of peaceful coexistence.

Credit: Anataban Facebook page

both the political will and the necessary institutional adjustments and arrangements required to work. To untangle the web of intertwinement between the state and the ruling party, new institutional and power-sharing arrangements that guarantee the participation of opposition parties and rebel movements need to be put in place. For this to happen, President al-Bashir would need to relinquish and divest his powers to some form of an interim council that would have as its priority securing a peace deal with rebel movements and ensuring their participation in shaping an agenda and an interim government that would be responsible for running the country during a transition period.

Of equal importance would be to begin to address the economic crisis that the country is passing through. This represents an area where the international community has much to contribute. Having Sudan removed from the USA's list of state sponsors of terrorism would be a first and important step. A second step would be to put in place, rapidly, long-awaited debt-relief arrangements for Sudan. These two steps would serve to usher in a much-needed stage of normalisation with the international financial community and pave the way for an economic stimulus programme that would ease the current economic crisis. This however must be linked to a resolution of the political crisis that is underpinning the economic crisis.

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

In summary, a comprehensive and inclusive process of political and economic reform closely linked to civic space would need to be put in place for any meaningful progress on putting Sudan back on the road to democracy.

In comparison, **Tunisia** has been hailed as a **success story** for its peaceful transition to democracy following January 2011's **Jasmine Revolution**, with civil society having played a hugely important role in bringing peace and the development of democratic institutions. But the legacy of that revolution seemed tarnished on its seventh anniversary in January, when hundreds took to the streets in several cities to protest against austerity measures introduced by the government, leading to violent clashes and at least **800 arrests**, many of them young people. The response of mass arrest suggested that the government was ill-equipped to deal with genuine anger at economic hardship, and meet citizens' expectations that there should be a democracy dividend that leads to improvements in their lives, not least in tackling the scourge of widespread youth unemployment. Meanwhile in neighbouring **Libya**, despite a very difficult environment for dissent, hundreds **protested** in the capital, Tripoli, in March against high prices and corruption.

These issues were of course not limited to the continent of Africa. In 2018 **Turkmenistan** experienced its worst **economic crisis** since it became independent in 1991, caused by the decline in the price of oil, on which its economy largely depends. The crisis was characterised by widespread unemployment, shortages of essential goods, rationing, long queues and price hikes. Bread, flour, eggs and cooking oil all became **hard to find**, particularly outside the capital, Ashgabat. But rather than try to address the problems, the government's response was to peddle absurd Soviet-style propaganda about the nation's abundance of consumer goods and insist on **forced participation** in national celebrations, including Independence Day events in September; the reluctant participants were even required to cover their own costs of attending. At the same time, the government made forced deductions from public sector pay packets

and sought to suppress dissenting voices, including by insisting on the removal of satellite dishes through which people could receive foreign news. Given the repression, protests are rare in Turkmenistan, but July brought news of a spontaneous **demonstration** sparked by an increase in the price of chickens. A number of protesters were detained and reportedly beaten while in detention.

While the world's attention has focused on **Ukraine's** ongoing **conflict** with **Russia**, material issues brought many to the streets in 2018. Protests were held against the high cost of **fuel** in October, while the early months of 2018 was marked by several protests against the continuing blight of **corruption**, with around 50 people arrested when police dismantled a **tent camp** that had been occupied the space in front of the parliament building. Unions also took action in Ukraine. In July, striking **miners**, organised by two trade unions, protested in front of Ukraine's parliament to demand payment of salary arrears, claiming they had not been paid for two-and-a-half months. An earlier **protest** in June saw coal miners joined by Chernobyl clean-up workers and veterans from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to protest about a range of essential issues, including transport and disability support. Clashes with the police resulted when protesters tried to enter the parliament building.

Fuel prices, along with changes to the tax law that increased the burdens on the lowest earners, saw hundreds take to the streets in **Jordan** to **protest** in November. Protesters organised by using the hashtag, #Maanash ('we don't have money') on social media. The new tax law had been controversially rushed through parliament without proper consultation earlier in the year.

Students in **Panama** **protested** against electricity price rises for three days in July. Teargas was used to disperse the protest, but the president then announced a reversal of the proposed increase. Panama was something of a protest hotspot in 2018: the year also saw a series of major union **protests**, resulting in a new collective labour agreement. However, in June, armed police prevented a teachers' protest over the non-payment of salaries, while a March demonstration against the rising cost of living in the city of Colon led to clashes between protesters and police. Rice farmers **protested** in October over the non-payment of a compensation fund, and in April members of the Kuna Nega community **protested** about the lack of water services. Protests in December in the town of Divisa came when negotiations between a group of farmers and the government broke down. Farmers **blocked** the cars of government negotiators, leading to clashes with the police.

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PANAMA WAS SOMETHING OF A PROTEST HOTSPOT IN 2018: THE YEAR ALSO SAW A SERIES OF MAJOR UNION PROTESTS, RESULTING IN A NEW COLLECTIVE LABOUR AGREEMENT.

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Livelihood issues were a key driver of protests elsewhere, including in **Djibouti**, where a rare **protest** occurred in May against nepotism in the recruitment of positions in a port under construction. The demonstration was countered with violence, including teargas grenades, and around 80 arrests were made. In **Ghana** too, jobs were at the heart of **protests** in 2018. In February, police were reported to have physically assaulted protesters who were picketing the Ministry of Health. Those protesting were unemployed nurses complaining about the lack of jobs available for them after training. In March, security forces violently dispersed a protest by goldmine workers in the western region, reportedly using teargas and pepper spray and firing guns. The demonstration was part of a larger protest against 2,000 goldmine workers being laid off.

Street **vendors** in **El Salvador** protested in November after the police tried to relocate them. One person died and over 20 were injured in clashes between protesters and police. 2018 was a year when economic and labour issues were to the fore in El Salvador: in October, municipal workers protested to demand that 97 employees, suspended for exposing labour abuses, be allowed to work again, while the country saw a **series** of protests against the proposed privatisation of the country's water service. One such **protest** by students in June led to clashes with the police and the use of teargas.

ESSENTIAL SERVICES: WATER AND TRANSPORT

Concerns about water supply and quality were also one of the motivating factors behind a series of 2018 protests in **Iraq**, which were met with excessive, often lethal, force. When a series of protests on everyday issues erupted across several of Iraq's cities in July, the response of the security forces was to use live ammunition, teargas and water cannon, and assault and detain protesters, and journalists and bloggers covering protests. Overall it was **reported** that at least 13 people were killed, 269

injured and 757 detained in the violent crackdown on the July protests, during which internet access was also severely restricted.

July **protests** in Basra, on issues of water, jobs and corruption, led to several protesters and journalists being assaulted and detained. Protests continued in Basra in August and September, but in September, one of the protest leaders, Dr Su'ad Al-Ali, head of Al-Weed Al-Alaiami for Human Rights, was assassinated. In July, human rights lawyer **Jabbar Mohammed Al-Karm**, who had offered to defend those detained during the protests, was shot dead. July was not the first time that excessive force was used to suppress protests on essential issues in Iraq: In Kurdistan in March, public servants **protested** against austerity measures and corruption. Teargas was used to disperse those gathered and several people were assaulted.

South Africa is often described as the protest capital of the world, and 2018 saw several demonstrations of public anger about livelihoods, access to essential services and corruption. A nationwide bus drivers' strike over pay was held in April, involving over 17,000 workers, and that same month saw often violent **protests** over jobs, housing and corruption. Police used teargas and rubber bullets while protesters threw stones and set vehicles alight. May saw a march organised by the powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on workers' rights and transportation issues. September brought anti-poverty protests as well as demonstrations against gang violence; further **protests** over crime and violence were held in October after a woman was killed in the crossfire of gang shootings.

South Africa's protesters have the law on their side. Fundamental civil society rights were upheld in a landmark ruling in November, when South Africa's Constitutional Court **ruled** that the right to protest without fear of arrest or incarceration must be respected. The case was brought following the 2013 arrest of 21 members of the Social Justice Coalition in the city of Cape Town. They had chained themselves to



South Africa's Reclaim the City movement mobilised to resist unjust evictions and sales of public land, and demand affordable housing.

Credit: Facebook, @ReclaimCT

the railings of the municipal headquarters to protest against the poor state of sanitation and other essential services. The ruling struck out a provision that protest organisers can be criminalised for failing to notify the local authorities of a protest being held. The judges ruled that the right to protest was “simply too important” to be limited in this way. In making the decision, South Africa’s legal guardians therefore firmly placed themselves on the side of civil society and upheld the right of the people to draw attention to the issues of poverty, poor services and corruption that continue to blight their lives.

URBAN HOUSING A RISING ISSUE

With people increasingly concentrating in cities and the wealth gap between the very rich and everyone else ever growing, it is perhaps not surprising that 2018 saw several examples of activism and protest focusing on issues of housing, including the gentrification that is making it harder for people to live comfortably and sustainably in cities. **South Africa’s Reclaim the City** movement, for example, campaigns for decent affordable housing and against the displacement of people from key areas of cities. In December, its campaigning scored a notable **victory** when the government of Cape Town agreed to designate a disused market site for mixed-income residential development, including social housing.

Housing scarcity is a growing concern in **Ireland**, particularly in the capital, Dublin, where in October a ‘**Raise the Roof**’ rally was held outside the Irish parliament, bringing together campaigning and community groups, trade unions, student unions and political parties to call for a radical change in housing policy. But the month before, the police joined with private security guards to **evict** a group of peaceful protesters who had occupied a vacant building in the centre of Dublin. The **Take Back the City** campaign, which organised the occupation, complained about the

police's complicity with private security staff, the failure of the private security guards to wear identification and the heavy-handed nature of the eviction: physical force was used, five people were arrested and four were hospitalised. Protests continued. In December, over a thousand people joined a **protest** against forced evictions in the County Roscommon area and thousands **marched** in Dublin in a demonstration supported by CSOs, including trade unions and community action groups, to call on the government to take urgent action to address the housing crisis.

Taiwan saw protests against forced eviction. Residents of the Daugan Community in Taiwan's capital, Taipei, are subject to forced eviction after **losing** a legal battle over land rights with the Veterans Affairs Council. At two **protests** against evictions in August, several protesters were dragged away, beaten and held by the police in barricaded areas.

Even in contexts where protests are rare because the conditions are so repressive, housing can be the issue that motivates citizens into expressing dissent. In **North Korea**, one of the most closed countries in the world, a rare reported **protest** took place in the city of Hyesan in November after residents of homes demolished to build an apartment block learned that the new homes would go not to them, but to ruling party officials; the former residents were reportedly forced to live in tents on the outskirts of the city. Similarly, in **Kazakhstan**, where the space for dissent is **under attack**, a group of women **protested** outside government headquarters in the capital, Astana, in January, against their impending eviction. The women complained that an earlier agreement enabling them to buy their apartments was not respected and a new owner was now intent on evicting them. However, rather than listen to their complaints, the authorities charged the women with 'petty hooliganism' and fined and detained them.

With protests on housing issues on the rise, measures to repress them can also be expected to grow. A new security decree introduced in **Italy**

in October **increased** the penalties for people who occupy buildings and those who organise occupations, a popular tactic used by housing activists.

CORRUPTION CONCERNS TO THE FORE

Few developments have more power to bring people to the streets than the exposure of large-scale corruption in which political and economic elites are implicated. Corruption protests often bring a range of other concerns to a head. Anger at corruption could be seen in many of the above examples, including Iraq, South Africa, Sudan and Ukraine. But those were not the only cases, as the following examples attest.

ROMANIA AND MOLDOVA: CONTINUING CORRUPTION CONCERNS

Romania has been home to massive protests against government attempts to weaken the punishments for corruption since **2017**. Many accused the ruling party of trying to introduce soft measures to let its own corrupt officials go free. As with Hungary and Poland (**see Part 3**) European Union (EU) officials took a close interest, **warning** Romania's government that it could face sanctions for breaching EU rules if it persists with measures that would weaken punishments for corruption and judicial independence. Hypocritically, the government persisted with its intent to introduce softer punishments while also taking steps to **introduce** a new law to force CSOs to adhere to **intrusive** reporting standards, including a requirement to publish the name of any donor, and to make it easier to force the closure of CSOs that fail to meet these standards.

With the government apparently set on still driving through softer corruption punishments, and as the ruling party's leader, **Liviu Dragnea**, faced a jail sentence following a conviction for abuse of office to add to his previous conviction for electoral fraud, protests predictably **sparked** again in the early months of 2018. In January, an estimated 50,000 people marched in the capital, Bucharest, and protests continued, particularly after **Laura Codruta Kovesi**, the head of Romania's anti-corruption agency, was forced out of office in July. An estimated 100,000 people took part in a further anti-corruption **protest** in Bucharest in August, with protests also held in other Romanian cities. The level of sustained public anger was indicated by the fact that many from Romania's extensive **diaspora** travelled back to participate; persisting poverty, in part fuelled by corruption, has caused many Romanians to work abroad and send money home. The August protests however met with repression: after a group tried to break through a police cordon, security forces reacted with indiscriminate and disproportionate force, using teargas, pepper spray and water cannon. Over **400 people** required medical treatment, and one person later died in hospital, reportedly following teargas inhalation. Journalists were among those attacked, raising the suspicion that foreign media in particular were being targeted to hinder international reporting and try to avoid the government being embarrassed for its weak line on corruption.

In a sign of the divide at the top of government, President Klaus Iohannis condemned the police action as **disproportionate**, but Prime Minister Viorica Dancila in turn accused him of inciting the public. Ruling party politicians continued to take a hard line, claiming that the police violence was necessary and turning the spotlight on civil society, accusing protest organisers of trying to mount a coup. They claimed that violence had been planned by protest organisers and called for an investigation into the funding of protests. In opposition to them, over 650 people were reported to have filed complaints against the police, and in September, those claims appeared vindicated when the head of the riot police and three senior officials were **charged** with violence towards protesters. In defiance of the violence, **further rallies** were held following the clashes.

When another corruption scandal broke in November, the government's response was typically evasive. The #TeleormanLeaks scandal **revealed links** between senior ruling party officials, including Liviu Dragnea again, and Tel Drum, a road construction company under investigation for accusations of fraudulent use of EU funds. The government's **reaction** was to order the RISE project, a Romanian investigative journalism outlet that broke the story, to reveal its sources, offering an early example of how the EU's new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) might

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be misused by states to stifle criticism. Romanian citizens deserve a more accountable response from their government.

Romania's neighbour **Moldova** also saw continuing protests against corruption in 2018. In August, tens of thousands of people **rallied** in the capital, Chişinău, against government corruption and alleged links to organised criminality. Anger at corruption has been a widespread in Moldova since 2015, when it was **revealed** that in 2014, the equivalent of one eighth of Moldova's GDP had been siphoned into foreign accounts from three banks; the gap then had to be covered from state coffers, meaning that systematic corruption could be seen to have directly impacted on people's ability to access the essential services that the state is supposed to provide. People's anger about corruption grew during 2018, particularly after a court judgement **annulled** the opposition candidate's victory in the June Chişinău mayoral election, sparking protests that lasted for several days. The ruling, which leaves an acting mayor in charge until fresh elections in 2019, came after both candidates were judged to have contravened electoral rules by campaigning on social media on election day. In a sign of polarisation and the entrenched power of corrupt interests, August counter-protests were mounted by supporters of politician and businessman Ilan Sor, alleged to be linked to the 2014 bank fraud.

MALAWI: POLITICAL PAYMENTS IN A POOR COUNTRY

Malawi was rocked by the 'K-4 Billion scandal' that broke in March; the government was alleged to have channelled funds from a secret budget line to members of parliament who had helped defeat electoral reform proposals. Ahead of an election scheduled for May 2019, the suspicion this raised was that the ruling Democratic Progressive Party

(DPP) was trying to stack the odds in its favour. In a country often classed as amongst the poorest in Africa, public anger was stirred by this apparently generous use of the state's resources, and the revelations sparked protests in April.

We asked **Timothy Pagonachi Mtambo** of the **Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation** to give the background to the scandal and the April protests:

The protests followed the K4-Billion scandal, under which selected members of parliament – mostly those representing the DPP – were given pay-outs as 'thank you' gifts by the state for turning down the progressive Electoral Reforms Bill. This scandal raised serious governance and accountability questions including the issue of trust with taxpayers' money and the betrayal of public trust.

The 27 April nationwide protests demanded greater transparency and accountability from the DPP-led government. The marches were led by Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation and partners, under the banner of the Malawi Human Rights Defenders Coalition. The protests involved patriotic Malawians who were disappointed with the 4-Billion Kwacha (approx. US\$390 million) scandal and the deteriorating state of governance in Malawi. This is evidenced by executive abuse and manipulation of public resources that are meant to serve the interest of Malawians, the high cost of living, nepotism, high levels of corruption and the abuse of taxpayers' money to reward the regime's political cronies. The public is also dissatisfied with continued electricity blackouts, alarming rates of unemployment among young people and the shortage of drugs and medical personnel in hospitals, among many other challenges.

Protests went ahead in a threatening environment, as Timothy goes on to relate:

Just a day before the demonstrations, DPP supporters went around cities in party colours, spreading violence and hate, telling people not to participate in the march. They threatened to deal with anyone who would participate in the 27 April protests. This was done in the presence of DPP senior officials and the Minister of Information. Some citizens were so afraid they failed to turn up. But thousands of others who have come to know the propaganda of the DPP defied such threats and participated on the day.

The protests were highly attended. This was historic and an indication that Malawians were tired of impunity and corruption. In total about 35,000 protesters participated. The capital, Lilongwe, had the highest number of over 13,000.

During protests, particularly in Lilongwe, there were efforts by the police to provoke protesters into turning violent, including blocking protesters from marching towards the government head offices. Fortunately, citizens remained calm.

While the protesters delivered a petition to the authorities, the government seemed unprepared to listen. Rather than acknowledge people's concerns, President Peter Mutharika accused protest supporters of joining an insurrection against the government. Meanwhile, as the election grew nearer, early 2019 saw an apparent **increase** in levels of politically motivated violence. Malawi's citizens will be hoping for better from their political class.

GUATEMALA, HAITI, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: STATES OF IMPUNITY

Corruption remains a huge political issue in **Guatemala** as well. President Jimmy Morales has long been at odds with the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and particularly its head, Iván Velásquez. CICIG investigations, working with Guatemala's Attorney General, fuelled the public anger and mass protests that led to the **ousting** of the previous president, Otto Pérez Molina, in 2015; he remains in custody on corruption charges. Having benefited from the Commission's investigations to win power, President Morales became increasingly reluctant to have the spotlight shone on his own behaviour, and first attempted to expel Velásquez from Guatemala in 2017, after the Commission began investigating the president and his associates for alleged illegal campaign financing during the 2015 election.

Matters escalated in August when President Morales **announced** that his government would not renew CICIG's mandate and stated that Velásquez would not be allowed back into Guatemala. In an ominous move, military vehicles were **despatched** to surround the Commission's headquarters. The decision would mean that as it stands, the CICIG's mandate would expire in September 2019. In September, Guatemala's Constitutional Court reversed the decision, ordering President Morales to let Velásquez re-enter the country, but the government rejected the court ruling and stated that it would not accept Velásquez as head of the CICIG. Thousands took to the streets to **protest** against the decision and sections of the Pan-American Highway were **blocked** in a week-long protest led by indigenous communities, but protesters were met by a strong military and police presence. Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsman, Jordán Rodas Andrade, denounced the heavy military



Guatemalan citizens continued to protest against pervasive state corruption after ousting the president in 2015.

Credit: Fabricio Alonzo/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

presence during protests, stating that this had the aim of intimidating protesters. Following his request, the Constitutional Court ordered the government to respect the right of people to protest peacefully against the decision.

In response, the government turned its ire on Jordán Rodas, attempting to remove him from office. He had earlier been called in for questioning by the National Congress for participating in a march on International Women's Day, which it claimed went against the Catholic religion. In response, civil society **rallied** to his defence and the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala condemned the government's distortions. Jordán Rodas also **reported** that he had tried to meet President Morales along with CSOs to discuss the lack of protection for human rights defenders in Guatemala, but his attempts had been rebuffed.

With the government increasingly paranoid about the consequences of any investigation, it was little wonder that an international civil society mission to Guatemala, conducted in August, found a pattern of **systematic** violence against human rights defenders and a climate of impunity, with violence against human rights defenders evidently **growing** during 2018. The year saw LGBTQI activists, indigenous peoples' rights defenders and **journalists** in particular singled out for attacks and **killings**, and a wave of **sentencing** in which human rights defenders convicted on spurious charges were handed long jail sentences. As the stakes get higher, a government challenged by corruption allegations can only be expected to crack down further on those who work to expose its excesses.

Corruption concerns also came to the fore in **Haiti**, where anti-corruption **protests** were held across the country in November following allegations that billions of dollars put into Haiti by the **Venezuelan** Petrocaribe programme had been stolen by politicians. While many senior officials were implicated in the scandal, none were prosecuted, suggesting entrenched impunity, with President Jovenel Moise accused of blocking action. Following clashes with the police, at least six people were killed, sparking further public outrage.

We asked **Jean Marc-nel Etienne** of the **Union of Brothers for Alternative Integrated Development** to describe the protests and their background:

Protesters asked: 'Where is the Petrocaribe fund?' They demanded an investigation into the embezzlement of funds from the Venezuelan Petrocaribe programme, which supplied crude oil to Caribbean and Central American nations on very generous terms. In 2017 the Haitian parliament published a report blaming former senior officials for

irregularities in the use of these funds, but no prosecutions followed, so protesters demanded punishment for those who embezzled Petrocaribe funds. In other countries in the region these were used for infrastructure projects, while in Haiti they ended up in somebody's pockets. According to several analysts, the Petrocaribe affair is the largest operation of corruption and misappropriation of public funds and the biggest financial crime in the history of Haiti. Those responsible must be tried and sent to prison.

Many young people mobilised to demand action. While the struggle to shed light on the fraudulent use of the Petrocaribe fund was not born on social media, but rather was triggered by a parliamentary report, the movement grew considerably thanks to online activism, with the #PetrocaribeChallenge hashtag trending.

This challenge moved beyond social media and took a new dimension by taking to the streets. In multiple locations in Haiti and among Haitian diaspora abroad, thousands of protesters marched, with numbers increasing dramatically by the day. Armed with signs, posters and banners, chanting remarks hostile to political and judicial authorities, people vehemently challenged the incumbent government to shed light on the use of the Petrocaribe funds.

On 17 October, tens of thousands of people protested, mostly peacefully, in almost every major city in Haiti. The event brought together a wide range of people. There were violent clashes between the police, who fired several times with live ammunition, rubber bullets and teargas, and protesters, who responded by throwing stones and bottles and setting up burning barricades. And again in mid-November, protests took place day after day, again with violent clashes with the police. This time, the protests also became a kind of referendum against the president, as

many members of the political opposition took advantage of the mobilisations to demand the president's ousting.

On 18 November unspeakable crimes were committed. Many people were killed, in addition to those already killed in previous protests, including young children, and several people were killed in their homes.

Following the protest deaths, a **general strike** shut down most of Haiti and protests **continued**, forcing the president, who had failed to respond to the earlier protests and the growing **demands** for his resignation, to appeal for calm. But when opposition leaders seized on the protests for their own ends, the question became one of how protest momentum might lead to real change, rather than the mere rotation of corrupt leaders which has too often characterised apparent political change in Haiti. As Jean identifies, the need for real change, in a context where maladministration makes Haiti the poorest country in the western hemisphere, is profound:

Is this a pre-revolutionary situation? If so, who will it benefit? If we scrutinise carefully a few pivotal periods in the history of revolutions, we note that, unlike the revolutions of the past, modern revolutions are made by a minority against the majority. Indeed, when people talk about 'mobilising the masses', they have only one goal: to immobilise them. When agitators, instigators, leaders, self-proclaimed 'leaders of the people', charlatans, demagogues and false prophets have succeeded in the name of democracy, that is to say, when this majority has been struck by general paralysis, petrified on the spot, the fruits of the revolution have fallen into their hands like a loose stone.

If we take into account the reality of Haiti, and particularly the level of social inequalities, we can say that the conditions for democracy are not being met. They have been flouted by our own leaders. The Haitian population has been left to its own

devices. Many measures seemed to have been taken to improve our situation, but they all remained on paper without any impact whatsoever on the daily lives of the population.

The situation remained fraught in early 2019. Following the publication of a report on the corruption scandal, further **protests** involving thousands of people in February 2019 saw violence that left at least seven people dead.

Meanwhile across the island of Hispaniola in the **Dominican Republic**, anger at corruption also continued to make waves in 2018. The Green March Movement **mobilised** thousands against impunity for corruption in 2017, as the vast and wide-ranging **Odebrecht** corruption scandal was exposed, implicating governments across Latin America, notably **Brazil** (*see Part 3*). The Green March Movement kept the issue alive in 2018: thousands **marched** in the capital, Santo Domingo, in August to demand an end to impunity. January saw a **protest** against the Odebrecht scandal in **Panama** too.

UNION ACTION IN 2018

As the above examples of Gabon, Guinea and Panama, among others, suggest, 2018 was a year in which trade unions showed their strength by organising collective action and winning victories, on economic and governance issues, around the world. The power of collective action was also celebrated in the many May Day protests held **around the world**, with workers often using the occasion to demand better pay and working conditions. **Asia** was a hotbed of protests. In **Taiwan**, for example, protesters called for a 10 per cent pay increase and improved working conditions; in Hong Kong people demanded a minimum wage; and in the **Philippines** people called for an end to the practice of short-term employment contracts, a 2016 campaign promise by President Rodrigo Duterte that has not been honoured. Demonstrating that demands for better pay and conditions

are political because they question entrenched economic and political power, in many contexts May Day protests were repressed or experienced backlash. This included the reported detention of disability activists in **Russia**, police scuffles with protesters in **Turkey** and the banning and use of riot police to stop a march for a higher minimum wage in **Cambodia**.

Fiji saw a win for labour rights in January, when airport workers, who had been locked out of their workplace after attending a meeting about mismanagement in December 2017, won a court **victory** enabling them to return to work with no repercussions and receive back pay. Ahead of the decision, thousands marched in support of the workers in a demonstration organised by the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC). The Congress had been prepared to organise a national strike to support the workers.

However, there were consequences for some who supported the airport workers. **Netani Rika**, editor of the Islands Business magazine, was interrogated by police after writing an article about the dispute. The leader of the airport workers union, **Jay Dhir Singh**, was found guilty of scandalising the courts after accusing the judiciary of being controlled by a minister; in June he was sentenced to three months in jail. The FTUC also had permission to hold protests refused on several occasions, including in February, **April** and September, often at the last minute and without valid reasons being given, aside from the apparently spurious grounds that the head of the FTUC was under investigation.

In February, the FTUC expressed concerns about the government's decision to impose individual, fixed-term contracts on civil servants, signalling the end of collective bargaining. This was condemned by unions as a downgrade in employment rights and as something that **undermined** the collective union power that has played a large role in holding Fiji's government to account on human rights standards. Ahead of a **fiercely contested** November election (*see Part 3*) that saw the



Greek labour unions called for a one-day general strike against planned austerity measures in May.

Credit: Milos Bicanski/Getty Images

ruling party only narrowly maintain its majority, the divide between the government and unions widened. By September the FTUC was **stating** that labour rights had never been worse in Fiji and that unions were being targeted.

Public sector workers went on **strike** in **Costa Rica** in September, rejecting a government austerity package that included benefit reductions for public sector workers and the taxation of goods and services that were previously exempt. The strike, considered the biggest for many years, lasted several days before the government granted concessions to the unions and agreed not to take any retaliatory action against those involved in the strike. Students from Costa Rica University protested in support of the strike; when police officers entered the campus and clashes and arrests ensued, both the university authorities and students spoke out about this violation of university autonomy, and the government agreed to create a commission to investigate the incident. However, such protests were likely to be made harder the following month, when members of congress signed a draft law to fine employees for striking if their employer files a petition to declare a strike illegal. Costa Rican courts have something of a track record in declaring strikes illegal on the grounds that they do not directly relate to labour issues.

Greece has seen a great deal of trade union action since the 2008 economic crisis and the introduction of stringent austerity measures that saw public services slashed and unemployment soar: it is estimated there have been around 50 general strikes in Greece since 2008. **November** saw civil servants hold a strike and protest outside parliament on pay and pensions, and municipal workers protest against recent worker fatalities. The previous month saw a strike that shut down the iconic Acropolis over the potential privatisation of several key landmarks. But union action can only become harder following the introduction of **new rules** in January that raised the threshold on votes to call strikes: unions now require the support of one half of their members rather than the previous one third.

GUINEA: WORKERS' PROTESTS COMBINE WITH ELECTORAL ANGER

In **Guinea** in 2018, public anger over pay and working conditions mingled with opposition fury over the results of February local elections. A teachers' strike closed schools for a month between February and March, ending when the government agreed to increase teachers' wages along with other demands, including that participants in the strike would not be prosecuted or punished. During the strike, thousands joined a protest to demand that it be resolved, but when many in civil society supported the teachers' strike, the president **accused** them of trying to destabilise the country. And with crucial issues left unresolved, another teachers' strike began in October.

The teachers' strikes pointed to broader issues in Guinea. In February, the Union générale des travailleurs de Guinée (General Union of Workers of Guinea, UGTG) called a general strike to protest against the mismanagement of contributions to the National Social Security Fund, as well as the state's indifference to occupational accidents and hazards, politicisation of the administration and obstacles to the full exercise of trade union rights. But Guinea's government further showed its suspicion of trade union action in May when **Aboubacar Sidiki Mara**, UGTG deputy secretary general, was arrested while investigating working conditions in the mining town of Boké. He received a six-month prison sentence in June, with four months suspended, for 'provoking unlawful assembly'. Meanwhile, when port workers protested against the granting of a concession to a Turkish company, security forces dispersed them with teargas, and arrested the leader of the port workers' trade union. He received a 13-day defamation sentence. These actions against union

leaders point to a government hardening its stance against unions in the face of several protests and strikes, rather than negotiating to help achieve the change needed to make protests less likely.

The backdrop to Guinea's union protests was one of political strife. In February, local elections were held for first time since 2005, and most seats were won by the ruling party. The opposition party, which won the capital, Conakry, disputed the results, claiming fraud. Clashes broke out between supporters of the two parties following the announcement of the results; houses were set on fire and at least seven people were reported killed. The post-election violence and the use of excessive and lethal **force** by security services was condemned by domestic and international civil society. The dispute rumbled on through 2018, with opposition 'dead city' protests held in Conakry. When negotiations between the government and opposition collapsed in May, violence broke out between opposition and ruling party supporters and security forces, leaving at least 15 people dead. It was in this polarised environment that a cornered government lashed out against union action.

BOLIVIA: UNION ACTION IN A POLITICISED CONTEXT

The context in **Bolivia** has been characterised by political polarisation around the apparent determination of incumbent President Evo Morales to stand for office again in October 2019, in defiance of both the constitution and the result of a **referendum** on the issue in 2016 (*see Part 3*). But that was not the only story in Bolivia in 2018, which also saw a major health workers' strike. **Javier Gómez Aguilar** of the **Centre of Studies for Labour and Agrarian Development** describes the union action:

*A key mobilisation of 2018, which started in late 2017, was that of medical doctors. Health professionals held a long strike and staged **numerous protests** against a new article in the Criminal Code that introduced sanctions of between five and nine years in prison for medical negligence and malpractice, following what was barely more than an administrative process.*

Health workers mobilised over the end-of-year holidays of 2017 and up to 21 February, the day when citizens mobilise to keep on the agenda the fact that in 2016 President Evo Morales lost a referendum that should have denied him the prerogative of running for another term in office.

Given the polarised context, the violence that took place against the health workers was perhaps unsurprising, as Javier relates:

*In the process of the health workers' protests, several instances of confrontation, violence and persecution took place. In January, the police **violently broke into** the Convent of San Francisco in the capital, La Paz, and arrested doctors and medical students who had found safe haven there following the repression they faced when trying to block the passage of the Dakar Rally, which was routed through Bolivia. This was extraordinary: historically, the church in Bolivia protected various protesters, including those involved in hunger strikes against the dictatorship, and up to now there had never been any such intervention. There are almost no spaces immune to state repression anymore.*

In the case of the health workers, mobilisation gave way when the Criminal Code was repealed.

While the health workers were ultimately victorious, the way in which the state approached their protests, Javier concludes, sheds light on the oppositional, politicised mindset with which the ruling party has come to meet any criticism:

In the face of every mobilisation, the state apparatus behaves in the same way. Even when it faces sectoral demands that in themselves do not necessarily imply a political challenge, the government allows conflict to grow, feeds polarisation, waits for scuffles and confrontations with the police to arise and then accuses the leaders of mobilised groups of being behind the violence and has them arrested and prosecuted. Opposition members side with these movements, arguing that the government is not listening to

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them, and conflicts that were initially sectoral or territorial end up being treated as destabilisation attempts orchestrated by the opposition.

Meanwhile in neighbouring **Paraguay**, thousands of people from several unions **marched** in June to protest against a government proposal to change pension regulations. The year also saw **farmers'** protests for agrarian reform and a **protest** in August, with students to the fore, against corruption and apparent impunity among state officials.

BACKLASH AGAINST UNION ACTION

In several of the above examples, states moved to constrain the potential for collective action. 2018 was a year when trade union action was countered with often violent state repression in many countries.

Swaziland – or eSwatini, as Africa's only absolute monarch, King Mswati III, unilaterally **renamed** it in April – saw several union protests in 2018, which were met with repression. In August, **teachers** took to the streets to protest at the government's failure to offer the expected cost of living allowance to public servants. When protesters threw stones and blocked roads, security forces fired live ammunition in disproportionate response. Further protests in **September**, in support of a teachers' strike to demand a cost of living increase, saw stun grenades used to disperse crowds. Beyond the focus on pay, broader issues motivated protesters, including education, healthcare, pensions and arbitrary evictions. The year also saw public sector workers protest when their pension fund was reported to have been raided to help pay for the lavish **50th birthday** celebrations of King Mswati, a scandal in a country where one in three people rely on food aid. Stun grenades, teargas and rubber bullets were also used against a June workers' **protest** to denounce alleged corruption in the management of the national pension fund.

Meanwhile in nearby **Lesotho**, a factory workers' **strike** in August led to a protest to demand increased wages that was met with rubber bullets and water cannon. Protests continued amid a tense atmosphere.

Striking sugar farm workers in the city of Sagay, the **Philippines**, paid a deadly price in October. A group of **nine** members of the National Federation of Sugar Workers were shot dead on a plantation while taking part in the first day of a land occupation. The Philippines has a sadly long-established pattern of killings of farmworkers, as well as those who challenge the power of extractive industries and seek land rights; impunity for such killings is also ingrained. Environmental and indigenous rights defender **Ricardo Mayumi** was shot dead in March. The following month, Father Mark Anthony Ventura, a priest, anti-mining activist and leader of the Ifugao Peasant Movement who opposed a hydroelectric project, was **shot dead**. The same fate awaited Beverly Geronimo, member of the Tabing Guangan Farmers' Association and an anti-mining activist, in May. The state of impunity was further demonstrated in November, when human rights lawyer **Benjamin Ramos**, who defended peasants' rights and had provided free legal advice to the families of the nine sugar workers, was shot dead by motorbike-riding gunmen.

Attacks on activists come from the top down in the Philippines: in February, the government **filed** a court petition labelling 600 activists and critics of the government as **terrorists**. The list included Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, a Filipino national who has criticised the government.

We asked **Cristina Palabay** of the **Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights** to describe the challenges faced by human rights defenders in the Philippines:

Human rights defenders face constant and increasing threats and direct attacks, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture and other horrible violations of human rights. Being a human rights defender in a country like the Philippines means

putting oneself in the line of fire, as the same rights violations that human rights defenders rise up against are committed against them. The most frequent targets are grassroots activists, farmers, workers, indigenous peoples and members of people's and mass organisations. The prevailing impunity for crimes committed against them perpetuates non-accountability for human rights abuses.

In the course of the government's sham **drug war**, its counterinsurgency programme and the **continuity of martial law** in Mindanao region, extrajudicial killings committed or incited by state forces have been on the rise. From 2001 to December 2018, Karapatan documented the killing of 760 human rights defenders, most of them rural and indigenous people, along with trade union leaders and members. Under the administration of President Duterte, at least one human rights defender is killed every week. Karapatan has lost 47 of our human rights workers, who were killed in the course of their work to document and investigate rights violations.

Mass killings of land rights activists are common, as is the killing of human rights lawyers working pro bono for peasants, environmentalists, activists, political prisoners and social movement organisations, as was the case of Benjamin Ramos. No category of human rights defenders has been spared. Victims have also included **Mariam Acob**, a grantee of the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights and a paralegal of Kawahib Moro Human Rights Alliance, a member organisation of Karapatan, who was killed in her home in September, and **Danny Boy Bautista**, a unionist in the Sumifru company in Compostela Valley, who was shot dead in October.

Journalists are also systematically harassed and killed: **at least 12** have been assassinated under the Duterte administration so far, the latest being Joey Llana, a radio anchor from Albay who was ambushed and shot dead in July, after being the target of repeated death threats.

Short of getting killed, human rights defenders routinely see their offices raided, burned and subjected to surveillance. This achieves the aim of sowing terror among them and the communities they serve. Most of them are subjected to surveillance, stalked, harassed, have their photos taken and receive threatening phone calls and text messages. This is facilitated by the fact that they are systematically targeted by vilification campaigns, both offline and online, that label them as 'communist fronts', 'terrorist lovers,' 'anti-development' and even 'lazy and home-wreckers'.

Also on the rise is the use of illegal arrests and the detention and prosecution of human rights defenders on the basis of trumped-up criminal charges. These are used to instil fear and silence among human rights defenders or prevent them from doing their work. New tactics are now being applied on top of subsisting repressive jurisprudence.

Often, fabricated charges are packaged as common crimes, conveniently to hide the political nature of the alleged acts, deny bail, make a conviction on simulated evidence easier, or even scoff at the advocacy work that human rights defenders do. It was therefore no surprise that, although President Duterte was initially open to the unconditional release of all political prisoners, he later backtracked and instead arrested and detained 225 more. There are now approximately **540 political prisoners** in the Philippines, most of them human rights defenders.

Despite these many challenges, as Cristina makes clear, civil society in the Philippines is fighting back:

Filipino civil society has persevered in pursuing justice and accountability for victims and survivors of human rights violations. In a very adverse context, all positive developments have been driven by civil society's persistence. Those included the cases of



Protesters marched towards the Philippine congress when President Duterte delivered his State of the Nation Address in July.

Credit: Jes Aznar/Getty Images

*the highly unusual convictions of **police officers** for killing a teenager in the course of their ‘war against drugs’, and of a **retired general** accused of kidnapping and serious illegal detention over the enforced disappearance of two students more than 12 years ago.*

*Despite restrictions, civil society has continued to mobilise in the face of injustice, staging mass protests on various occasions throughout 2018, including during the president’s **State of the Nation Address** in July, the commemoration of the **46th anniversary** of the declaration of Martial Law in September and on **International Human Rights Day** in December.*

As the example of the Philippines suggests, wherever union activists are attacked, so are others who stand against dominant economic power, notably indigenous peoples’, environmental and land rights defenders. **Peru**, like the Philippines, is a country where there is a clear pattern of intimidation and killing of human rights defenders, with a particular threat coming from criminal gangs linked to land traffickers. **Two farmers** – Celestino Flores Ventura and Irineo Curiñaupa Campos – were shot dead while protesting during a national agrarian strike in January, and more than 60 people were injured. Mobilisations elsewhere were forcefully dispersed, at the cost of many reported injuries. The farmers were protesting about a fall in the price of their potato crops and Peru’s high level of food imports.

The killings continued: in April, **Olivia Arévalo Lomas**, a leader of the Shipibo-Konibo indigenous people and an advocate for her community’s cultural and spiritual rights, was killed. Peru also saw protests against **corruption** in 2018: in September, hundreds marched in the capital, Lima, to call for governance reforms, including a proposal to criminalise the non-reporting of political campaign contributions.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS AND THE COST OF COAL

Thailand’s largest **protests** since the imposition of **military rule** in 2014 were held in 2018. Over a thousand people protested in the city of Chiang Mai in April over the destruction of forest land to construct government buildings. Aerial photos shared on social media showed that a new luxury housing complex for judges was cutting deep into the forest. Protesters, many of them wearing **green ribbons**, demanded that the new buildings be demolished. The military government, which

takes a hard line on public expressions of dissent, allowed the protest to go ahead because it was deemed to focus on environmental, rather than political, issues.

But protests in **India** against the Sterlite Copper Plant, accused of polluting air and water in the city of Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, took a **tragic turn** in May. On the 100th day of protests, a reported 15 people were killed when security forces fired live ammunition into crowds of protesters. It appears that some people were deliberately targeted. The plant has been seeking to expand in the face of strong local opposition. In February, over 250 activists were arrested while on a hunger strike to oppose the plans. Following May's violence, the plant was temporarily shut down, but local internet connections were also blocked and 65 people were reported to have been arrested. Civil society was active in condemning the violence, but risked becoming a target for doing so: in August, activist Thirumurugan Gandhi was **detained** on his return from attending the UN Human Rights Council, where he spoke out about the lethal use of force.

As the example of India and several others above suggest, indigenous peoples', environmental and land rights defenders often find themselves under attack when they try to defend affected communities against the transnational power of big infrastructure and extractive industries, and governments closely connected to those industries. Examples of the repression of such voices also came outside the greatest danger zones for attacks, of Latin America and South and South-East Asia. In **Kenya** in May, for example, two environmental activists were **arrested** when they protested against a plan to set up a coal-fired power plant. The joint Kenyan-Chinese concern plans to import its coal all the way from South Africa.

Coal mining is a contested practice in **Germany** too. While German civil society enjoys mostly open conditions, September saw the forced **eviction** of environmental protesters who had occupied the Hambach

Forest for six years with the aim of preventing coal mining. One activist died in an apparent accident during the eviction. Protests were held in several locations in Germany as the eviction took place, causing the temporary shutdown of a coal-fired power station. Following a legal challenge brought by the protesters, the clearing of the forest was halted in October; a final decision remains pending.

There are few places where coal mining is as controversial as **Australia**, which is one of the world's biggest coal producers but is also on the frontline of climate change. Civil society has continued to campaign against mining, as exemplified by protests against mining expansion in Queensland. In March, 13 **protesters** from **Frontline Action on Coal** were collectively fined approx. US\$60,000 for an action in which they closed down a coal port, owned by Adani Group, an Indian company. The protesters, who chained themselves to coal-loading equipment in Abbot Point Port, Queensland, were charged with the rare offence of "intentionally or recklessly interfering with a port's operation." Described as the biggest environmental movement in the history of Australia and motivated by concern for coal mining's impacts on water and reefs as well as climate change, the Stop Adani campaign got 35 banks, including **Chinese** ones, to commit to not financing the expansion of the coalmine. Protests continued against the construction of the mine, with an estimated 15,000 people **marching** in cities across Australia in December.

In **New Zealand** in September, it was gold mining that was under the spotlight: five members of anti-mining group Protect Karangahake were **arrested** when they occupied a goldmine that had been established in a conservation area. Earlier, in January, five Greenpeace activists were **arrested** when they occupied an offshore supply vessel to complain about oil exploration.

UK: RESUMED FRACKING SPARKS FURTHER PROTESTS

Renewed protests greeted the **return** of fracking to the **UK** in October after a seven-year hiatus. The energy company Cuadrilla resumed drilling in Lancashire, North-West England, after central government overturned a ban imposed by the local authorities following a series of earth tremors. Protesters greeted the resumption of fracking by attempting to blockade Cuadrilla's site, and protests at the site continued throughout the year, during which fracking operations were repeatedly **halted** after numerous fresh earth tremors.

Alongside the earth tremors, in a country with little experience of these, protesters point to pollution impacts and heavy water usage, as well as the apparent incompatibility of fracking with climate change commitments; supporters make an economic case and claim that fracking reduces reliance on oil imports. The sites of fracking are rural and removed from decision-making centres, and protesters see their government as being firmly on the side of fracking companies.

This certainly seemed the case when three anti-fracking protesters, Rich Loizou, Richard Roberts and Simon Roscoe, were **jailed** for 15 to 16 months in September on grounds of "causing a public nuisance" after climbing on lorries during a four-day protest outside Cuadrilla's Lancashire site. They were the first anti-fracking protesters to be imprisoned in the UK, breaking a long tradition in which people convicted of offences while engaged in non-violent direct action have been spared jail. Given this, the sentences provoked widespread anger. The three were freed the following month when their sentences were **overturned** on appeal.



Anti-fracking protesters, including Vivienne Westwood, rallied against the resumption of fracking at Cuadrilla's Lancashire site in October.

Credit: Ki Price/Getty Images

Appeal court judges described the sentences as “manifestly excessive” and possible **links** between the original judge and the oil industry came to light.

More broadly, civil society expressed concern about restrictions in the civic space of groups protesting against fracking, with high numbers of arrests of protesters, court injunctions and aggressive and apparently biased policing. Earlier in the year it **emerged** that some anti-fracking campaigners had been labelled as extremists and subjected to monitoring by the UK government’s anti-extremist surveillance programme, which was supposedly set up to prevent Islamist terrorism; as was also the case with the ‘Stansted 15’ anti-deportation protesters ([see Part 2](#)) and as in other countries, this showed how initiatives that are ostensibly about fighting terrorism can be instrumentalised to restrict peaceful activism. It was **reported** that among those referred to the programme was a 14-year-old boy who expressed ardent opposition to fracking on social media. A proposed law that would extend the scope of the anti-extremist programme was **criticised** by Nuala Ní Aoláin, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

Fracking companies did not entirely get their own way. Earlier in the year, in March, anti-fracking campaigners won a **victory** when the National Police Chiefs’ Council agreed to a public consultation on the policing of anti-fracking protests. The following month, the High Court rejected a request brought by the UK Oil and Gas company to ban anti-fracking protests at sites in Southern England. At the time of writing, fracking companies are **lobbying** to relax regulations on earth tremors. Protesters will continue to mobilise in what they see as a crucial battle for their communities’ and their country’s future.

LAOS: THE DEADLY DANGERS OF BIG INFRASTRUCTURE IN CLOSED CONDITIONS

The dangers to citizens that large infrastructure projects railroaded through by unaccountable governments and large, often foreign-based, corporations can pose were starkly and sadly made clear in **Laos** in July. The Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy hydroelectric dam, under construction on the Mekong River, suddenly collapsed, washing away entire villages and killing many people. In the closed society of Laos, it was hard to know how many people lost their lives in the tragedy. Official figures suggested that about 40 people had died, but civil society believed the death toll was much higher, with initial reports suggesting at least 800 people had disappeared. **Thousands** others were displaced, including into neighbouring **Cambodia**. Shockingly, the first response of the company behind the project, a joint Laos-South Korea-Thailand concern, was to deny that the dam had collapsed at all, blaming heavy rains instead. Local people also complained that they had not received sufficient warning to evacuate their homes immediately following the collapse.

Laos is a hardline one-party communist state where civic space is closed and dissent is not tolerated. Activists are jailed, social media usage is strictly policed and CSOs must obtain prior approval for any fundraising activity. International CSOs that came to Laos to provide humanitarian response were ordered by the government not to speak to the media as a condition for being allowed to work, while local rescue teams were quickly ordered to leave the disaster zone. And although the government announced that an inquiry into the disaster was underway, citizens could find out little about it. The government declared a suspension of all new dam projects pending a review – the dam was one of several built or

under construction on the Mekong as the government seeks economic growth through exporting electricity to its neighbouring states – but consultation work on building new dams with Chinese backing **continued** regardless. Environmental groups have long criticised the government's dam-building strategy.

Given closed conditions, it was little wonder then that when the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission held a **consultation** in September on a proposed new dam, many in civil society stayed away because they were scared of repercussions or did not believe the consultation could achieve any impact. The Cambodia Mekong Alliance, a coalition of 52 CSOs, did not participate because its previous attempts to express concerns to the government were ignored.

What the Laos tragedy shows is that the suppression of dissent in the pursuit of economic growth can make disaster more likely and response harder, and make it more difficult to learn the lessons that can help prevent future disasters. At least in **South Korea**, home to the company leading the project, SK Engineering and Construction, people were able to protest: September saw a **demonstration** held outside the company's headquarters, calling for it and the government to be held accountable. Protesters made the point that South Korea's involvement in the project was backed by its government as part of its official development assistance (ODA) to Laos, raising troubling questions about the role of government development spending in funding unaccountable projects that negatively impact on communities.

CIVIL SOCIETY FIGHTING BACK

As several of the above examples indicate, extractive and infrastructure projects often involve foreign partnerships, and when decisions are made in headquarters many thousands of miles away, it can be hard for civil society in the communities affected to influence decision-

making. But an activist from **Papua New Guinea** took the message direct to headquarters: in April, indigenous activist and environment rights defender **Cressida Kuala**, founder of Porgera Red Wara Women's Association, travelled to the Toronto, **Canada** headquarters of mining company Barrick Gold, which runs the Porgera gold mine as a joint concern with a Chinese corporation. There, she updated shareholders and others about the situation for communities living near the mine in Porgera, while supporters organised a protest outside. Impacts include water pollution, land erosion, chemical dumping, the forced destruction of houses near the mine and what seems to be a systematic campaign of rape by the mine's security guards.

In another victory for civil society, in May the **Solomon Islands** government **withdrew** the licence to mine bauxite on Nendö Island from an **Australian** company, AU Capital Mining, because the company had failed to establish amicable relations with the local community. There were allegations that the company had coerced and tricked people into signing over their right to land, and **protests** calling for the removal of the company's licence were long-running.

Environmental protesters also achieved a victory in **Estonia** in June. When over a thousand people formed a human chain to **protest** against a proposed cellulose plant in the village of Tabivere, concerned about environmental impact, the government announced the scrapping of the plans.

LATIN AMERICA: HOLDING CHINESE POWER TO ACCOUNT

In Latin America, Chinese investment plays a huge role, but is often unaccountable. In 2018, civil society came together to try to hold the government of China to account for its activity in the region, taking advantage of the government of China's November assessment under

the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process (*see Part 4*). We asked Paulina Garzón of the **China-Latin America Sustainable Investment Initiative**, María Marta Di Paola of the **Environment and Natural Resources Foundation** in **Argentina**, Sofía Jarrín of the **Centre for Economic and Social Rights** in **Ecuador** and Julia Cuadros of **CooperAcción** in **Peru** to describe the need for their initiative:

China is either the first or second trading partner of all South American countries, and the vast majority of their exports to China are concentrated in the oil, mining and soybean sectors. Investments by China or driven by Chinese demand have given a new impetus to the primary sector and, within this sector, to extractive industries. As a result, the economic relationship between China and Latin America poses great challenges to both the environment and the rights of the communities in which these investments are based. The growth and the scale of Chinese financing in Latin America have taken CSOs and communities by surprise. So far, there is little that civil society has been able to do to hold Chinese banks, companies and regulatory agencies accountable, partly because of a lack of knowledge and access to these institutions' procedures, but mostly because of the secrecy that characterises them.

Transnational corporations have contributed to human rights violations, including systematic practices of criminalisation of environmental defenders. Along the same lines, China has followed the principle of non-interference when building its relationship with Latin America, which has resulted in interactions taking place almost exclusively between governments, without including civil society. In this context, Latin American CSOs have not been able to establish substantial channels of dialogue with Chinese institutions, much less hold them accountable for the negative impacts of their actions.

In coming together, the Latin American CSOs decided to use the opportunity presented by the UPR process to begin reversing the accountability deficit, as the four partners describe:

We decided to make use of the tools offered by the international human rights system to establish a conversation about the need to call governments to account for the effects of their investments and the actions of their companies abroad.

Although it does not have an enforcing authority or enforcement mechanisms, the universal human rights system, including its UPR mechanism, offers civil society around the world

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Credit: Jonatan Rosas/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

valuable opportunities for advocacy. The UPR offers a space for communities affected in their civil, political, economic, social, or cultural rights to have their claims heard.

Generally speaking, responsibility for violated rights is adjudicated to the state within the territory where these rights violations occur. Thus, when China undergoes its UPR, the bulk of the recommendations that the Chinese state receives relate to the treatment of Chinese citizens within the territory of China. However, nothing prevents communities affected in their rights in other countries, such as Latin American ones, from submitting claims regarding the actions of another UN member state. Nothing prevents any group that has suffered a violation of its rights from invoking the principle of extraterritoriality to demand that a foreign state comply with the human rights obligations it contracted when accepting UN instruments, as well as any voluntary commitment that it may have ratified and taken upon.

We created a regional alliance to collaborate research and prepare a national shadow report for each of the South American countries included in the project, as well as a shadow regional report. In March these reports were submitted to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as inputs to the UPR examination of China. This initiative came to life in 2017, as we searched for a regional alliance to strengthen our advocacy work in relation to the Chinese state.

For us, participation in the UPR mechanism is a window of opportunity to channel our concerns and make visible the multiple human rights violations suffered by the communities affected by projects which are linked in their funding and operation to investments of the Chinese state. In several instances we have advocated towards Chinese entities to improve substantially their environmental and social behaviour and act as good global citizens. The lack of answers from these entities has led us to seek new spaces of dialogue with the government of China in international forums.

We hope that China's UPR and other UN mechanisms will provide the much-needed space for a serious commitment on the part of Chinese banks and companies to internalise human rights principles in their overseas operations.

CANADA: AN ANTI-PIPELINE VICTORY IN A YEAR OF PROTESTS

Protesters in **Canada** also secured a major victory in August, when following years of campaigning, an appeal court **unanimously** decided to delay construction of the Trans Mountain Pipeline project, planned to take oil from the tar sands of Alberta to Burnaby on the British Columbian coast. In August, the Canadian government took over ownership of the project from the US-headquartered Kinder Morgan company.

If successful, the project would almost triple the amount of oil flowing to the Burnaby terminal and vastly increase the number of tankers using the port, with inevitably increased environmental impacts. Protests have been led by several First Nations groups and environmental groups, including through blockades of the Kinder Morgan terminal, with thousands of people taking part over the years. The British Columbian and local municipal governments are also opposed to the project, in contrast to the federal government's support. The court **ruled** that the project had failed to consult adequately with First Nations peoples or consider the environmental impact on British Columbia's killer whale population.

However the court victory may represent only a temporary success for civil society campaigning; it forces a further round of consultations, suggesting a need for sustained campaigning and alliance building, not least with the sub-national government bodies that share civil society opposition. Currents of support for the project, which promises to create jobs, must also be acknowledged; in November, thousands took to the streets of Calgary, Alberta, to **demand** that the pipeline be built, and to

protest against a proposed law that would extend consultation with First Nations peoples affected by big energy projects.

These protests and counter protests neatly underlined the tension between the positive international image projected by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Canada's environmental and climate change commitments on the one hand, and the imperative for chasing economic growth on the back of Canada's natural resources on the other. This was the background to a surge of people's activism in Canada as citizens worked to hold the government to its reputation and commitments. Thousands of people rallied in Montreal in November to **demand** that the Quebec state government prioritise action on climate change. The year also saw farmers' protests against trade deals, protests both in **support** of and against refugees and migrants, not least in **Quebec**, where the new government has promised to take a harder line on immigration, First Nations peoples' **protests** about the treatment of indigenous children in the care system, and protests both for and against **abortion**, among many others. Canada's tradition of debate in the public square looks healthy and set to continue.

SPOTLIGHT ON FRANCE: A PRO-BUSINESS GOVERNMENT MEETS CITIZEN OPPOSITION

France, despite the claims to practise a different kind of politics of its leader, President Emmanuel Macron, was another state that was often quick to take the side of big business in 2018. In April, an attempt to **evict** a long-established occupation in the Notre-Dame-des-Landes municipality by an alternative, anti-capitalist community ended in violence. The locale had long been proposed as the site of a new airport,

opposed by local farmers and environmental activists, and in 2008 an alternative community of collectives living autonomously from the state was founded. While airport plans were cancelled in January, the authorities insisted that the community be removed. Around 2,500 riot police were deployed, with huge amounts of teargas sprayed and stun grenades hurled, including at journalists covering the event, while some protesters threw petrol bombs and burned barricades. The French Journalists' Union complained that its members were initially prevented from covering the eviction. The attempt to evict the community highlighted a clash of values about capitalism and suggested that the state was becoming increasingly intolerant of alternative ways of life. But as of January 2019, members of the community remained on site to **celebrate** the first anniversary of the cancellation of the airport plans.

In May, over 100 people were detained in **violent** May Day protests in the capital, Paris. Police used teargas and water cannon while some protesters threw petrol bombs and smashed windows. The violence overshadowed a peaceful May Day protest convened by trade unions against the government's weakening of labour laws. The state further flexed its muscles in June, when anti-nuclear waste activists were **detained** in a series of police raids, along with the lawyer representing the activists. There were accusations of causing damage during protests.

Further civil society concern arose when a new law on business secrecy was **promulgated** in July. Many CSOs, media unions and academics **criticised** the new law for excessively limiting the freedoms of expression and information. The new law, which was swiftly introduced with little debate, takes a very broad definition of what constitutes a 'business secret'. As such, it could make it harder to investigate companies and hold them to account for the negative impacts of their operations. Growing civil society concern about the pro-business tilt of President Macron's France was also fuelled by the January filing of a defamation suit by two French companies with interests in **Cameroon**, Socfin and Socapalm – both affiliated with the Bolloré Group – against three newspapers, Mediapart, L'Obs and Le Point

and two CSOs, ReAct and Sherpa. The accused had reported on claims by Cameroonian villagers and farmers that the companies were involved in land grabbing and exploiting their land. In response, several French CSOs and media groups launched the '**On ne se taira pas**' (we will not be silenced) campaign, identifying the action as a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) and campaigning for French legal reform to protect the freedom of expression.

Globally, there is increasing concern about the growing use of **SLAPPS** to suppress civil society dissent and investigation and exposure of business abuses. SLAPPS seem to be spreading from the **USA** to Europe: in **Portugal**, for example, well-known investigative journalist **Arlindo Marquês** was sued by the Celtejo paper production company on the grounds of damaging its credibility and good name after accusing it of unacceptably polluting the Tagus River.

Discontent with President Macron's pro-business policies and his determination to weaken labour laws continued in France throughout the year, with the country seeing several strikes, including by railway workers. But nothing had prepared the political establishment for the outbreak of the always angry and often violent 'gilets jaunes' (yellow vests) protests that began in November.

Protests, with participants wearing standard, high-visibility safety vests, started on 17 November and continued into 2019. The key protest tactics included road blockades, occupations of tollbooths and roundabouts, and marches every Saturday in Paris and many other French cities. An estimated 300,000 people took part in the initial protests, which saw many roadblocks, along with blockades of several fuel depots. But there was already a high price: in that first week of protests, two people were reported dead and over **530 injured** as cars tried to **drive through** blockades.

Protests were also held that first weekend on **Réunion**, a French overseas region in the Indian Ocean. Soldiers were deployed when protests against poverty degenerated into looting and riots.



'Gilets jaunes' protests were sparked by planned fuel-tax rises and quickly gathered momentum.

Credit: Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

The initial spark of protest in mainland France was an unpopular plan to increase fuel taxes, particularly on diesel, along with new speed controls on rural roads. People complained that they relied on their vehicles to get to work and had no alternative forms of transport. People protested that they were already finding it hard to make ends meet, even while working, and would be hard hit by any further increase in costs.

But of course the movement was about more than the planned fuel-tax rise. It was largely a revolt of the suburbs, villages and peripheries, as compared to people from city centres: a rebellion of working-class and lower-middle-class people. These were often people who felt economically squeezed and left behind, and also distant from the political elite; they felt that the government did not hear them. President Macron, who positioned himself as a challenge to the established order when he won power in 2017, was now criticised by the movement as part of an out-of-touch metropolitan elite, unable to understand the lives of working-class and rural people. Protesters dismissed him as a **president of the rich**, and compared the planned fuel-tax rise with the government's programme of tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy. Protesters' grievances became broader as the weeks went on, and by week three, protesters were calling on President Macron to resign. Students also started to protest, against tuition fees for foreign students and planned changes to exams.

As the protests continued, they were marked by violence. On the second weekend of protests in Paris, some protesters lit fires on the streets and tore up roads. Police used teargas, water cannon and pepper spray against protesters, and bulldozers to clear blockades. Each weekend after this saw violence, including arson attacks on shops and cars and looting, and violent responses from security forces. Protests turned into riots in Paris on 1 December, while that same day, in Marseille, an 80-year-old woman **died** after her window was hit by a police teargas canister. It seemed that the lines were hardening and polarisation was setting in.

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After three weeks of protests, the planned fuel tax rise was **dropped**, marking the first time President Macron had changed policy following street protests. However, this did **little** to stymie protest anger, and the demonstrations continued. In a widely viewed **televised address** on 10 December, President Macron offered a **package** of concessions on taxation and the minimum wage. In doing so, he could be seen to be making a material offer that acknowledged the everyday concerns that had motivated many to take to the streets. He also acknowledged the difficult circumstances of many people's lives, and the legitimacy of the protesters' feeling of isolation from decision-making. But he refused to restore a key wealth tax. Protests **continued** regardless.

The protest movement tapped into apparently widespread anti-government sentiment. Even following rioting in Paris, **polling** showed that 72 per cent of French people supported the movement, although 85 per cent said they disagreed with the violence. At the same time, President Macron's popularity continued to **plummet**: on an average of polls, it fell from 47 per cent support in December 2017 to only 24 per cent one year later. Ahead of European Parliamentary elections in May 2019, President Macron's *Republique En Marche* party was also reported to be **losing ground** to the far-right National Rally party.

While numbers fell into the tens of thousands, protests continued into 2019, and with them the violence. Women started to hold **separate** protests, pointing to their invisibility as a major part of the workforce, and also seeking to show that protest anger need not lead to violence. In early 2019, President Macron began a three-month 'national debate' tour of France, holding town-hall **meetings** to discuss the issues raised. The initiative, a novelty, met with some **scepticism**, but President Macron admitted to failings in social policy and a "breakdown in equality." At the time of writing, it was also rumoured that President Macron might hold a **referendum** on key issues raised by the protests. These moves seemed both an attempt to deal with the anger once and for all, and an admission that there could be no going back: there needed to be some change in the way France is governed.

But this apparent willingness to listen sat at odds with the law-and-order-approach that has come to characterise the government's approach to public dissent. Emergency powers the government initially pushed through to combat terrorism were codified into **permanent law** in October 2017; these emergency powers had been used to **prevent** potential protests when France hosted the 2015 climate change summit. December saw many arrests, at least some of which seemed to be preventative in nature. At the time of writing an estimated 5,600 people had been detained and

1,000 people convicted. In January 2019, one of the movement's most visible figures, **Eric Drouet**, was detained for the second time on charges of organising an unauthorised protest. That same month, in a move that seemed intended to bolster support from those advocating for a hard line, French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe **threatened** to introduce tough new laws, including a register of rioters. Under this, people could be banned from participating in protests even if not previously convicted. Politicians, including some from President Macron's party, **condemned** as "authoritarian" the threat the new measures posed to fundamental freedoms.

What such measures made clear is how rattled and caught off the guard the government had been by the gilets jaunes movement and the scale of the protests. Collectively, protest anger threatened President Macron's international reputation, and domestically it posed a risk to his pro-business, economically neoliberal agenda. President Macron, when he won power in 2017, had positioned himself as the antidote to populism. The gilets jaunes protests showed that it was much more complicated than that.

This was undoubtedly a populist movement, but seemingly one that drew supporters from across and outside the political spectrum. Many who participated had supported far-right or radical-left candidates at the last election, but many others had expressed **disaffection** with all political parties. Participants also covered a wide age range: this was not the clearly marked demographic revolt of the UK's Brexit rebellion, for example, which skewed strongly to older people. The political establishment initially tried to paint the gilets jaunes as a movement of the far-right, but the scale of public support suggested that the concerns were far more mainstream than that.

That movement also seemed genuinely to be a leaderless one, having arisen largely out of **social media** calls for action, and indeed to be resistant to the notion of being led. Its organic, leaderless nature made

it vulnerable to becoming a vehicle for extremist violence. And without leaders, it was hard even for the political establishment to try to meet and negotiate, which may have been a factor in sustaining protests.

The gilets jaunes protests also showed the difficulty governments may face in trying to reduce fossil fuel consumption. In France, many people rely on their cars, particularly outside cities, and have been encouraged to use diesel by successive governments, which held the price down. If people view their existing car use as essential then raising taxes will only increase their costs, while doing little to curve greenhouse gas emissions, which should surely be the idea of using taxation as an instrument to help address climate change. Not unreasonably, people will ask why the favoured approach to combating climate change is one that visits the costs on citizens through indirect taxation, rather than on the large companies and business sectors – such as extractive and fossil fuel industries, agribusiness and transportation – that are responsible for the bulk of climate-harming emissions. They may accuse the government of tokenism at the expense of the poorest. In France, protesters compared their own increasing taxation burden with the government's removal of wealth taxes. They saw a tax rise ostensibly intended to combat climate change as just another government measure that increased their cost of living.

The motivations of those involved were varied, but together the protests were an expression of genuine anger, if at times an incoherent anger that made few clear demands once the fuel-tax increase was cancelled. One key demand that many made was to have more direct democracy, through referendums, to determine national policy. This would mark a break with France's often centralised and elitist governance traditions, and potentially encourage greater participation, although it could also potentially fuel polarisation, as has happened with referendums elsewhere ([see Part 3](#)).

Some of those involved attempted the move directly into electoral politics. In January, a group put up a **list** for the European elections, under

the Citizen Initiative Rally banner, seeming likely to stand on an anti-EU platform. Another person said they would **start** their own political party, although anyone who claimed to put themselves forward risked hostility from those in the movement who insisted it was leaderless.

There was undoubtedly much that this anger had in common with the disaffection that fuelled Brexit, and the right-wing populism that is on the march across a great swathe of Europe (*see Part 3*). Visually, as elsewhere, this often looked much like a revolt of a white, long-resident population that once enjoyed certainty about its status and role in society but now felt less secure and more distant from power. In common with disaffection across Europe, this was in essence a conservative rather than radical rebellion: one that sought more the restoration of something lost rather than something new. This was why many of the manifestations of the gilets jaunes movement, in France and abroad, were xenophobic and anti-migrant. They were also often marked by hostility towards the media, because it was perceived as part of the establishment.

The international comparisons came readily because the yellow vest was quickly adopted elsewhere. Perhaps the genius of the movement was that it took an everyday item – by law all motorists in France must carry a yellow vest – and turned it into a powerful symbol. The yellow vest was cheap, accessible and associated both with manual labour and an emergency. It was both visible, by design, and invisible, because of its association with labour. To wear the yellow vest was to identify oneself as working-class, anti-establishment and angry; it became a visual shorthand. And so it travelled.

In neighbouring **Belgium**, yellow-vest **protests** began in November, against fuel prices and the cost of living. Around 60 people were arrested before the protest turned violent, as clashes between protesters and police escalated into a riot, with the police using teargas and water cannon and making further arrests. Mass arrests were made before a further protest in December, prompting concern about the blanket

nature of the state's approach. Journalists covering the protests also reported being on the receiving end of aggression from both protesters and security forces.

Meanwhile the threat the symbol could pose to the authorities was made clear in repressive **Egypt**, when in December new regulations were imposed requiring police **permission** to sell yellow vests. Importers and wholesalers of yellow vests were summoned to a meeting with the police. **Russia's** hardline President Vladimir Putin also **attempted** to justify the jailing of activist Lev Ponomarev in December (*see Part 3*) by stating that the country did not want to see scenes similar to those in Paris.

In December yellow vest protests were held in Iraq, Ireland and Israel, to name but a few. It proved a **malleable** symbol: in Germany **both** far-right and far-left groups organised yellow-vest protests; elsewhere, many of those who adopted the symbol were clearly right-wing populists. Across the channel in the UK, yellow vests were worn by far-right protesters who **harassed** politicians and public figures opposed to Brexit, as well as journalists. **Canadian** anti-migrant and anti-carbon tax protesters also adopted it, as did pro-government, anti-EU protesters in **Italy** and anti-migrant protesters in **Finland**. While its origins in France were more complex, reactionary forces seized on the symbol and made it their own, something confirmed in February when leaders of Italy's populist government **met with** prominent gilets jaunes members and expressed their support.

In France, at the time of writing, protest numbers were continuing to dwindle, but the anger that people expressed likely remains not far below the surface. The government, having made concessions, is now having to do something much harder: to show that it is truly willing to listen.