



Farmers shout anti-government slogans on a blocked highway during a protest against new farm laws in December 2020 in Delhi, India. Photo by Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

# 2021 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT

## DEMANDS FOR ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

## ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: PROTEST IN A PANDEMIC YEAR

In a year dominated by the pandemic, people still protested however and whenever possible, because the urgency of the issues continued to make protest necessary. Many of the year's protests came as people responded to the impacts of emergency measures on their ability to meet their essential needs. In country after country, the many people left living precariously and in poverty by the pandemic's impacts on economic activity demanded better support from their governments. Often the pandemic was the context, but it was not the whole story. For some, economic downturn forced a reckoning with deeply flawed economic structures, and the power imbalances and inequalities embedded in them. People resisted plans to restart economies in ways that threatened to impact most adversely on those who already had the least, while doing little to challenge entrenched elite wealth.

The harmful impacts of the present economic model were confronted every time people sought to stand in the way of environmentally devastating economic development projects, and wherever people insisted that climate action must come before business as usual. Due to the pandemic and restrictions imposed by emergency measures, 2020 did not see the same great

climate mobilisations<sup>7</sup> that marked 2019 and that pushed climate action to the top of the political agenda. But people continued to keep up the momentum by protesting whenever and however they could, using their imaginations and offering a range of creative actions, including distanced, solo and online protests. State support to climate-harming industries during the pandemic and plans for post-pandemic recovery that seemed to place faith in carbon-fuelled economic growth further motivated people to take urgent action.

Wherever there was protest there was backlash. The tactics of repression were predictably familiar and similar: security force violence against protesters, arrests, detentions and criminalisation, political vilification of those taking part, and attempts to repress expression both online and offline. In many countries, people working to defend their local environment and realise land and Indigenous rights, doing the grassroots work to model alternatives to ultra-capitalism and climate harm, faced physical attacks and attempts on their lives. Just as with the year's other great wave of mobilisation, in which people around the world rose up to demand an end to systemic racism (see this report's chapter on the global struggle for racial justice) people continued to act, sometimes in the face of great danger, because they had to. They knew the alternatives – environmental degradation, climate catastrophe, untrammelled economic development, spiralling economic inequality – were no alternatives at all.



Farmers listen to a speaker on a blocked highway during a protest against the new laws on 17 December 2020 in Delhi, India. Photo by Yawar Nazir/Getty Images



# ACTION FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

For many plunged into poverty and living precariously as a result of the pandemic, economic decisions made by states and international financial institutions mattered deeply. **Hunger** ↗ and loss of income were fundamental concerns that drove many people to the streets. Alongside the immediate economic impacts, people worried that their governments were using the pandemic as a pretext to introduce economic policies that would make them poorer or make their lives more precarious. Mass protests mobilised wherever policies threatened to cut back or privatise public services, raise the costs of essential goods, increase the burden of taxation on those struggling to get by and erase hard-won labour rights.

Often the timing of these new policies exacerbated the anger. People questioned why, amidst a pandemic that was causing economic misery for many but in which it was also abundantly clear that the already very wealthy were **piling up** ↗ further riches, the prescription always seemed to include measures, such as cutbacks and rollbacks of rights, that would hit the poorest, rather than more radical solutions that changed the balance of economic power: why the response to an unprecedented situation was the same package of neoliberal economic measures that states and international financial institutions seemingly always fall back on; people also wondered why international financial institutions seemed to be pushing these policies on global south countries

even as global north states were massively expanding their public spending and indebtedness in response to the pandemic. People mobilised to defend the public services, such as healthcare, education and social safety nets, that they needed the most during the pandemic. They demanded much tougher action on corruption, of which they had seen new evidence in some of the decisions taken in response to the pandemic, as stories abounded of politicians and public officials – including in Paraguay and Zimbabwe – seeming to view the crisis as an opportunity to divert healthcare funding into their pockets and reward their associates with lucrative contracts.

Protests, as detailed below, brought some significant successes. Some governments, including Costa Rica and Guatemala, quickly reversed packages of austerity measures they had agreed with international financial institutions. Even some intransigent governments, such as India, came to the negotiating table. But the power that people mobilised and demonstrated was often met with excessive state force, because protests asked awkward questions of entrenched economic interests and sought to challenge existing power relations. Sometimes that state force was lethal, as in Iraq. Demonstrations of state violence led to people making further demands, for justice, accountability and redress, and the political change necessary to bring these about.



A protester carries a smoke flare during a demonstration against a new economic law on the main street of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, on 8 October 2020. Photo by Ed Wray/Getty Images

## INDIA: FARMERS MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD

India has in recent years been home both to mass protests and heavy state repression. In 2019, the focus was on the **struggles** of people against discriminatory new citizenship laws that targeted India's sizeable Muslim minority, and the repression of the formerly semi-autonomous region of Jammu and Kashmir. In 2020, those struggles, and the state backlash against them, continued as the stridently Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stood accused of making high-handed decisions that were out of step with many people's everyday realities.

The trigger for the latest acts of mass protest was the introduction of three new laws on farming. The laws, passed in September after **little parliamentary scrutiny** or consultation with farmers, removed many regulations on the sale of farmers' produce, changing tightly regulated markets that have for decades ensured farmers a place in which to sell their goods, in the form of state-mandated wholesale markets, and at set prices. The government positioned the changes as giving farmers the opportunity to increase their profitability by being able to negotiate higher prices, sell in a wider range of markets and cut out intermediaries. For many farmers, however, the new laws seemed to offer a direct threat to their way of life.

India's 'Green Revolution', introduced in the late 1960s with the northern state of Punjab at its core, saw the introduction of higher-yielding crops, the intensive and subsidised use of irrigation, fertilisers and pesticides, state training of farmers and guaranteed purchasing at minimum prices through wholesale markets. Its aim was to make India more self-sufficient in its food production but also, it has been argued, it helped **prevent** potential demands for more radical change. The policies of the 'Green Revolution' enabled a class of small farmers to just about sustain themselves. Over **40 per cent** of India's population work in agriculture and around 86 per cent of India's farmland is cultivated by small farmers. They have however faced considerable challenges in recent decades, including mounting debt, impacts of heatwaves and droughts and soil degradation caused by intensive farming methods. From the 1990s onwards, rates of suicide soared among farmers, reaching **almost 300,000** since 1995.

While the climate crisis and the ways intensive practices have stripped soils of nutrients suggest a need for reform of some kind, the proposed changes did not speak to those needs. There seemed to have been no attempt to listen to farmers, understand their concerns and work with them before announcing the changes. Instead this was a top-down approach seeming to symbolise a high-handed governance style from a government that thinks it always knows what is best. The laws even **removed** the possibility to seek legal recourse over disputes.

For many small farmers, the government's changes threatened to undermine further their already precarious livelihoods. In the time of the pandemic, when so many people were struggling and worried, they questioned why the government saw fit to make such sweeping changes, and at such speed. They saw in the new laws an irreversible transfer of power away from small and medium farmers towards vast corporations. With reduced regulations, large companies would have the power to demand aggressively lower prices and greater discounts and build up stockpiles, against which small farmers would have little negotiating power. Protesting farmers therefore saw the changes as working in the interests of wealthy business owners, including those close to the Modi regime; anger focused on the Adani Group and Reliance, two large corporations headed by **tycoons** with close links to the Prime Minister. Many farmers **switched** their mobile phone provider from a Reliance-owned company to other firms as part of their protest.

After two months of holding local-level protests and not being listened to, farmers decided to take their concerns directly to India's capital, New Delhi. In late November tens of thousands of farmers from Punjab and other northern states marched on Delhi, in what became the **largest farmers' mobilisation** in modern-day India, picking up sympathy, solidarity and support as they went, including from many people other than farmers. When they reached the perimeter of the capital, they were prevented from going further by security forces who used teargas and water cannon.

As farmers waited outside Delhi and blocked roads with their tractors in protest, a solidarity strike mobilised. The strike, held on 26 November, saw over 250 million workers from a range of industries, including banking, telecoms, transportation and oil and gas production, down tools to express their support for the farmers. It was reported to be the largest coordinated strike in the





Farmers sit inside a tractor trailer at a protest site on the Delhi-Haryana border crossing in Singhu, Delhi, India, on 3 December 2020. Photo by Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg via Getty Images

world, with various farmers' unions working together to coordinate the action. Following the strike, the protesters were allowed to cross the city limits and **occupied** ↗ a protest site on the outskirts of Delhi.

The farmers articulated clear demands in relation to their cause, including for a special parliamentary session to be called to repeal the three farm laws and a retention of the established produce sales system and minimum pricing. But reflecting the broader connections of solidarity the movement had established, other issues of everyday concern were articulated, including over fuel and power prices, minimum wages and the loss of labour rights. In a country where the government has worked to repress dissent, the farmers' protests came to serve as a vital space where people sharing a sense of dissatisfaction, of being left out and not listened to, could come together and find common cause.

More political issues were also articulated, including demands for the release of detained activists and human rights defenders, and for the reining in of central government powers over India's component states. People protesting against the citizenship law marched in solidarity with the farmers. The movement represented arguably the biggest challenge to Prime Minister Modi and the way he runs India since he won power in 2014. Importantly too, given the often toxic environment that women's rights activists face in India, women farmers were for the first time visibly in the forefront of these protests, challenging their invisible status as people who often work land but do not own it. They were part of the protest camps, and not just in supporting roles. When in January 2021, India's Chief Justice **appealed** ↗ for women to leave the protest camps and go home, the answer he got was a resounding no as women asserted their right to be there and be part of the struggle (see also this report's chapter on challenging exclusion and claiming rights).

The government seemed surprised by the scale of the mobilisation and the sympathy it attracted. It had managed to weather and downplay the previous waves of protest over its discrimination against Muslims and its attack on

freedoms in Jammu and Kashmir. But this was different, because it tapped into the sympathies many Indians feel for farmers, the role farming still plays in national identity and the family ties many people have with farmers. It was a new threat to the government because many of the farmers protesting had not previously opposed the government; many had even likely supported the BJP until then. Modi initially dismissed farmers' concerns as misplaced and blamed them on opposition parties spreading misinformation. But as the protest pressure continued, he was forced to negotiate. Talks came that would not have happened without the protests. The government offered concessions on minimum price guarantees, but this did not go far enough for the farmers, who continued to demand the repeal of the laws. This meant that as the negotiations continued in December, so did the protests.

A further day of action on **8 December** ↗ saw people shut down public transport, block roads and close down their shops. As awareness spread of the farmers' protests, solidarity protests rallied in other countries. In the USA, the grassroots **Jakara Movement**, a Punjabi Sikh organisation, organised protests in the city of Oakland and outside the Indian consulate in San Francisco. Solidarity protests mobilised in several cities in **Canada** ↗. Thousands protested outside the Indian High Commission in **London** ↗, UK. In other cases pre-emptive repression obstructed solidarity protests; in **Singapore** ↗, the police investigated people for social media posts that appeared to show them gathering in support of the farmers, and warned that protests for political causes in other countries would not be permitted.

The repression continued in India too. **Bilkis Dadi** ↗, one of the leaders of the anti-citizenship law protests, tried to march in solidarity with farmers, but was stopped from joining protesters, detained and returned home. Several union heads and opposition leaders were prevented from joining the protests. Arvind Kejriwal, Chief Minister of Delhi, who opposed the new law and the harsh action taken against protesters, was barricaded in his home to stop him joining protests.



## ANOTHER YEAR OF REPRESSION IN INDIA

The Indian government's attempts to restrict the protesting farmers' dissent went hand in hand with its continuing efforts throughout the year to clamp down on those who opposed changes to the citizenship law and demanded rights in Jammu and Kashmir. In February, scores of people were killed in deadly religious riots in Delhi, when, in reaction to protests against the citizenship law, Hindu mobs attacked Muslim groups, **fuelled** by hate speech by ruling-party Hindu nationalist politicians, and with the **active assistance** of the police.

In May, two members of a women's rights collective were **arrested and detained** after taking part in an anti-citizenship law protest. In August, on the first anniversary of the government's revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, **security force violence** was once again unleashed against protesters in the region, which also remained home to a long internet shutdown. Attempts to stop civil society scrutiny and advocacy saw nine **simultaneous raids** carried out on the offices of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the media and the houses of human rights defenders in Jammu and Kashmir in October. Meanwhile, in September, the government further tightened its already restrictive law on the ability of CSOs to access foreign funding, making it even harder for CSOs to receive and transfer money. Such was the level of intrusion that in September Amnesty International announced that it was **suspending** its work in India after the government froze its bank account, as **Mrinal Sharma**, who until the closure worked for Amnesty International India, relates:<sup>1</sup>

*Amnesty International India was forced to shut down in retaliation for its publication of two critical briefings that underlined the human rights situation in Kashmir and highlighted the role of the Delhi police in the riots that took place in north-east Delhi in February. Shortly after it released these briefings, all its bank accounts were frozen. The government did not provide any prior warning, notice or reason for freezing the bank accounts. Strapped of the funds that it had raised locally, with the help of ordinary Indians, Amnesty International India was forced to halt all its work and let go of all its employees.*

*Harassment and intimidation for its human rights work is not new for Amnesty International India. It has faced a relentless smear campaign by the government and government-aligned media outlets since 2016. In 2018, it endured a 10-hour-long raid by the Enforcement Directorate, following which it was forced to let go of a number of staff, adversely affecting its work in India, including with excluded communities. Although the court granted an interim relief to the organisation, a malicious media trial and reduced capacities made it difficult for it to function properly. It is important to note that no formal charges have been filed against the organisation. A year later, in November 2019, amid rumours of impending arrests of top officials, the offices of Amnesty International India and the residence of one of its directors were raided again, this time by the Central Bureau of Investigation, the country's premier investigative agency, placed under the central government. However, it continued to work, defying all the malice thrown against it and its employees.*

*But this time, it was more vicious. The immediate impact of the shutdown has been borne by the employees of Amnesty International India – researchers, campaigners, fundraisers – who lost their jobs overnight without any compensation during a period of economic recession that has been worsened by the pandemic. The extensive research projects and campaigns that Amnesty International India was running have all ground to a halt. Taking everything into account, it must be clarified to the government that in the name of holding a 'foreign entity' accountable, the Indian government has deprived many of its own citizens of their livelihoods. Most importantly, there is now one less voice to hold the Indian government accountable for its excesses and inactions.*

The year also saw **numerous arrests** of journalists who criticised the government's pandemic response, while farmers' rights activists were **arrested** for reporting corruption in the distribution of emergency food supplies.

<sup>1</sup> All interviews quoted in this report are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews are available [here](#).

For the farmers, frustrations came to a head on India's **Republic Day**, 26 January, when farmers, many riding tractors and horses, **broke through** police barricades and took their protest into the heart of the city, close to where the Republic Day parade was taking place, forcing their way into Delhi's iconic Red Fort. Violent clashes broke out between protesters and police, who fired teargas and water cannon and hit protesters with batons. It was reported that one protester died, and that several police officers were injured, while many protesters were detained. Protest organisers insisted that those committing violence had been a small minority. These events, in which protesters effectively gate-crashed the government's attempts to use Republic Day as an opportunity to project itself as a modern democracy and economic superpower, made global headlines and communicated both the seriousness



Protesting farmers gather at the Red Fort in Delhi on 26 January 2021, flying flags from the ramparts where India's Prime Minister would traditionally hoist the national flag on Independence Day. Photo by Pallava Bagla/Corbis via Getty Images

with which protesters saw their plight and the government's intransigence. **Images** of brutality went round the world, showing police in riot gear hitting defenceless farmers, many of them of advanced age, with batons.

The government mobilised a swift backlash to this humiliation. Heavy **charges** of sedition and terrorism were brought against protesters, activists and journalists. Numerous protesters were reported to be **missing** days after the Republic Day events. In February, a series of simultaneous **raids** were carried out on premises of the NewsClick news portal, which provided extensive coverage of the farmers' protests. A further international outcry was stoked in February, when the police **arrested** young climate activist Disha Ravi, a leader of India's Fridays for Future climate strike movement, allegedly for sharing an online protest toolkit. She was charged with sedition and **bailed** after spending 10 days in detention. The message seemed to be that even **high-profile** critics of the government were not safe.

The government ordered protesters to vacate the protest camp they had occupied since December, cut off the water and electricity supplies and sent hundreds of police in riot gear to try to clear the camp. But the events of Republic Day had also served to recruit even more protesters, and many more farmers were reported to be on their way. The riot police backed down, although protest camps continued to face threats from Hindu nationalist groups. The authorities **shut down** internet access in many areas on Delhi's northern perimeter where groups of farmers had gathered and put up fortified **barriers** around protest camps, leaving the city looking like a war zone.

The international spotlight continued to focus on the protests, as prominent figures including Rihanna and Greta Thunberg tweeted their support, **provoking** a nationalistic backlash and government accusations of sensationalism for doing so. Ruling-party-supporting **celebrities**, who had said nothing about the farmers' protests, were duly **mobilised** to insist that only Indians could talk about India, using hashtags such as #IndiaAgainstPropaganda. In the immediate aftermath of the Republic Day violence, the government **demand**ed that Twitter block hundreds of accounts, not only of protesters but also of journalists and media companies. Twitter initially complied but then quickly reversed many of the bans following a backlash. The government and Twitter remained in a tense stand-off, with the government threatening legal



action that could result in jail terms. BJP politicians flocked to an alternative platform to Twitter, Koo, which was quickly revealed to be rife with hate speech.

At the time of writing the battle lines seemed more drawn than ever. Protesters were dug into their camps, encircled by security forces, for the long haul, with many vowing not to leave until the laws had been repealed. Protesters had at least forced a government that normally stubbornly refuses criticism to the

table, and the government had offered to delay implementation of the new laws, but what compromise may eventually result remained unclear. But beyond even this dispute and its potential to affect so many farmers' lives, bigger issues have been made clear, of a top-down and high-handed government that sees any dissent as treachery, and a ruling elite evidently driven by the pursuit of the generation of wealth for an associated economic elite. India's government needs to issue edicts less and listen more. It cannot do that by continuing its crackdown on dissent and attempts to suppress civil society.



Protesting farmers raise their phones with the lights on during a New Year's Eve vigil honouring 40 farmers who lost their lives on a highway leading to Delhi. Photo by Anindito Mukherjee/ Getty Images

## ZIMBABWE: REPRESSION FOLLOWS CORRUPTION

Few governments seem as remote from their people, as unwilling to listen, as the government of Zimbabwe. In 2020, corruption was a protest trigger in a country that continued to be the site of a struggle for essential employment rights, civic rights and democratic freedoms and, indeed, basic government competence. People contrasted their experience of economic struggle with the very evident corruption of political elites and demanded better. They were met with repression.

Long-simmering outrage gained fresh fuel in June, when journalist Hopewell Chin'ono released government information detailing that multi-million contracts to buy pandemic supplies had been set at inflated prices. The revelations lead to the **sacking** of the health minister, who subsequently faced corruption charges. They came at a time when many Zimbabweans were living in conditions of economic strife that pre-existed the pandemic. Protests over a rise in fuel prices, scarcities of essential goods and a likely government deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) mobilised in **2019**, and brought a repressive response. The pandemic then made the situation worse. In the same month that people discovered that at least some in the government had apparently seen the pandemic as a corruption opportunity, nurses **held a strike** to demand to be paid in US dollars for their vital work in combatting the virus, as a more secure form of payment that would enable them to buy the essentials they needed amid a return to **soaring inflation**.

In July, people took to the streets of the capital, Harare, **protesting** against corruption, economic malaise, unemployment and the poor state of the country's health service. The government fell back on its usual routines, unleashing **violence** to disperse protesters and **arresting** over 60 people, who were charged with inciting public violence. Respected author **Tsitsi Dangarembga**, fresh from being longlisted for the Booker Prize, was among those arrested. **Hundreds** of police and soldiers were deployed in a bid to prevent further protests, checkpoints were set up to prevent people entering Harare and shops were ordered to close. President Emmerson Mnangagwa went on the offensive, **labelling** protesters as 'rogue Zimbabweans', accusing them of being part of 'terrorist opposition groupings' seeking to destabilise the country in 'league with foreign detractors' and **characterising protests**

as a 'planned insurrection'. This was falling back on a trope familiar from the long era of dictatorship under President Robert Mugabe, when all attempts to defend social and economic rights and demand democratic freedoms were characterised as imperial interference in internal affairs. Several protest organisers went into hiding when their names were published on a police wanted list in relation to the protests.

As for Hopewell Chin'ono, his reward for exposing corruption was to be abducted from his home by a group of eight state agents, reportedly without a warrant. He was held in unsanitary and crowded conditions for 45 days on charges of inciting violence for his role in calling for peaceful protests. He was finally bailed in September, after several earlier bail applications had been rebuffed, only to be **arrested** again in November after tweeting about gold smuggling and yet again, for the **third time** in six months, in January 2021 after tweeting about alleged police brutality in enforcing pandemic regulations. It can only be assumed that he was being targeted by a government embarrassed at having corruption exposed. Chin'ono was not alone. An opposition politician, Jacob Ngarivhume, was arrested at the same time as Chin'ono in July in relation to the protest, and another opposition politician, Fadzai Mahere, was **arrested** in January 2021 for sharing the same tweet alleging police brutality. But nor was Chin'ono alone when it came to solidarity. International civil society campaigned for his release, and more than 100 African writers and journalists **signed a petition** calling on the African Union to suspend Zimbabwe for its human rights abuses.

In response to the economic crisis and the state's repressive response, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter mobilised as an **online** campaign, seizing on the prominence of the BlackLivesMatter hashtag (see this report's chapter on the global struggle for racial justice), unleashing **hundreds of thousands** of tweets and winning international support from political figures and music stars around the world. Zimbabweans mobilised outside their country's embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, although when they did so, in August, there too they faced a **violent state response** in the form of rubber bullets and stun grenades that was all too reminiscent of home.

The government appeared set on thwarting potential further labour protests in September when it **revealed** new measures that would make it harder for healthcare workers to unionise, announcing that newly graduated doctors



would be recruited into the army as military doctors before they could work in government hospitals, at a stroke preventing them from taking strike action.

Demands for economic change and civic freedoms remain thwarted because, when Mugabe was forced to step down and Mnangagwa took over, little else changed. The elite, including the powerful military, quickly closed ranks around Mnangagwa. Zimbabwe's political system, and the corruption of those at the top, did not alter. Many in Zimbabwe will continue to take the considerable risk of demanding real change.

## IRAQ: LETHAL RESPONSE TO PROTEST DEMANDS CONTINUES

Much the same could be said of Iraq, where protests against unemployment, corruption and poor public services, making demands for economic, political and social change, have been mobilising since at least 2018, with a great wave of recent protest unfolding from **October 2019** onwards. But in Iraq the state responded with even greater violence, and the violence was lethal and at scale: within six months of protests starting, an estimated **700 people** had been killed, with security forces targeting protesters with live ammunition and at times deploying snipers to pick protesters off.

The state refused to act on protesters' demands, although the continuing protests and internal and international pressure following mass killings forced Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi to **resign** in November 2019; his eventual replacement, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, **emerged** from the complex negotiations between different factions to be appointed prime minister in May 2020. But for the protesters, nothing much has changed, and al-Kadhimi's acknowledgement of protesters' demands and commitment to bring reforms has been **thwarted** by Iraq's political establishment and its many pro-Iran politicians; Iran exerts heavy influence over Iraq as part of its cold war for regional primacy with Saudi Arabia, another issue that protesters sought to challenge and change.

Despite promises of dialogue with protesters and accountability for the excessive use of force, no senior commanders have been **prosecuted**. For many protesters, al-Kadhimi's inability to make any progress on change merely offered further evidence that the political system from which he emerged is corrupt and self-serving and must be swept away.



After weeks of heavily repressed protests, hundreds gather near Tahrir Square, Baghdad, Iraq in November 2019 to pray in memory of the more than 300 protesters killed. Photo by Laurent Van der Stockt for Le Monde/Getty Images

Given the lack of progress in meeting protesters' demands, protests **continued** during 2020. In late January, protesters in the capital, Baghdad, and in the cities of Basra and Nasiriyah, **re-established** bridge and road blockades. In response, security forces resumed their violence. Within days of protests resuming, **at least 10 people** had been reported killed and many more wounded and arrested. In February, armed militias **attacked** protests in the cities of Karbala and Najaf with guns and knives, and in both instances security forces did nothing to stop the attacks; there seemed to be a growing deployment of pro-Iran militias to do the state's dirty work. Several people associated with the protests were killed, disappeared or kidnapped, including, at a time when the country could ill afford to lose them, doctors and other healthcare professionals. Several journalists were also shot and killed, both while covering protests and in what clearly seemed to be targeted assassinations. The pattern of protest and lethal response was continuing. But while in February the Iraqi Human Rights Commission reported its estimate that **almost 550 people** had by that point been killed in protest-related violence, many with live ammunition, the government continued to deny that security forces were shooting at protesters and refused to provide information on numbers of deaths, injuries and arrests.

Despite the risks, women continued to play a prominent role in the forefront of protests. In February, **thousands of Iraqi women** took part in protests in Baghdad and other locales, demanding comprehensive reforms and an end to corruption, and condemning the attacks on protesters, including attacks that targeted women protesters. Young people were to the fore. In Basra, a strong youth-led protest movement had formed over the course of several years, developing protest skills and ever ready to mobilise in response to emerging demands, and it played a leading role in each new wave of protest.

Such was the continuing anger that even as the pandemic spread in Iraq in February and March, people **vowed** to keep up their protest. Some protesters donned masks and mock biohazard suits, insisting, given the extent of the state's lethal repression, that the government was more of a threat to them than the virus. Emergency restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic meant that the protests became smaller, but people **maintained** a protest presence, holding sit-ins in Baghdad's central Tahrir Square. And of course the violence continued. In April a protest camp in Tahrir Square was attacked by a gang bearing machine guns, and in June an armed gang attacked an occupation

in the same square and burned protesters' tents. That same month, a protest in Basra was met with live ammunition and teargas, and arrested protesters were tortured in detention.

Protests that mobilised against pandemic emergency rules and the economic impacts of these on people with low incomes were also responded to with excessive force. Live ammunition and teargas was used against **protests** calling for the payment of delayed wages and a **protest** by government contract workers calling for permanent jobs. Arrests of activists, protest leaders and journalists and attacks and targeted killings by armed militia groups continued.

The **first anniversary** of the upsurge of the mass protest movement, at the start of October, became another focal point for protests and attempts to suppress them. The authorities blocked roads to try to stop protesters from outside Baghdad entering the city, while a gang carrying petrol bombs roamed Tahrir Square as a threat to protesters. In defiance, people still took to the streets in several cities to insist that they would continue to protest until their demands for far-reaching change were met. Security forces stormed a sit-in in Tahrir Square and the main sit-in location in Basra city centre, where they burned the tents protesters had occupied. Two days later, however, protesters defiantly returned to the Basra sit-in, which continued in an uneasy stand-off between protesters and security forces. In November students protested to demand accountability for the many killings of protesters.

When people mobilised after the **killing** of two protesters following a resurgence of mass protests in Baghdad in July, the prime minister stated that he recognised that people have the **right to protest**. He **promised justice** following the **killing** of two young activists in Basra in August. But his continuing inability to stop the slaughter seemed evident. His proposal to put up statues in protest locations to honour those killed was dismissed by many as offering only insulting lip service. Prime Minister al-Kadhimi also seemed to have little room for economic manoeuvre, with the pandemic's economic impacts further compounding the country's reliance on a slumping oil industry. During 2020 the government tried to both cut back on public staff spending and hired hundreds of more state employees to try to address unemployment, suggesting that there was not a plan to meet the deep needs, particularly among Iraq's young people, for jobs and adequate public services.



Determined to press home the need for change, protest leaders decided to challenge the murky world of Iraq's electoral politics, launching a **new political party** <sup>7</sup>, the Imtidad Movement, in January 2021. The party aims to stand candidates in elections scheduled for June 2021, brought forward by Prime Minister al-Kadhimi from the initially planned 2022 date as a way of trying to acknowledge the demands for change. The violence mobilised against activists and protest leaders may well have had the aim of trying to stop such a development; following the announcement, a defamation campaign against those involved mobilised on Facebook. The people who have put themselves forward can expect to be targeted further. Unfortunately in Iraq, people who exercise their fundamental civic rights to seek change need to be very brave. They will keep striving for a country in which wanting to make society better does not entail risking such a heavy price.

## GUATEMALA: PUBLIC SERVICE CUTS REVERSED

One of 2020's biggest protests against public service cutbacks came in Guatemala in November, when thousands **took to the streets** <sup>7</sup> in response to congressional approval of a budget that saw cuts to education and healthcare spending, a staggering political response to a pandemic. The budget was approved with little transparency and minimal debate, and seemed clearly to signal an approach to post-pandemic recovery that prioritised private sector development, with all the associated opportunities for high-level corruption, rather than social welfare. With Guatemala already shocked by two **hurricanes** <sup>7</sup> that destroyed tens of thousands of homes and much agricultural land, it seemed like the state was abandoning people.

**Sandra Morán Reyes** <sup>7</sup>, a women's and LGBTQI+ rights activist and former member of Congress, sees the budget announcement as a tipping point that brought people out to protest, including those who might not previously have joined protests:

The effects of the lack of attention to the impacts of the pandemic and of hurricanes Eta and Iota, which struck in October and November, were compounded by attacks on the officials of the Public Prosecutor's Office who continue to fight against corruption. Discontent continued to



A protestor holds up a banner that reads 'State for the people. Let's defeat the mafias!' during a demonstration at Constitution Square in Guatemala City on 5 December 2020. Photo by Josué Decavele/Getty Images

accumulate until the early hours of November when Congress approved the national budget for 2021. It was a very high budget – the highest in the country’s history – and it included obvious pockets of corruption, especially in the area of infrastructure contracts, which is where the bulk of corruption takes place, but paid no attention to health and education, in the context of a pandemic. Budget cuts even affected the national nutrition programme, in a country that has a huge problem of child malnutrition.

That was the last straw. People who are not normally prone to protest – a professional chef, an artist, many well-known people in different fields – started writing on social media and expressing anger against this decision. That’s how the first demonstration was organised, and suddenly we were about 25,000 people out there, in the middle of a pandemic. No one foresaw such a massive protest, and yet it happened.

The budget controversy brought to a head currents of anger that had long been present in Guatemala and expressed at least since 2015, when **sustained protests** led to the downfall and conviction of the president, after which the political and business elite quickly reorganised to protect its interests, **resisting** United Nations (UN)-backed efforts to end impunity for corruption.

From 2017 onwards, we started denouncing what we called the ‘corrupt pact’ that brought together public officials, businesspeople and even church representatives in defence of their own interests. In 2015, after six months of sustained mass demonstrations, the president and vice president ended up in prison, but the governments that succeeded them ended up reaffirming the same old system. The government of President Jimmy Morales unilaterally ended the agreement with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, and the current government led by President Alejandro Giammattei, following on from its predecessor, has made progress in controlling the judiciary, Congress and all state institutions in order to sustain corruption as a form of government.

The first anniversary of his government was 14 January 2021 and the levels of support it receives are extremely low. Congress also has little legitimacy, given the number of representatives who are part of the ‘corrupt pact’, which is large enough to hold an ordinary majority to pass legislation.

In a further indication of how impunity from corruption is perpetuated, when President Morales’ term came to an end in January, he was immediately **sworn in** as a member of the Central American Parliament, in a move that seemed a clear attempt to ensure immunity from any potential prosecution on corruption charges. That decision also brought protests, which were met with pepper spray and detentions by security forces.



A protestor holds up a poster reading ‘The police don’t take care of me’ during a demonstration held in November 2020 to demand the resignation of Guatemala’s president. Photo by Josue Decavele/Getty Images

The November protests mobilised in response to social media anger and calls for action, but they also built on the work done by social movements over several years, and were accompanied by vital actions of public solidarity in response to the pandemic. People contrasted the support they were able to provide each other with the lack of help they got from their government.

A new government was inaugurated in January, and soon after that we found ourselves locked up because of the pandemic. But by May or June some of our colleagues started to take to the streets again, partly to criticise the government's attitude towards the needs of the population as the effects of the crisis generated by the pandemic began to be clearly seen. Suddenly **white flags** started to appear on the streets, on house doors and in the hands of people and families walking the streets or sitting in doorways. With the white flag people indicated that they did not have enough to eat, and solidarity actions began to take place, for instance in the form of soup kitchens, which did not previously exist in Guatemala. There was a great movement of solidarity among people. While organisations were busy attending to their own members, citizens made great efforts to provide person-to-person support. It became common for people to go out into the streets to give a little of what they had to those who needed it most. This was then repeated regarding those who were affected when hurricanes hit and lost everything.

At the state level, a lot of resources were approved to alleviate the effects of the pandemic, but these resources did not reach the people and the needs of the population remained unmet, so the question that people began to ask was, 'where is the money?'

There were a series of calls through social media that appealed above all to the middle classes, but social movements and Indigenous authorities also made their calls. Indigenous authorities have played an increasingly important role in recent years, and in the context of this crisis they published a statement in which they proposed a governing council of the four main groups of peoples who make up Guatemala – Garífuna, Maya, Mestizo and Xinka – to pave the way for a constituent assembly. They have been visiting territories and working to form alliances, and this was the first time that they have made steps towards the national government, as for now they have only had authority within their territories. The role

they have played is important because the oligarchy has always been afraid of an Indigenous uprising.

Four main actors mobilised: Indigenous peoples, women, young people and what are called 'communities in resistance' – local communities, generally led by women, who are resisting extractive mega-projects in their territories. The latest demonstrations also evidenced the results of the newly achieved unity of the university student movement: from 2015 onwards, students from the public university of San Carlos de Guatemala marched together with those from the two private universities. This was a historical event that marked the return of organised university students to popular struggles.

The role of young people can also be seen within the feminist movement, as there are many young feminist movements. In particular, the Women in Movement collective, a very important expression of university-based feminists, stands out. Sexual diversity organisations have also been present, and have been very active in denouncing femicides and murders of LGBTQI+ people.

These groups were joined by a middle class made impoverished by the severe impact of the pandemic. There were many middle-class people, many white-collar workers and professionals, in the protests. Many people who did not belong to any Indigenous, student or women's organisation or collective went out on their own, moved by the feeling of being fed up. Thus, the November protests were a reflection of both social organisation and citizen autonomy.

The state's first response was one of violence, particularly when some protesters started fires. Videos circulated online showing officers beating protesters and dragging them away. Several people were reported injured, including with eye injuries, and dozens were reported **detained**, while attacks on journalists covering the protests were also reported. The excessive force was condemned by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

The demonstrations were initially peaceful, but already during the second one there was violence and repression. A small group set fire to the Congress building, an event that is still under investigation. This was used to justify the repression: teargas, beatings, arrests and detentions.



In another demonstration, people set fire to a bus. From our perspective, these acts of violence were instigated to justify the need for more police control over demonstrations and ultimately the repression of protests.

But protest pressure produced one quick win: approval of the budget was suspended. President Giammattei opened a dialogue involving civil society, although some of the CSOs invited to take part boycotted it, as they did not believe it to be a serious process. Protests continued, demanding more than the cancellation of the budget, including the resignation of key political leaders and serious action against corruption. Many called for a democratic process to develop a new constitution, as **resulted in Chile** due to mass protests in 2019 (see this report's chapter on democracy under the pandemic). Indigenous roadblock protests mobilised as part of this pressure.

Despite the fact that several sectors mobilised and many demands accumulated, there was an order to the protests' petition list. Although each had its own demands, they all rallied around a few major ones. The key demand was that the president should veto the budget, since what triggered the mobilisation was the impudence of a Congress that made a budget that was clearly not to the benefit of the citizens of Guatemala but to their own, to feed corruption. The demonstrations were an immediate success in that regard, since a few days after the Congress building was burned, Congress backed down and annulled the budget it had previously approved. Along with the withdrawal of the budget, the protesters' demand was the drafting of a new budget that would respond to the needs of the population, but this demand is still pending.

Following the repression of the protests, the resignation of the minister of the interior became a key demand, but this did not happen and this public official remains in office. The president's resignation was also **demand** but did not take place.

Finally, the demand for a new constitution, which has been on the agenda of social movements for several years, was raised again. In 2015, during the big demonstrations that led to the resignation of the entire government, social movements assessed that corruption was not only the fault of some individuals, but more than that, we had a corrupt system and that therefore a change of system was needed. Indigenous

and peasant organisations have their proposal for constitutional change, based on their demand of recognition of Indigenous peoples and the establishment of a plurinational state that would give them autonomy and decision-making power.

Other groups have more embryonic proposals. I was a member of Congress until January, and when I was still in Congress I worked with women's organisations, thinking that this situation could arise and we had to be ready. We started the Movement of Women with Constituent Power to develop a proposal for a new constitution from the perspective of women in all our diversity.

We have a constitution that was drafted in 1985 and it has an important human rights component; it includes the office of the Ombudsman, which at the time was an innovation. But human rights are approached from an individual perspective; collective rights and peoples' rights are absent, as are the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people. And so are the most advanced innovations in constitutional matters, such as the rights of nature. Ours is a political proposal for the emancipation of peoples, women and sexual diversity. It is based on the idea of an economy for life, which puts the community at the centre, and on a feminist economy that reorganises work and care tasks.

Indeed, rights challenges are enduring, including attacks on women's rights and the rights of LGBTQI+ people (see this report's chapter on challenging exclusion). And as in several other Latin American countries (see further below), Indigenous peoples' rights defenders, who stand in the way of development projects that offer lucrative opportunities for corruption, faced grave threats throughout 2020. Attacks on human rights defenders **increased** during the pandemic. In September the IACHR **condemned** the murders of and attacks on Indigenous and land rights defenders, stating that between June and August alone there had been eight killings, and reminded the government of its legal obligation to adopt a protection policy for human rights defenders. Among those killed was **Medardo Alonzo Lucero**, who had opposed a mining company's attempt to exploit Indigenous territory, and who was found dead showing signs of torture. Indigenous women's rights defenders are subject to **violence and threats**. President Giammattei's unwillingness to respect and listen to Indigenous voices was made clear in July, when he **interrupted** an Indigenous leader's speech and made insulting remarks.

Indigenous citizen **journalists**↗, journalists reporting on anti-corruption protests and **environmental journalists**↗ were attacked, **threatened**↗ and faced multiple smears, from both state and non-state sources. Journalists further encountered **increased hostility**↗ from the president and government officials when reporting on the pandemic, and experienced restrictions in reporting on hospital conditions. Guatemala's journalist association **reported**↗ that 2020 was the most violent year for journalists since the period of military rule, with 149 documented cases of attacks and restrictions, including three deaths. The association pointed the finger directly at President Giammattei for encouraging a hostile climate towards the media.

In another move that seemed designed to suppress dissent, in February Congress approved a decree, hurriedly and with little debate, that would have given it **sweeping powers**↗ over CSOs. Fortunately the Supreme Court intervened to suspend the decree, despite President Giammattei saying that he would not back down. The decree, which would have imposed harsh penalties for vague offences and automatic cancellation of legal status in cases of a failure to update registration, as well as granting the state the power to force the closure of CSOs, is currently the subject of several legal challenges from CSOs and has been condemned as incompatible with the freedom of association by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the IACHR. These instances from 2020 indicate the scale of the reform challenge.

The protests will continue. The minister of finance is drawing up a new budget. It remains to be seen not only how much will be invested in health, education and economic revival, but also what they think 'economic revival' actually means. Until now the emphasis has always been on international private investment, which only generates opportunities for greater exploitation and mega-projects. The demands of rural populations, peasants and Indigenous peoples are going to continue to be expressed on the streets.

It will not take much to revive citizen protest, since after the November demonstrations the president made a series of promises that he has not kept.

The anger at corruption, and a determination to replace a political system that is rotten to the core with something that speaks to the contemporary needs of

Guatemala's diverse peoples, will remain. Post-pandemic reconstruction should provide the opportunity, while examples such as Chile prove that protests can lead to breakthroughs. The obviously self-serving nature of the proposed post-pandemic path and its failure to speak to people's needs may just have pushed people in Guatemala past a point of no return.



People gather to protest against corruption on Guatemala City's main square on 28 November 2020. Photo by Daniele Volpe/Bloomberg via Getty Images

## COSTA RICA AND URUGUAY: DEMANDS FOR ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES AND LABOUR RIGHTS

Guatemalans were not alone. Country after country in Latin America saw people rise up to insist on their right to have a say in the economic decisions made by governments, call for alternatives to neoliberal economics and its austerity prescriptions and defend their labour rights.

When the government of Costa Rica struck a deal with the IMF to borrow US\$1.75 billion for its post-pandemic recovery plans in September, part of what it agreed to in return was to increase taxes. For many people, in an economy hit hard by the pandemic and with unemployment standing at **20 per cent**, the idea of tax rises was simply a step too far. **Carlos Berríos Solórzano** of **Asociación Agentes de Cambio-Nicaragua** (Association Agents of Change – Nicaragua) and **Red Previos** (Central American Youth Network) gives the background:

Costa Rica had not requested IMF financing for almost 20 years. The proposal would eventually entail a tax increase in a country where the cost of living is already high. In fact, recent public finance legislation had introduced a tax increase that made already high taxes even heavier.

In addition to an increase in income and property taxes, the **proposed** agreement with the IMF included new taxes on banking transactions and global income. It also proposed merging some public institutions and selling others, such as the Costa Rican International Bank and the National Spirits Factory.

The government announced its proposal unilaterally, without any consultation whatsoever, when a negotiation of such dimensions and with such implications by far exceeds the sphere of the economy and should be subjected to political negotiations with the participation of all major social forces. The consequences of reaching an agreement with the IMF must be subjected to public debate, which in this case initially did not take place.

Costa Rica had seen a major public sector workers' strike in **2018** over an earlier government attempt to introduce a package of neoliberal austerity

measures, including benefit cuts and increased indirect taxation; the government reversed these after several days of strike action. In January 2020, the government moved to make such strikes harder in future, when it **passed a law** limiting the grounds on which people could take strike action, and preventing people working in roles categorised as essential from striking, while strikes deemed to be political were made illegal.

Regardless, huge **protests** mobilised in response to the September announcement, characterised by roadblocks, and their impact was rapid. After three days of protests, the government reported that **33 roadblocks** had been organised, obstructing access to key ports, airports and border crossing points. The government dropped the proposal.

Despite this, protests continued, having taken on a range of concerns. Protests represented diverse shades of opinion, including those opposed to any tax rises and those calling for the burden of taxation to shift onto large corporations rather than people who already had little. Even once the plans had been dropped, people called on the government to commit to not raising taxes in future. People called for no more austerity measures or privatisation, while others accused the government of wasteful spending and called for politicians' pay to be cut. A range of groups was involved in the protests, including politicians opposed to the government, who set up the National Resistance Movement, but also **labour unions** and rural groups, many of which blocked roads in their locales and demanded action on their issues of concern.

Mainly trade unions, working class people and public servants, as well as social and student movements, came out to protest. Their main demand was that the government suspend its proposal to request IMF financing and abandon the idea of privatising public companies and increasing the tax burden. Trade union organisations were faster than others to identify the impact of a financing agreement with the IMF on their agendas and their struggles.

Civil society denounced the executive's intentions, warned of the consequences, worked to educate the public and to open debate, and supported mobilisation.



As protests set in, some acts of violence broke out, with groups of protesters burning vehicles and security forces trying to break up protests with force. Violence flared during a march in the capital, San José, on 12 October. Some protesters threw rocks at police officers and the police used teargas against protesters. Elsewhere, a police car was reportedly set on fire. Both the government and some protest leaders agreed that **violent gangs** ↗ linked to organised crime and drug trafficking had infiltrated the protests. The government also admitted that police officers had attended protests in **plain clothes** ↗, but denied that they had instigated violence.

In the wake of the protests the government instituted a multi-sectoral dialogue, similar to that offered following similar protests in **Ecuador in 2019** ↗, but some of those invited questioned whether the government was offering this in good faith, given that at the same time it brought **criminal charges** ↗ against six National Resistance Movement leaders on grounds such as obstruction of public highways and illicit association, and also tried and failed to get a **court order** ↗ to prevent three of the leaders participating in any further protests. Given such suspicions, some politicians and unions said they would **not take part** ↗ in the dialogue, while the National Resistance Movement was not invited. The first attempt to hold a dialogue failed, before the process finally **began** ↗ on 23 October. Agreement remained elusive, processes were characterised by a level of suspicion and the threat remained of an IMF deal being struck to which many were opposed.

Demonstrations continued, and in response to them the government made public its negotiating strategy with the IMF and opened its proposal to comments from all sectors. On 11 October, the government announced a national and local ‘social dialogue’, in which 25 representatives from various sections of society – business, labour, women, churches, university students, farmers and others – would submit their own proposals for resolving the economic crisis deepened by the pandemic. The **question** ↗ posed was very specific: ‘How can we achieve a permanent improvement of at least 2.5 percentage points of the GDP in the central government’s primary deficit and a short-term decrease in the amount of public debt (of about eight percentage points of GDP), through a mix of revenue, expenditure and public debt management actions, in order to prevent the state from defaulting?’

Despite the intense process of dialogue with various sectors and the valuable contributions brought into this process, substantive demands have not been met, although according to the government they are being considered within the institutional framework in order to give them the attention they deserve.

The protests resumed precisely because the dialogue process showed no results and the authorities demonstrated little political will in terms of compliance. This was reflected in the announcement that the government would move forward with its funding request. Indeed, following the dialogue process, the executive remained firm in its proposal to request IMF financing. In retrospect, in view of these results, civil society assessed that the call for social dialogue had been nothing more than a demobilisation strategy.

Further protests on the government’s negotiations with the IMF followed, and at one such protest on 29 October, a journalist who was present to report on events and was displaying media ID was **detained** ↗ as the police tried to prevent the demonstration. The government is evidently still suspicious of those who disagree with the direction it sees for Costa Rica. The country remains divided and characterised by deep distrust. Some people, including many rural communities, feel cut off from decision-making and not listened to by the government. Truly inclusive processes that bring everyone together to come up with some new answers that can win broad consensus are still needed.

While it is true that Costa Rica enjoys a robust institutional framework compared to its Central American neighbours, which has resulted in economic and social stability, it also continues to fail to address deep social inequalities in the country’s most vulnerable areas. Social problems are neglected because of a lack of political will and the existence of levels of corruption that, while not scandalous by international standards, permeate the country’s political and economic structures and allow the political class and the economic elite to collude and share the spoils of the state.

The protests highlighted unresolved structural problems in Costa Rica. They brought together unsatisfied immediate demands and structural problems related to the distribution of wealth, tax evasion by big business and the control of economic elites over the state apparatus, which materialises in the social inequality of migrants, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and rural people.

As in Costa Rica, in Uruguay during 2020 one area of civil society concern was the passing of a **package of laws** that, among other things, will make it harder to strike or deploy the key protest tactic of blockading roads, and will give the police new powers to use force against protesters. The new laws could also potentially criminalise criticism of the policing of protests. The package of laws, which also included several neoliberal economic changes, including in relation to education and healthcare, was passed by Uruguay's right-of-centre government of President Luis Lacalle Pou, who took office in March. The legislative package, containing almost 500 articles, was passed using a procedure provided in the constitution for the passing of urgent laws. Civil society complained that the new laws had been rushed through with little debate or scrutiny. They were passed in the face of **mass protests** and strikes, and demands to hold a referendum on the changes were ignored.

In **November**, more than 100 organisations, including unions and other CSOs, came together to keep up the pressure, forming a National Commission with a **campaign** of collecting signatures for a petition to convene a referendum to repeal 135 troubling **articles** of the legislative package. The bar is high, because in Uruguay 25 per cent of the electorate, some 680,000 people, need to back such a proposal before a referendum is held. As of February 2021, some 135,000 signatures had already been collected, and efforts will continue to recruit the support needed by the July 2021 deadline.

The protests against the hurried passing of the legislative package indicated the existence of a wider fault-line in Uruguay that continued to be seen through the year. In August, as the government's budget was under debate, students' and teachers' unions **mobilised** thousands of people to protest against proposed education cuts, calling instead for greater investment in public education. And in September, the national trade union confederation, PIT-CNT, held a 24-hour **general strike** against the government's proposed cutbacks in education and healthcare spending. Again the **call** was for a very different alternative economic approach, including for a guaranteed basic income.

As in Costa Rica, there is considerable division that has been left unresolved, and two very different sets of ideas about what Uruguay's post-pandemic economy should look like.

## PANAMA AND PARAGUAY: CUTBACKS AND CORRUPTION

In Panama too people **protested** against government **budget cuts** in education and healthcare, with students to the fore in October protests. The police response was one of excessive force, and at least six people were **detained**, including a journalist covering the protest, Juan Alberto Cajar, who reported that the police had used pepper spray against him and beat him, despite Cajar having clearly identified himself as a journalist. The police denied this, even though photo and video evidence confirmed it, and then doubled down on the repression by delaying Cajar's release from detention and attempting to charge him for public disorder. The move brought civil society condemnation, before the police relented, dropping the charges and apologised to Cajar. Earlier, in September, **students** blocked a major road in the capital, Panama City, using burning tyres as a barricade, to protest against university budget cuts that would put the university's plans for faculty of medicine at risk.

These protests came on top of multiple mobilisations in which people demanded pandemic relief and complained about slow and absent support, with government sources indicating that **at least 57** such demonstrations were in the last two weeks of April and first week of May alone, in response to which the government provided digital vouchers to enable people to buy essential groceries. Protests against the lack of aid included a roadblock in the city of La Chorrera in April, to which the authorities responded by detaining 42 people. When the economy started to reopen in June, unions **protested** further at the lack of adequate measures to protect workers.

Paraguay saw a series of **protests** over corruption and public sector cutbacks in June and July. Anger grew after reports of **corruption** in the procurement of medical equipment in response to the pandemic. In response people formed a series of **vehicle convoys**, in which they sounded horns and flew banners from their vehicles, as a form of distanced protest. A range of civil society groups, including labour unions, was **involved** in the protests, in which people also expressed their disagreement with the government's plans to privatise some key state agencies and alleged electricity overcharging.

And then the months of October and November brought a second wave of protests, with mobilisations of rural and Indigenous social movements seeking pandemic support but also making further demands, including for land redistribution and social housing construction. In October, protesters **set up camps** in central parts of the capital, Asunción. They vowed to stay until government leaders met them to discuss their demands for support in response to both the pandemic and drought, and also debt cancellation and the right to land.

Over a thousand protesters **marched again** in November, calling for commitments the government had made on debt renegotiation for small farmers, in response to the October protests, to be honoured. Their struggles will continue. Inequality in land ownership remains a controversial issue in

Paraguay, where many smallholder farmers struggle to eke out a living and large-scale farming concerns engaged in intensive soybean production have advantages that were handed to them in the dictatorship era.

The levels of exclusion that campesinos (peasant people) face and the precariousness of rural life was made clear in December, when police violently **evicted** over 150 families from a campesino settlement in Caazapá province, and arrested and mistreated those who resisted. The background is one of **growing hostility** towards and criminalisation of members of campesino, Indigenous, labour union and student movements, as evidenced by the baseless **smear campaign** mounted against Alter Vida, a CSO that works with an Indigenous community threatened by ranchers and land grabbers, which was falsely accused of corruption and money laundering.



People in Asunción, Paraguay, demonstrate against corruption and over the mishandling of the pandemic on 7 March 2021. Photo by Luis Vera/Getty Images



## TUNISIA: 10 YEARS ON FROM THE 'ARAB SPRING'

Lives remain hard for many in Tunisia, often lauded as the sole lasting success story of that great wave of mobilisation 10 years ago often referred to at the time as the 'Arab Spring'. Libya, Syria and Yemen slid into deadly and ongoing conflict, authoritarianism was intensified in Bahrain and Egypt and demands for fundamental political change remain blocked not only in Iraq, as discussed above, but also, among other countries, in Algeria and Lebanon (see this report's chapter on democracy under the pandemic). A decade after young fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in protest at state repression and corruption, democratic practices have been sustained in Tunisia and backsliding towards authoritarianism resisted, thanks to concerted **civil society efforts** ↗ to defend democratic freedoms.

But throughout 2020 and into 2021, discontent continued to fuel demands for economic change. Tunisia's youthful population experience chronic unemployment. Worsening economic crisis under the pandemic has driven an **exodus** ↗ of refugees by sea, seeking a better life in Europe. For many, the social and economic problems that drove the revolution as much as a thirst for democracy have been neglected. Corruption remains a daily blight encountered by many. If political elites have been refreshed by the holding of elections, gulfs **remain** ↗ between those elites and communities, particularly people far from the capital.

In March, the pandemic lockdown prompted widespread **protests** ↗, with people calling for the state to provide financial aid in recompense for their loss of essential income. Part of the government's response was to **detain** ↗ bloggers who criticised government failures to ensure basic food supplies and provide financial aid to those worst affected. As **Ramy Khouili** ↗ of the **Tunisian Association of Democratic Women** ↗ points out, the economic impacts of lockdown cut deep on women in particular:

Due to the economic crisis that came with the pandemic, many women lost their jobs, or are not getting paid. Many women in Tunisia work in the informal sector so they could not continue their work and were left without any income. This is affecting their ability to take care of

themselves and their families. The situation is really alarming because domestic workers cannot work during lockdown and have no other source of income. Although the informal sector represents a large part of the economy, the relief measures adopted by the government only apply to the formal sector. In addition, government aid was given to families, but according to Tunisian law it is men who are the head of the family, so money goes mostly to men. In cases of conflict, violence or separation, women won't have access to government aid.

An accelerating economic crisis as the year went on saw a further **burgeoning** ↗ of protests, mostly led by unemployed young people. Part of the state's response was to seek to extend impunity for security force violence, with the introduction of a draft law, filled with vague terminology, extending immunity for security force officers and giving them broad permission to use firearms, up to and including lethal force. The discussion of the bill to parliament in October was greeted with **protests** ↗, which were in turn met with security force violence, with several people beaten and detained. Women protesters were subjected to sexual assault and harassment, and people who expressed support for the protests online also faced police interrogation.

Violent **protests** ↗ marked the transition to 2021 as **young people** ↗ demonstrated in working-class suburbs of the capital, Tunis, and in other neighbourhoods experiencing economic strife. People called attention to the fact that they lacked the money even to buy essential foods. As protesters set off fireworks and threw stones in January 2021 protests, a heavily armoured police force responded with clouds of teargas. The death of a protester, **Haykel Rachdi** ↗, reportedly after being struck with a teargas cannister, further angered protesters. As protests continued almost daily, protesters **demand** ↗ an end to police brutality and called for police reform to be enacted as part of the unfinished business of the revolution, **repurposing** ↗ slogans from the revolution 10 years ago. Continuing police impunity and a hardline approach to protest seemed **incompatible** ↗ with that revolution.

The state's response to the protest kept providing further examples of brutality. The army was **deployed** ↗ in several cities. At the time of writing some **1,600 people** ↗ were reported to have been arrested, many of them teenagers, and many of those arrested were detained in crowded and unsanitary conditions, and subjected to ill-treatment. Troublingly, security forces were accused of

specifically targeting LGBTQI+ protesters for arrest. Among them was **Rania Amdouni** ٢, an artist and LGBTQI+ activist sentenced to six months in jail in March 2021 after taking part in protests.

The protests further fuelled ongoing political tussles between Tunisia's president and prime minister, following September 2019 elections that resulted in a fragmented parliament. A new, fragile coalition government was **agreed** ٣ in February 2020, only to collapse in July after the largest party, Ennahdha, **withdrew** ٤ its support; 2020 was a year in which Tunisia had three prime ministers. In the wake of the January 2021 protests Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi reshuffled his cabinet, but promoted several people alleged to have been involved in corruption; President Kais Saied's response was to reject those appointments, leaving a political stand-off. In February 2021, Ennahdha, which was backing the prime minister against the president, organised its own large-scale **counter-protest** ٥, leading to fears that polarisation was setting in.

These political power struggles offered little that could speak to people's economic anger, and rather seemed to signal how disconnected the political class had become from the daily strife people experience. Meanwhile, foreign lenders were demanding large spending cuts if they were to provide fresh loans towards a government with a deep budget deficit; if these were implemented, further mass protests would be guaranteed to follow.

Tunisia's democracy remains under pressure, but part of its vulnerability comes from the siren voices of powerful politicians who want to suppress protests and repress dissent in the name of protecting political institutions. Political leaders must continue to recognise dissent as part of democracy, rather than act as though formal democracy needs to be protected from dissent. Economic change has to follow. In any society, people will become disenchanted with the system if they cannot get jobs, their public services do not work and they cannot access the essentials of life. Ten years on, the eyes of the world will remain on Tunisia.



Ten years ago, people in Tunisia took part in a massive campaign of civil resistance leading to the ousting of a long-time dictator and a transition to democracy. Photo by Christopher Furlong/ Getty Images



## INDONESIA: LABOUR RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENCE IN THE FIRING LINE

Demands for economic rights and environmental defence came together in Indonesia, where mass protests mobilised throughout 2020 against labour law changes. As in Uruguay, the Indonesian government passed a huge legislative package with far-reaching implications, and with very little discussion. The so-called Job Creation Law, a wide-ranging omnibus law running to over 1,000 pages, was positioned as an initiative that would make it easier for Indonesia to attract foreign investment. The biggest package of legislative changes in Indonesia for decades, it removed many regulations on land acquisition and use and environmental regulations and wiped away many labour protections. Labour unions pointed out that the law had been drafted without any consultation with them.

The government asserted that increased foreign investment would lead to more jobs, but the concern of those protesting, and as seen in other countries in the region that have liberalised and removed regulations, is that jobs will be low-paid and insecure, and it will become harder to demand better working conditions. Those protesting were not prepared to see themselves as a pool of contract workers available to be hired and fired at whim. Among the rights that people stood to lose, according to drafts of the law, were mandatory paid leave for childbirth, weddings and bereavements and menstrual leave for women, while maximum overtime hours were to be extended, sectoral minimum wages would be abolished and the mandatory severance pay to be paid by employers was to be reduced. The law therefore threatened to impact particularly severely on **women workers** ↗, who already face more precarious working conditions.

Concerns also focused on the new law's apparent aim of removing environmental regulations, including a reduction of the need to undertake community consultation ahead of development, and changes to make it easier to acquire and change the use of land, including forested land. The potential seemed clear for the changes to drive an expansion of extractive industries and the development of rural lands, increasing climate-harming emissions, causing local environmental damage and impacting on the rights of affected communities. The law's **removal of regulations** ↗ on the coal industry and palm



Workers take part in a protest against the Job Creation Law passed by parliament in Jakarta, Indonesia on 2 November 2020. Photo by Oscar Siagian/Getty Images



oil biofuel use, and its lack of any reference to cleaner energy development, seemed clearly at odds with Indonesia's commitments, as one of the world's top 10 emitters, under the Paris Agreement. It threatened to reverse recent progress made in **slowing** ↗ the loss of forests, in a country that has shown itself not to be isolated from the impacts of climate change; the start of 2020 saw the worst **flooding** ↗ in over a decade in the capital, Jakarta, with over 60 people reported dead and thousands of homes destroyed or damaged. For CSOs working on environmental issues, the law would seem to reduce their opportunities to challenge environmentally damaging developments and exercise scrutiny over new projects.

**Mass protests** ↗ first mobilised against the new law in January, when labour unions worked together to bring thousands of people to the streets. Some of those taking part in protests **reported** ↗ that they experienced intimidation and harassment. But despite these dangers, as the year went on, the coalition of those opposed to the law grew, encompassing a variety of civil society groups and networks, including labour unions, environmental groups, Indigenous and land rights movements, faith networks and student organisations, along with many academics. Even a group of 35 international investors **stated** ↗ that they feared the changes would not be consistent with international best practice.

Despite the strength of the opposition against it, the omnibus law was **passed** ↗ at short notice in a special, unscheduled parliamentary session held on 5 October. While the government insisted that the economic downturn caused by the pandemic made the passing of the law more urgent, workers pointed out that they were already carrying a heavy burden because of the pandemic's impacts that the changes were likely to make worse.

As the law was passed, police stopped people heading to parliament to protest, while unions announced an immediate strike. Strikes in Indonesia's main industrial zones between 6 and 8 October saw thousands of young people and university students protest alongside striking workers. Around **50,000 people** ↗ protested in Jakarta, with mass protests in Indonesia's other major cities. President Joko Widodo however refused to acknowledge the validity of any criticisms, belying the international reputation he has cultivated as a moderate and moderniser by falling back on a tactic commonly used by autocrats, **claiming** ↗ that people had been mobilised by disinformation and social media hoaxes. Key civil society groups, including Nahdlatul Ulama, said

to be the largest independent Islamic membership organisation in the world, and the Indonesian Trade Union Confederation, filed petitions against the new law with the Constitutional Court.

The state's response to the October protests was one of excessive force and mass arrests. The police used teargas and water cannon, and there were hundreds of reports of alleged physical assault by security force officers. The Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (KontraS) reported that hundreds of people were also missing. The Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation **reported** ↗ that some of their members who were providing legal support to those arrested were beaten by the police; police officers were also reported to have attacked paramedics giving medical treatment to protesters and denied food to arrested protesters. In the city of **Bandung** ↗, it was reported that security force officers beat, kicked and stripped protesters, and confiscated their personal property as they were arrested. There were reports of mass arrests at public transport stations and in universities. People trying to monitor protests were also arrested.

These brutal attacks on rights hardly came out of the blue, as those who stand up for labour and environmental rights of the kind being eroded by the omnibus law have long learned to expect a hostile response in Indonesia. In March three environmental activists involved in resisting a land grab from farmers by a private company were **arrested** ↗ after going to Jakarta to meet with the National Human Rights Commission. The following month, **Hermanus Bin Bison** ↗, an Indigenous farmer and environmental rights defender, died in custody after having been refused medical treatment. He had been arrested while protesting against a palm oil company by harvesting palm fruit from community land that the company is accused of having illegally acquired. The authorities had **failed** ↗ to take his worsening health condition seriously and kept him in a crowded cell. Numerous people were also **charged** ↗ under criminal defamation laws for criticising the government's pandemic response.

During the protests, there were also multiple reports of attacks on journalists, including police officers beating journalists who were shooting videos. On 10 October, the Alliance of Independent Journalists **stated** ↗ that at least 28 journalists had reported experiencing police violence while covering the protests. Online freedom of expression suffered too. On 13 October, the police **arrested** ↗ eight members of the Save Indonesia Coalition for their social

media reports in support of the protests. They were arrested on the grounds of spreading ‘hate speech’, under the Electronic Information and Transaction Law, a vague and broad-reaching law that has often been used against critics of the government in recent years. More arrests followed on 21 October, when seven managers of social media groups were also arrested and charged with provocation to commit criminal acts.

Evidently social media users were being blamed for incidences of protest violence, in which transport stops were set on fire. Seizing on these incidents, the security minister **described** <sup>7</sup> the protests as ‘anarchist actions’, a slur echoed by senior police officials. The police seemed politically implicated in the suppression of protests and propagandising for the new law. An internal police directive **came to light** <sup>7</sup> ordering the police to ‘cyber patrol’ social media, on the grounds of preventing crowds from gathering under the pandemic, with the aim of discouraging people from participating in protests, and to offer ‘counter narratives’ to criticism of the government.

After several days of protests, the Education and Culture Ministry **circulated** <sup>7</sup> a letter calling on students not to take part in the protests, in a move criticised by education unions as government interference in educational independence and the culture of academic debate. Two union leaders also **reported** <sup>7</sup> having been approached by police and intelligence officials prior to the protests in a bid to get them to limit the numbers of workers taking part. The picture, in short, was one of a government, having hurriedly passed a clearly unpopular law, making every effort to reduce the scale of protests and then repressing them when they happened at scale regardless. The government could reasonably be accused of seeking economic development at the expense of human rights, democratic dissent and environmental protection. If the international message was that Indonesia was open for business, then the question could reasonably be: at what cost?

When the dust settled, the law had been passed, and those who protested against it continue to campaign for decent labour conditions and respect for the environmental standards. The judicial review brought in response to the civil society lawsuit is proceeding, and unions committed to holding further protests to keep up the pressure. However, already there were **reports** <sup>7</sup> that some companies had dismissed permanent staff and rehired them as contract workers.

Many will find it impossible to move on given the scale of violence and repression unleashed against the October protests. A report from KontraS at the year’s end **suggested** <sup>7</sup> that 232 people had been injured and 4,555 arrested. Amnesty International Indonesia’s monitoring suggested the violations had been even more extensive, **documenting** <sup>7</sup> at least 411 people who had experienced police violence and 6,658 arrests. There has been little accountability over the police’s actions, and after a year when the spotlight fell on police brutality, not only in Indonesia but around the world, the many people who protested against environmental damage and the loss of their labour rights, in Indonesia and the many other countries in this report, know that they deserve better.



Students and workers protest against the Job Creation Law on 8 October 2020 in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. Photo by Ulet Ifansasti/Getty Images

# DEMANDS FOR CLIMATE ACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

As several of the above examples suggest, the frontline of seeking change and holding governments to account on economic and environmental issues begins with the many grassroots environmental, Indigenous and land rights defenders who are daily working to resist key sources of environmental harm and economic inequality: the activists against extractive industries, intrusive, damaging and unaccountable big development projects, corporate agriculture and other unsustainable practices that cause local environmental harm, contribute their emissions to climate crisis, impact on human rights at the community level and generate income not for local communities but distant companies.

Much of the work done by these human rights defenders lacks international recognition and connections are not made often enough between many

of the large-scale climate mobilisations described below and the ongoing, often decades-long, stalwart work of people and groups who defend local environments, resist practices that degrade natural resources and model small-scale, locally driven and sustainable alternatives that offer good stewardship of the local natural resources that communities rely on. These people and groups need more praise and more support, but they also need more protection, because they are endangered. To stand up against environmental damage is to stand in the way of the profit-seeking goals of big business and the political elites and corrupt law enforcement officials they are often enmeshed with. People who stand against webs of economic and political interests can pay with their lives. The heavy repression they face in numerous countries makes clear the size of the challenge that must be overcome, and the need for planet-wide solidarity.



A group of Indigenous Q'eqchi' women demand 'justice, truth and reparations' during an anti-government protest in Guatemala City on 10 December 2020. Photo by Josué Decavele/Getty Images



## GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION: FOCUS ON LATIN AMERICA

In 2020 a cluster of Latin American countries exemplified the problems, including several of those described above along with many others. Honduras has long been recognised as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental defenders, and sadly nothing happened in 2020 to belie that reputation. Leaders of campesino and Garífuna – Black Indigenous – movements came under violent attack throughout the year. In April, **Iris Argentina Álvarez** <sup>7</sup>, a campesino collective leader, was killed during a violent eviction by private security officers working for a **sugar company** <sup>7</sup>. She led a cooperative working on land recovery. In June, **Antonio Bernárdez Suazo** <sup>7</sup>, a Garífuna rights defender, was found dead with bullet wounds and showing signs of torture. Young environmentalist Marvin Damián Castro Molina was found dead in July. He had reported fearing for his life.

Environmental rights activist **Arnold Joaquín Morazán Erazo** <sup>7</sup> was shot and killed in October. He was a member of an Indigenous Guapinol community who had been campaigning against a mining project that would adversely impact on the local environment, and particularly on water sources. The Guapinol water defenders have become subject to criminalisation, violence, intimidation, smearing and surveillance for standing in the way of the mining project. The killing came just before an important court hearing on the community's complaint; **another environmental defender** <sup>7</sup> was killed just before an earlier court hearing in 2019; the intention to try to silence Guapinol voices in legal processes seemed clear. Meanwhile a group of eight water defenders are being held in detention as a result of a complaint filed by the Inversiones Los Pinares company, and judges have **refused** <sup>7</sup> to release them.

There was no let-up in the slaughter before the end of the year. In November, **Laura Carolina Valentín Dolmo** <sup>7</sup>, a young Garífuna defender, was found dead in a river, and then in December **two more environmental defenders** <sup>7</sup> were killed within days of each other. Félix Vásquez, leader of a rural workers' union, was killed in front of his family by a group of masked assailants. He had campaigned against the local environmental impacts of extractive industries and, when he received death threats, asked for but did not receive protection. Indigenous leader José Adán Medina was then ambushed and shot dead. He had stood up to local loggers and landowners.



Indigenous protesters gather outside Brazil's Supreme Court in Brasilia in February 2020 to assert their rights over their lands. Photo by Andressa Anholete/Getty Images

Alongside the killings there were numerous other threats. La Via Campesina, the international peasants' movement, experienced a series of attacks on its offices in Honduras. In one such raid in February, data relating to its campaign against military-run agriculture projects was **stolen** <sup>7</sup>. In July, five Garífuna people were **abducted** <sup>7</sup> by armed assailants wearing police uniforms; in response, Garífuna protesters blocked a highway in protest and **demand** <sup>7</sup> the return of the five. Honduras also saw many **protests** <sup>7</sup> over lack of food under the pandemic lockdown, which were dispersed with excessive force, with the police using firearms and teargas.

While Costa Rica is a Central American country with a better record than Honduras when it comes to respect for human rights, environmental activism can be dangerous there too. In 2020, Costa Rica's Indigenous people faced a series of attacks for defending their lands. In February, **Jerhy Rivera** <sup>7</sup>, an Indigenous leader who had defended his community's land, was killed by an armed group of land invaders. He had previously been subject to violence and

## STAND AS MY WITNESS THE GUAPINOL WATER DEFENDERS

Imagine being in prison? The 'crime'? Speaking up and standing for what you believe in. CIVICUS is sharing the stories of people behind bars and urging people to call on governments to protect rights, uphold justice and stop harassing and imprisoning human rights defenders across the globe. Human rights defenders are asking you to #StandAsMyWitness.

The Guapinol Water Defenders tell their story:

We are the Guapinol Water Defenders. We are Porfirio Sorto Cedillo, José Avelino Cedillo, Orbin Naún Hernández, Kevin Alejandro Romero, Arnold Javier Aleman, Ever Alexander Cedillo, Daniel Márquez and Jeremías Martínez Díaz, Defenders of Tocoa, in the northern region of Honduras. We are being charged with arson and unlawful deprivation of liberty. We were protesting against the implementation of a mining project in the protected Carlos

Escalares area that would endanger fresh water sources in the region.

In September 2018, private security guards hired by the mining company, Inversiones Los Pinares, attempted to evict the peaceful protester's camp set up in defence of fresh water located in the community of Guapinol. As a result, a young protester was seriously injured and 32 community members were criminalised while security guards have not been investigated. We have been in pre-trial detention since September 2019 and were held for several months in a maximum-security prison. Some of us have pre-existing conditions, such as hypertension and asthma, making us particularly vulnerable during the pandemic.

All possible legal measures have been taken in our favour in Honduras. The Supreme Court of Justice rejected a writ of habeas corpus filed on our behalf in March 2020 and the Court of Appeals has refused to grant a new hearing to review the measures imputed against us or to resolve the three appeals that have been filed that could set us free. Threats and intimidations against land and water defenders in the Tocoa region continue. To date, the mining company, Inversiones Los Pinares, is operating without the consent of local communities that have voiced their disagreement with the project.



**TAKE ACTION. CALL FOR THE GUAPINOL  
WATER DEFENDERS' RELEASE** ↗

been granted precautionary measures by the IACHR. That same month another Indigenous leader was shot in the leg, and then his attacker was quickly set free. People protested outside the presidential house to demand justice, but the violence continued. The land of Indigenous land defender Pablo Sibar was subjected to **multiple arson attacks** in March and others reported receiving death threats. July saw a series of **violent attacks** against the Bribri, Brörán and Maleku Indigenous communities, in response to Indigenous people resettling and restoring ancestral lands.

Brazil's activists for environmental and Indigenous rights could expect little protection from their climate-denying government. In June, **two Indigenous Yanomami people** of the Xaruma community were killed by illegal goldminers. Movement of illegal goldminers into Indigenous communities also helped spread COVID-19 in those communities. As the pandemic **swept through** Indigenous communities, and with little government support, older people were vulnerable, raising the fear that a generation of Indigenous leaders would be lost, and with them much precious Indigenous knowledge. The future seemed at risk too, with the deaths of several **children**. In response to the role illegal miners played in spreading the virus, Yanomami organisations launched a campaign, **Miners Out, Covid Out**. Following this, the IACHR granted a **precautionary measure** calling on the government of Brazil to uphold the rights of the Yanomami community and protect them from COVID-19 risks, including those caused by illegal miners.

Despite this, the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro continued to do everything it could to make life hard for those seeking to defend the environment and protect land from exploitation. In August, the government even moved to deny such voices an international platform, when it reportedly **vetoed** the participation of Indigenous leader Nara Baré in a meeting on Indigenous peoples of the Organisation of American States (OAS). Baré, who heads the Coordination of Indigenous Organisations of the Brazilian Amazon, had been invited to speak on the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous peoples. According to reports, Brazil's ambassador to the OAS requested that Baré be disinvited even though her participation had been confirmed. In another ominous move, in November it was reported that the government was in discussions about introducing a new **regulatory framework** to give it tighter control over CSOs operating in the Amazon region, although the government subsequently appeared to pull back from this following a **backlash** by European Union (EU) parliamentarians.

The Brazilian government's commitment to climate denial even resulted in the **sacking** of yet another national space agency senior official, for giving the government the deforestation data it preferred to deny.

Colombia saw a **surge in killings** of environmental defenders, Indigenous leaders, trade unionists and community leaders in 2020 as rival groups tussled violently to claim territory previously controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and now seen as up for grabs following the 2016 peace deal between FARC and the government of Colombia, which the government has largely **failed** to implement. The statistics are staggering. According to one **report**, in 2020 there were 90 massacres with 383 victims, and a further 310 social leaders and 64 ex-combatants murdered. Some 53 per cent of all cases of killings of human rights defenders worldwide in 2020, as **documented** by Front Line Defenders, were in Colombia.

The situation worsened under pandemic lockdown, which saw an increase in **attacks** on Indigenous people, ethnic minorities and human rights defenders, as the state of emergency offered apparent impunity for killings and armed groups **imposed** their own, brutal pandemic control regimes. Some meetings of the national protection mechanism for people at risk were suspended due to the pandemic and people at risk faced **heightened danger** because they were forced to stay at home or were no longer able to follow security advice to vary their movements as a way of avoiding attack. A mere two-week span in August saw **at least 39 people** killed in seven different incidents. Many of those killed had defended local environments against incursion and degradation. Many communities were **losing their leaders**, those who had spearheaded struggles for rights.

People **expressed their anger** at this dire state of affairs on 21 September 2020, when thousands of Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, along with workers, teachers and students, took part in a **national strike** to protest against the government. Protesters demanded an end to the assassinations, massacres, armed conflict and police repression, and called for action on rising unemployment. The strike was called by a coalition of CSOs, including trade unions. A **further strike** was held on 19 November. Over several days of actions, protests were held in the capital, Bogotá, in other cities, including Barranquilla, Cali, Cartagena, Medellín, Valledupar and Villavicencio, and in the rural communities of the **Catatumbo** on Colombia's border with Venezuela.



While the scenario was undoubtedly bleak for many of Latin America's defenders, with Guatemala (see above) offering another hotspot of repression, there were also events that showed the value and necessity of the work of activists on the frontline. In the northern Peruvian Amazon, following fierce resistance from the Achuar People of the Pastaza and the Wampis Nation, the Chile-based oil company GeoPark announced in July that it would **withdraw** <sup>7</sup> from the region. The decision was the result of years of Indigenous people's **campaigning** <sup>7</sup> and acts of resistance. The Autonomous

Territorial Government of the Wampis Nation and the Federation of the Achuar Nationality of Peru both opposed GeoPark's activities due to serious concerns about potential environmental impacts, the threat to their collective rights and the social tensions generated by having the company in their communities. The Achuar and Wampis peoples consider themselves the best custodians of the five million acres of Amazon rainforest that are their ancestral territories, and will remain vigilant in the face of likely further attempts to exploit their land.



Members of the Indigenous guard take part in a demonstration in Bogotá, Colombia during the general strike against social and economic policies on 21 October 2020. Photo by Diego Cuevas/Vizzor Image/Getty Images





Indigenous people take part in a bus caravan in Bogotá, Colombia during the general strike on 21 October 2020. Photo by Guillermo Legaria/Getty Images

## ESCAZÚ AGREEMENT: A REGIONAL STRUGGLE, ONE COUNTRY AT A TIME

In November 2020, Mexico became the 11th country to ratify the Escazú Agreement – the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean – triggering the clause that determined its entry into force in February 2021. Negotiations towards the Agreement on environmental rights had begun in 2015, and it had finally been adopted in 2018, in the Costa Rican town of Escazú, after extensive civil society involvement that ensured the inclusion of ambitious commitments on prior informed consent from affected communities and the protection of environmental human rights defenders under threat. Escazú is the **first** binding regional environmental treaty and the first in the world that includes provisions about human rights defenders in environmental matters (see this report's chapter about civil society action in the international arena).

The years following the adoption of the Escazú Agreement saw sustained civil society engagement to pressure respective governments to ratify it. Twenty-four of the region's 33 countries took at least the first step of signing the treaty; some countries that had taken part in the negotiations – including Honduras, with its particularly horrendous record on environmental human rights defenders – did not sign it. In 2019, **Guyana** was the first to ratify, in April, followed by **Bolivia** in June and St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines and **Uruguay** in September. Six countries ratified in 2020, often following insistent civil society advocacy: **Ecuador** did so in February, **Antigua and Barbuda, Nicaragua and Panama** in March, and **Argentina** and **Mexico** followed suit in September and November.

In Peru, however, the civil society campaign did not yield the hoped-for result. In October, before Mexico's ratification, Peruvian civil society expected that their country would be the one to ratify and trigger the Agreement's entry into force. But on 20 October, the Peruvian Congress's Foreign Affairs Commission rejected the ratification bill, killing it before it could even proceed to a full debate. While environmental CSOs energetically **campaign** for ratification, powerful economic interests actively voiced their **opposition**. Interest groups such as the National Confederation of Private Business Institutions, the Exporters' Association and the

Lima Chamber of Commerce expressed concerns about the Agreement, which they characterised as excessively impinging on Peru's sovereignty, impacting on investments and increasing bureaucracy and costs. These arguments from business were repeated verbatim by legislators during the congressional session. CSOs and politicians who supported ratification agreed that the failure to ratify the Agreement was the result of a very successful disinformation campaign orchestrated by those whose economic interests are served by existing minimal constraints.

Another country that raised controversy by refusing to ratify the Agreement was **Chile**, which under its previous government had led the Agreement's negotiation process. The Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Environment now claimed that the Agreement was unacceptable on the grounds that it contained 'ambiguous' obligations that could create legal uncertainty and expose the country to international lawsuits. The government also repeated a claim that had been made in Peru, along the lines that its existing environmental rights laws were already adequate, a position that might be expected to lead to support ratification, since the government would have nothing to fear. Similarly in **El Salvador**, despite civil society **advocacy**, President Nayib Bukele rejected ratification by objecting to some clauses that he characterised as not appropriate to his country.

In **Honduras**, CSOs such as the Honduran Social Forum on Foreign Debt and Development and the Honduran Environmental Law Institute (IDAMHO), alongside dozens of grassroots organisations, continued to advocate for their government to start engaging with the Agreement. An IDAMHO lawyer **recognised** that the ratification of the agreement would not be a magical solution to the problems faced by groups such as Guapinol water defenders (see above); even if the Agreement were eventually ratified, much work would still need to be done to inform communities about it and their rights under it. But first, in the face of high private sector influence and the government's evident lack of interest, it will fall on Honduran CSOs and environmental defenders to keep up the pressure on the government to sign, ratify and implement the Escazú Agreement.



## FOCUS ON SOUTH-EAST ASIA

As is clear, Latin America remains a region of great danger for people who defend their local environment, but it is not the only part of the world in which the risks are high. South-East Asia is sadly another.

The authoritarian government of one-party-state Laos brooks little criticism over its programme of dam development, backed by China, as it seeks to exploit its position on the Mekong river to sell electricity to neighbouring countries. Hydroelectric power can offer a less climate-harming alternative to coal and oil-fuelled electricity generation and so be positioned as a response to climate change. But when such projects are in the hands of undemocratic states where civil society cannot advocate for good practice and scrutinise decisions, they can have profoundly negative impacts on human rights. The experience of Laos shows that action on climate change must be action that realises rights and enables people to act to help protect their environment.

The communities who live along the river pay the price of dam development, through displacement, impacts on the environment and the local resources such as fishing that they rely on, and risk of exposure to disaster. A catastrophic dam collapse in **July 2018** <sup>7</sup> vividly demonstrated the risk people face. To this day it is unclear how many died, since it was impossible to ask questions of the government or hold it to account, and after a brief pause the government pressed ahead with its programme of dam building. Demands for justice remain thwarted and at least one activist who questioned the government on its response to the dam collapse lingers in jail. While the rebuilt dam is now active and producing electricity that is sold to Thailand, people **displaced** <sup>7</sup> by the disaster remain in temporary housing, have not been adequately compensated and struggle to obtain even the essentials of living.

In May it was **reported** <sup>7</sup> that yet another huge dam project was under way, without the community affected being consulted. Amidst a climate of **fear and censorship** <sup>7</sup>, people in Laos have next to no spaces available to express their concerns, but civil society in neighbouring Thailand, where pro-democracy protests are repressed (see this report's chapter on democracy under the pandemic) but environmental protests are often more tolerated, mobilised in **opposition** <sup>7</sup> to the dam's likely environmental impacts. A further sign of the challenge for environmental and land rights activists came in March, when two

people were detained for shooting a video showing the police engaged in **land grabbing** <sup>7</sup> on behalf of the state, clearing communally owned agriculture land for development, which is an ongoing state practice. The two were subjected to 're-education' and the authorities continued to ignore the appeals of the affected villagers: when a delegation of 10 families attempted to petition the prime minister, they were told to go home and stop making trouble.

The level of repression in Laos meant that those who took part in a rare **online protest** <sup>7</sup> in October had to be very brave. Evidently inspired by the protests demanding democracy in Thailand, people in Laos used the satirical 'if Lao politics was good' hashtag on Twitter to call attention to their **frustrations** <sup>7</sup> about natural resource exploitation, along with corruption, misgovernance, lack of democracy, poverty and economic inequality.

It is a similar situation in Vietnam, which like Laos is a one-party state where the ruling party strongly restricts the freedom of expression, including online expression, and ruling party and army figures are tightly enmeshed in big economic development projects that come with major environmental impacts. In recent years, several prominent bloggers have been jailed for calling out the environment repercussions of these state-led projects. In January, in Dong Tam village the police carried out an operation against residents who had been protesting against the granting of a lease of land to a military-owned telecoms company. The police **reported** <sup>7</sup> that they had experienced violence, and in the violent clashes three police officers and the village leader, Le Dinh Kinh, were killed. Dozens of people were arrested and held incommunicado. The authorities tried to impose a blanket of silence to prevent the villagers' version of events circulating, intimidating bloggers and mobilising an army of online agents to post a flood of supportive messages about the government's response, along with sharing false confessions purporting to come from the villagers. The government's online army also made mass complaints to Facebook to get the profiles of critical voices suspended. Several people were arrested for social media posts on the issue. The authorities even froze the bank account of an activist who collected donations to support Le Dinh Kinh's family. Despite these efforts to promote the government's story, footage of Le Dinh Kinh's widow, Du Thi Thanh, surfaced, in which she said she had been severely beaten and forced to make a false statement about the attack, while others reported that the villagers had first been attacked by the police.

In neighbouring Cambodia, activists for environmental and land rights also come up against economic forces that are tightly linked with the ruling party and the world's longest-serving prime minister, Hun Sen, who has held office for over 36 years, making Cambodia a de facto one-party state. Like Laos and Vietnam, Cambodia's closed civic space, in which dissent is highly repressed and the media is **tightly policed**, makes it hard to take a stance against projects that are in the interests of government members. Local land rights and human rights groups revealed in July that a planned massive development of a new suburb of the capital, Phnom Penh, would **destroy** crucial wetlands, leading to the eviction of hundreds of families and significantly increasing the risk of flooding for Phnom Penh residents. Close allies of Hun Sen, including at least one member of his family, are involved in the project, with some having leased parcels of land vital to the development that were made available by the government.

In September, three members of the environmental CSO Mother Nature Cambodia were **detained** while planning a peaceful march to protest against the filling in of a lake as part of this project, and held in detention with bail denied, potentially facing **two-year jail sentences** on grounds of 'incitement to cause societal chaos'. The government has **accused** Mother Nature Cambodia of working to promote instability and social unrest and has **smeared** it as being an 'unauthorised organisation', falling foul of Cambodia's deliberately complex and vague CSO laws.

In another incident, in March, four environmental activists were beaten by private security guards and **arrested** for trespassing on the grounds of a South Korean company operating in Cambodia that was, they claimed, engaged in illegal logging. In December, Sok Oudom, manager of a radio station and website, **received** a 20-month jail sentence in retaliation for posting a Facebook livestream in May showing members of a rural community defending land that had been assigned to them from military takeover.

In all of the above cases, environmental, Indigenous and land rights defenders were targeted because they dared take on powerful economic interests. They confronted a globally dominant economic model that offers financial reward in exchange for extraction and environmental destruction; one that places no value on environmental resources other than the profit that can be obtained from their use. As part of the model, it seems that a certain amount of human

deaths, particularly of those who defend rights, is viewed as an acceptable cost. It is hard to see how serious action on climate crisis, and the preservation of community resources that have a value beyond their price, can come without changing that model.

## CLIMATE ACTION: MORE NECESSARY THAN EVER

Asserting alternatives on city streets were the many climate activists who have taken up the cause in recent years. Pre-pandemic, their hopes were that 2020 would prove to be a breakthrough year for climate action. As it happened, the pandemic deflected attention away from the urgent need to reverse climate harm. But the evidence continued to pile up about just how urgent the situation was. One impact of emergency measures and economic slowdown was a temporary fall in carbon dioxide emissions, but emphasising the scale of the challenge, in November the World Meteorological Organization **reported** that greenhouse gas concentrations had hardly been dented. 2020 was the **joint hottest year** on record. Lockdowns were not the right kind of radical and sustained action that the climate crisis needs. The pandemic even came with its own environmentally damaging side effect in the form of an avalanche of protective plastic waste.

The need for urgent action had been signalled at the year's start, when bushfires in Australia were estimated to have killed at least 34 people and killed or displaced almost **three billion animals**. A majority of Australians were exposed to the smoke, which spread as far as Argentina. The pandemic year was also a year of fires, including in regions that had not seen wildfires **before**. Russia's Siberian heatwave in the early months of 2020, which led to forest fires in a region famed for its cold climate, would, research suggested, have been **almost impossible** without climate change. In August, Brazil saw the **worst start** to its annual Amazon fire season in a decade, while the Pantanal wetland, on Brazil's border with Bolivia, experienced its **worst fires** in over two decades. That same month, China saw its **worst floods** in decades, forcing 100,000 people to be evacuated. The records just kept tumbling as extreme weather events, once rare, now risked becoming the norm. By September, the US authorities had **run out of names** for hurricanes, having worked their way through the alphabet. In September and October, Arctic **sea ice** shrunk to its lowest-ever recorded levels.



Activists rally for climate action in Sydney, Australia, on 10 January 2020, as fires rage across large parts of Australia. Photo by Brendon Thorne/Bloomberg via Getty Images

While the pandemic prompted some renewed questioning of our relationship with the natural world, given the zoonotic nature of the virus, it also came with the fear that the economic recovery paths states would pursue would be unsustainable and carbon-intensive. Having taken emergency action on the pandemic, states might now be less prepared to follow up by treating climate change as the emergency it is. As countries seek to bounce out of the emergency into rapid recovery, there seems to be little current evidence that they are intending to do so through ‘green new deal’ style approaches that promote sustainable jobs, industries and energy. In response to protest pressure, a raft of powerful states, including Denmark, France, Japan, New

Zealand, South Korea and the UK, declared their commitment to become net carbon neutral by 2050, but in 2021, most states are acting as if they think they can wait a while to get started on it. The commitments governments had made – in the Paris Agreement, declarations of climate emergency and net zero carbon plans – were belied by the actions governments took – in building new pipelines and bigger roads, pushing ahead with coal, oil and gas projects, and subsidising airlines through the pandemic.

As vaccinations are rolled out, at least in wealthier countries, another danger is that affluent sections of populations may travel and consume like never before. The measures the world needs to combat climate catastrophe might become wrongly associated in the minds of at least some people with the miseries of lockdown. As a result, it may become harder to build out from changes in individual behaviours to mobilising collective pressure on governments and big business, as climate movements have done successfully. At the international level, the postponement of the COP26 climate summit meant a year has been lost, and there are not many more years left in which to act.

More positively, many remain convinced of the need for action. At the start of 2021, the largest-ever [opinion poll](#)<sup>7</sup> on climate change found that two-thirds of people recognise climate change as a global emergency. Conducted by the UN Development Programme and involving 1.2 million people in 50 countries, the poll showed that people in all age groups agree that climate change is a global emergency, and young people overwhelmingly do so. An [earlier poll](#)<sup>8</sup> in major European economies showed that many people said their support for action to meet climate commitments had increased during the pandemic. The potential for the pandemic to offer a chance to pause for thought and change course was there.

In July, climate pioneer Greta Thunberg won recognition for her inspiring role in climate action with the award of the [Gulbenkian Prize for Humanity](#)<sup>9</sup>. She pledged to donate the €1 million (approx. US\$1.2 million) award to frontline action to protect the environment and fight the climate crisis, particularly in the global south. But in August she said that the world’s leaders had [wasted](#)<sup>10</sup> the two years since she started her solo school strike. Throughout the year people continued to try to keep up the pressure for action, urging that no more years be wasted, taking action in any way they could. The multitudes who protested in 2019 had not given up their commitment to climate justice.



Under the pandemic climate action continued through a range of means, including campaigning, advocacy, litigation, engagement with international bodies, online protests, solo and distanced protests, mass protests when and where possible and civil disobedience and non-violent direct action, and in multi-stranded responses that connected these varied forms of action. In many mobilisations, those taking action included young activists involved in school strikes under the Fridays for Future banner, activists from the diffuse Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement and people associated with long-established movements and CSOs, such as Greenpeace and a raft of national and local environmental CSOs. Many actions mobilised under the XR banner since it is a devolved campaign that encourages people to form their own movements; anyone can act under the name of XR and use XR symbols if they **commit** to the three XR goals of calling on governments to declare a climate emergency, cut emissions and halt biodiversity loss, and set up citizens assemblies, and adopt its 10 organising principles, which include non-violence, inclusion and non-hierarchy.



Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg holds up a sign that reads 'School strike for climate' at a climate protest in Lausanne, Switzerland, on 17 January 2020. Photo by Ronald Patrick/Getty Images

Under this variety of banners and often on their own initiative, time and again activists exposed the vast gaps between their governments' words and actions on the climate, and the climate-harming activities of large, often transnational, corporations. And while their efforts encountered pushback and sometimes repression from state authorities, they also achieved some significant breakthroughs. It can be guaranteed that whenever and wherever mass gatherings are allowed again people will reassemble in great numbers to keep up the pressure for climate action.

## ACTION ON FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRIES

Many of the advocacy efforts understandably focused on the fossil fuel giants that are at the leading edge of climate harm, with 20 oil, gas and coal corporations – both private sector and state-owned – responsible for **over a third** of all carbon emissions. Advocacy took on both the industries and those who finance extraction, including banks and states.

Kenyan activists won a historic victory against the coal industry when, in November, a Chinese bank, the Industrial Commercial Bank of China, **pulled out** of financing a proposed coal-fired energy plant. A **coalition** of advocacy groups had mounted a dogged campaign of resistance against the plan to build the climate-harming facility on the island of Lamu, a major tourist attraction and a UNESCO world heritage site. As a result of this advocacy, the plant's environmental licence had already been cancelled in 2019, on the grounds that there had been a lack of public participation, as required by Kenya's environmental law.

Thousands of Kenyan protesters also took to the streets in September to demand action on climate change and the retention of the country's tough controls on plastic waste. In 2017, Kenya imposed the world's strictest ban on the use, manufacturing and import of plastic bags, after plastic waste supposedly imported for recycling piled up in Kenyan cities; this was seen as a breakthrough for efforts to reverse the flow of harmful waste to African countries. But during 2020, big US oil companies, members of the American Chemistry Council, **lobbied** the US government to push for a reversal of the ban as part of trade talks with Kenya. Activists **urged** their government to resist the pressure, so far successfully.

Japan was one of the many countries that in 2020 experienced the impacts of once extreme weather events that are becoming more normal under climate change. In July, the **heaviest rains** ⚡ on record lashed the southern island of Kyushu, leading to flooding that left at least 77 people dead. But in 2020, campaigners were able to strike a blow against the coal industry. In March, environmental groups **protested** ⚡ against the Mizuho Funding Group over its investments in coal, gathering outside its Tokyo headquarters, paying for a full-page advert in the Financial Times and sharing the hashtag #ChangeMizuhoChangeWorld. Civil society pointed out that Mizuho was one of the world's biggest financiers of coal-based power plant construction. Alongside protests, activism took the form of a shareholder resolution, submitted in March, calling on the bank to outline a plan and targets to align with the Paris Agreement. This was the first time that shareholders of a publicly traded Japanese company had submitted a resolution relating to climate change. The pressure told, and ahead of its April meeting Mizuho stated that it would **stop financing** ⚡ new coal plants and end any coal loans by 2050. Civil society **welcomed** ⚡ the move, while criticising the 2050 deadline as too distant and pointing to the existence of some loopholes, which they continued to pressure the bank to close. They also committed to keeping up the pressure on other Japanese banks, which remain among the last banks in the world lending to coal projects.

The coal industry came under the spotlight in Germany too, when in September, hundreds of **anti-coal campaigners** ⚡ took part in a protest at a vast coalmine close to the city of Cologne, calling out the government's decision that coal could be mined and burned until 2038, which they say will not reverse Germany's emissions quickly enough. Current proposals are to **further expand** ⚡ the strip mine, entailing the destruction of several nearby villages. Campaigners reported that around 3,000 people took part, with some protesters detained when they broke through police lines. Several journalists reported being **blocked** ⚡ by the police from taking photos and shooting videos as they attempted to cover the protest.

This was one of many actions on the climate crisis seen in Germany during 2020, reflecting the long-established nature and political presence of the country's environmental movement, which has spanned several generations. In addition to the coal industry, German activists protested against the infrastructure development that will further contribute to climate harm. In October, XR



German climate activists march in an attempt to occupy the Garzweiler open-cast coal mine and nearby gas infrastructure in an act of civil disobedience on 26 September 2020. Photo by Sascha Schuermann/Getty Images

activists held a **week of protests** ⚡ against airport and motorway projects, **staging** ⚡ a sit-in blockade outside the transport ministry and holding a march of dead trees. Police removed some protesters who had glued themselves to the street. Protesters from the movement also tried to halt the destruction of a section of the Dannenröder forest, in Hesse state, to build a motorway extension. As clearance of a stretch of forest that had been occupied by activists since 2019 **began** ⚡ in October, thousands more people **gathered** ⚡, making the point that the loss of ancient forest was at odds with Germany's climate commitments. Police arrested activists occupying the site. Protests included an occupation of the Hesse state representative's office in Berlin and a mass cycle protest that closed down a stretch of road. In November, the police began **clearing** ⚡ the barricades and treehouses that had been put up by occupiers.

Climate protesters in France **shut down** ⚡ Bordeaux's airport in October; seven activists were arrested and faced the possibility of up to five years in jail. XR activists in the Netherlands also staged a **protest** ⚡ at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, one of Europe's major air hubs, in December, blocking two of the

airport's entrances. Some protesters glued their hands to the ground and others formed human chains; 14 people were detained. Protesters objected to support the airport had been granted under the pandemic and the low tax on air fuel, and called for the airport to be shut down due to its high emissions. Similarly, in Finland, state support for Finnair, the national airline, during the pandemic, with no environmental conditions attached, was one of the issues that motivated protests. Other issues of concern included the involvement of a state-owned enterprise in coal-fired electricity generation in other countries and continuing practices of peat burning in Finland. A twelve-day **hunger strike** was held in August, with protesters camping out outside parliament and calling on the government to act on cutting emissions.

The aviation and oil industries were also the target of climate activism in New Zealand. In December, XR protesters in the city of Christchurch objected to plans to develop a new airport, lying on the floor and **playing dead** at a



In February 2020, campaigners in the UK celebrate a judicial ruling against a proposed expansion of Heathrow airport. Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images

council meeting that was discussing the plans. The council's timing could not have been worse, with the meeting coming just a day after New Zealand's new government declared a **climate emergency** and pledged to make its public sector carbon neutral by 2025. Earlier, in March, XR protesters protested against fossil fuel extraction when it scaled an **oil rig** that was exploring for oil and gas as it passed through Cook Strait, which separates the main islands of New Zealand. New Zealand's climate activists will now be pressuring the government to stick to its commitments.

In Canada, as in **previous years**, a key focus of protest was against the construction of oil pipelines. In **protests** in February against the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline in British Columbia, people blockaded railway lines and blocked access to a construction site. Members of the Indigenous Wet'suwet'en Nation made clear that they had not given their consent to the project. A protest camp was **aggressively cleared** by militarised police with dogs, and six people were detained, while **numerous journalists** reported that the police had prevented them from covering the raid. The raid however had the opposite effect to that intended, sparking wider protests across Canada, as multiple further rail barricades were set up, causing **weeks of disruption**.

Protests also continued against the Trans Mountain Pipeline, a vast project under development to run from Alberta to the coast in British Columbia. The controversial pipeline, which was taken over by the Canadian government in 2018, stands **at odds** with Canada's climate change commitments, its Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's international positioning as someone with green credentials and a 2019 declaration of climate emergency by Canada's parliament. The project seemed even more an outlier when, in January 2021, President Joe Biden **cancelled** the USA's permit for the Keystone XL oil and gas pipeline, intended to carry oil from Canada's Alberta tar sands to US refineries, and long the subject of protests.

In 2020, Indigenous groups, whose lands along the pipeline route will be affected, continued to lead the protests against the Trans Mountain Pipeline. In October, members of the Secwepemc Nation set up a new **protest camp** close to a construction site; several of the protesters were later **arrested**. The following month, XR activists **blocked** a railway line on the Trans Mountain route, expressing their solidarity with the First Nations people standing against the project. In January Indigenous people, XR activists and other environmental



groups **protested** ↗ against a proposed oilsands mine in Alberta, while in March, a crowd of protesters **blocked streets** ↗ in Toronto to take a stance against the annual meeting of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, the Canadian mining industry's membership body. Their condemnation of the environmental and human rights impacts of mining was supported by over 50 CSOs.

Vital acts of environmental activism such as Canada's anti-pipeline protests were however potentially challenged by the passing, in Alberta province in June, of an alarming **new law** ↗, the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act. The law prohibits people from entering, obstructing, interfering with or damaging what is broadly defined as 'essential infrastructure', potentially criminalising anti-pipeline protests and a vast range of other protests. In response, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees began a **court action** ↗ on the grounds that the law violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a constitutional text that protects fundamental freedoms, including civic rights.

Alberta's law was similar to a slew of laws recently passed by several US states to criminalise protest near sites designated as critical infrastructure, with the aim of suppressing anti-pipeline protests. In March, **three states** ↗ – Kentucky, South Dakota and West Virginia – added to this worrying trend by passing new laws to give fossil fuel sites increased protection from protest. In Tasmania, Australia, environmental activists also faced a proposed harsh **new law** ↗ that would **criminalise protests** ↗ in locations deemed to be workplaces, and which could result in jail sentences. The proposed law seemed targeted at preventing people protesting against logging in Tasmania's forests, where protests are increasingly being restricted. In February, four anti-logging activists from the Bob Brown Foundation were **arrested** ↗ for trying to prevent trees being felled. Activists were **banned** ↗ from protesting in forests on safety grounds, a restriction the Foundation took legal action to have overturned.

The oil industry was a key focus of protests in several places beyond Canada. When exploratory oil drilling took place in the waters of the Bahamas in late 2020, people **protested** ↗ against the likely environmental damage, calling attention to potential impacts on protected marine areas and fish stocks, the risk of oil spills and increase in emissions; the Bahamas is a **low-lying** ↗ island group vulnerable to sea-level rise. The Bahamas National Trust and Greenpeace came together with over 130 organisations, businesses and individuals to call



Climate activists protest outside the US Supreme Court as oral arguments are heard in a case involving the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images

for the unique ecological heritage of the islands to be protected. Activists on board Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior ship **showed their support** ↗ for Bahamian activists. Civil society took the government and oil company to court to try to have the secretive permits allowing drilling made public, and an online petition, hosted by **Our Island, Our Future** ↗, garnered more than 76,000 signatures against oil-drilling. While it was **reported** ↗ in February 2021 that the drilling had failed to find commercially exploitable oil reserves, activists continued to call for a permanent ban on drilling, and some have pushed for the Bahamas to hold a referendum on the issue. Oil exploration continues in the waters of numerous other Caribbean islands, meeting civil society resistance at every turn.

The announcement of further oil exploration in the Norwegian Sea was one of the prompts for XR **protests** ↗ at a range of sites across Norway's capital Oslo in



An environmental activist extinguishes a burning model of the world outside the headquarters of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, Germany, to protest against its funding of fossil fuels in October 2020. Photo by Alex Kraus/Bloomberg via Getty Images

September. Mobilisations included protests outside government ministries, a road blockade and a human chain, while some protested wearing fish costumes. Around 40 people were **arrested** <sup>7</sup>. That same month in neighbouring Sweden, Greenpeace activists **blockaded** <sup>7</sup> an oil refinery in protest against its proposed expansion. Six people were detained at the protest's end.

As well as street-level action there has been a growing use of the courts to try to hold governments to account for lack of climate action and failure to adhere to climate agreements. In Estonia, for example, Fridays for Future activists built on the momentum of the school strike movement in April by **launching** <sup>7</sup> a legal challenge against the construction of a new shale oil plant. Its legal petition, accepted by the court in **May** <sup>7</sup>, calls for the permit for the plant's construction to be revoked on the grounds that it breaches Estonia's international climate change commitments, making it a historical first in Estonia. Among the most striking attempts at international litigation, at the European level, six young

Portuguese people – aged from eight to 21-years-old – join together to take **legal action** <sup>7</sup>. In September they submitted a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights. Their complaint is against 33 of the Council of Europe's 47 member states for their failure to take effective action on climate change and the harm that will be done to their future lives and livelihoods. Far from viewing the complaint as frivolous on the grounds of the ages of those making it, the Court not only accepted the complaint but also found that it should be dealt with as a matter of priority, raising the prospect that some of Europe's big emitters, including Germany, Poland and Russia, could be asked to answer for their climate failures.

People living on the frontline of fossil fuel industry harm also protested. People who live close to the Melut and Palouch oilfields in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan held **protests** <sup>7</sup> in August against the local environmental impacts of oil mining. Among the effects that have been **reported** <sup>7</sup> are miscarriages, birth defects and other major health conditions. The locals have seen only



An XR protester holds a banner as police form a cordon during a climate change protest in Parliament Square in London, UK, on 3 September 2020. Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Images



pollution and disruption, but no benefits from the oil in their backyard. In the protests, people closed roads and an airstrip and blocked entrances to the oil company.

In February Tuul Erdenebileg **led** Mongolia's first Fridays for Future climate strike. The need for environmental vigilance in Mongolia was made clear by residents in the Erdenetsagaan region close to Mongolia's eastern border with China, where the local community organised to campaign against mining companies that have wreaked havoc on their neighbourhoods. Extensive mining has threatened the ways of life of traditionally semi-nomadic herders, with springs running dry and dust clouds polluting food and the soil. Local CSOs helped residents advocate towards the government, which stepped in to **enforce** mining laws and revoke the licences of the worst offenders.

People in Mauritius experienced first-hand the devastating impacts of oil pollution. An oil spill from a wrecked ship in August put the island country's **unique biodiversity** at risk and killed numerous dolphins and whales. An estimated 100,000 people – a huge proportion of the country's circa 1.3 million population – **marched** in the capital, Port Louis, angered at their government's **slow** and inadequate response to the environmental crisis and demanding an inquiry. Protests **continued** into September, with many calling on the government to resign. People wore black to symbolise the colour of the oil, and Mauritian diaspora groups **mobilised** in other countries, including Australia, Canada, France and the UK. At the same time, a **voluntary effort** mobilised to clean up the damage: with the government's response inadequate, environmental groups and thousands of volunteers risked harm to improvise barriers from straw, sugar-cane leaves and even their own hair, which people cut off and donated to help absorb the oil.

People also protested against another impact of fossil fuel industries they experience in their towns and cities, in the form of air pollution. In Sarajevo, capital of **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, in January, even before the pandemic struck, protesters marched wearing a different kind of mask from those that would soon become commonplace, designed to filter dirty air. They called attention to the city's dangerously high levels of air pollution, far above European safety levels. In June, as part of their global actions, XR activists in **Hong Kong** focused on the problem of air pollution: they placed 35 shoes on the ground and staged a die-in at a cemetery to represent the number of people

killed in the city every week due to bad air quality. Environmental activists focused on air pollution in **Kazakhstan**, risking repression for doing so (see below). Air pollution was also the cause that prompted action by the world's youngest-known climate activist, India's **Licypriya Kangujam**. In February, aged only eight, Licypriya completed a year of climate protests in front of her country's parliament, campaigning at the head of the Child Movement, which she founded, for laws to address the problem of poor air quality across India and to make climate change a compulsory subject to be taught from an early age in Indian schools.



XR activists stage a die-in on All Saints Day, 1 November 2020, outside the Spanish Parliament in Madrid, to commemorate those who have died from the climate crisis. Photo by Pablo Blazquez Dominguez/Getty Images



## PROTEST UNDER THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic forced people to come up with alternative means of keeping activism going. In March, when it became impossible to hold weekly strikes, Greta Thunberg launched a series of weekly **webinars** ↗, 'talks for future', to try to maintain people's engagement in the movement. Asia's young climate activists went **online** ↗ to hold the inaugural Asia Climate Rally in November. The rally involved activists from Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore and South Korea, with the agenda of pressuring their respective governments, multinational corporations and other institutions to adhere to their demands, which include protecting the lives of environmental and human rights defenders, strengthening climate and environmental laws and demanding accountability from big climate polluters.



Climate activists hold a performance on 2 September 2020 in Seoul, South Korea, calling for measures to avert an environmental catastrophe. Photo by Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images

When April's planned mass global climate strike no longer proved possible, Germany's climate movement found another way of keeping the crisis visible. Activists collected over 1,000 of the **placards** ↗ that climate strikers from across the country had used and laid them out in front of Germany's federal parliament. Tens of thousands of people also added their voices in an online protest. Activists in the Netherlands mobilised in a similar way, **gathering** ↗ over a thousand shoes from around the country and placing them outside the country's parliament in a show of continuing support for climate action. When restrictions had eased somewhat in September, Dutch XR activists took the opportunity to hold a **series of protests** ↗ in Amsterdam, including a road blockade and a protest inside a clothing store, focused on fast fashion's contribution to climate change and the **forced labour** ↗ of China's Uighur people in garment factories. On 'Black Friday' shopping weekend, when people are enticed to shop with special offers, protests took place in **15 Dutch cities** ↗ to highlight over-consumption and its role in climate change. Alongside other activities, in Amsterdam protesters offered to repair people's clothes to encourage them to wear them for longer.

In **Greece** ↗, as pandemic-related restrictions were eased in June, people went out to protest in reaction to controversial environmental legislation that had been passed with little debate and behind the cover of lockdown measures, when people had been unable to mobilise against it. While the law was presented as a modernising initiative promoting green development, protesters criticised it as favouring big investment over the protection of local environments, allowing for inappropriately sited projects that may not offer the best prospects of cutting emissions, and even potentially enabling drilling for oil and gas in areas that had previously been protected to preserve their biodiversity.

The USA's young climate activists, unable to gather in numbers under the pandemic, switched to a campaign to encourage young people to **vote** ↗, and to vote for candidates committed to climate action, in the country's November elections. **Activists** ↗ used phone banks, social media and friend-to-friend organising to try to convince other young people. Meanwhile the USA's weekly **Fire Drill Fridays** ↗ protests, which were met with numerous **arrests** ↗ when they took place before the pandemic, moved online, with actor and climate activist Jane Fonda **repurposing** ↗ her iconic 1980s workout routines via TikTok to recruit support for climate action.

A step forward was taken in France in 2020, with the announcement of a **planned law** on ecocide, which would make serious intentional damage to the environment a criminal offence. Encouragingly, the idea for the proposed law came not from the government but from a **citizen's assembly**, in which a group of 150 randomly selected people were convened to discuss policies on the climate crisis. The move suggests that the citizens' assembly model, often called for as key demand in climate activism, can really work as a way of breaking political deadlock and advancing solutions, and that mass mobilisations can influence agendas and outcomes. The **Stop Ecocide Foundation** is driving forward the idea of defining ecocide as an international crime (see this report's chapter on civil society in the international arena), but as **Jojo Mehta** of Stop Ecocide affirms, hope can also come from national-level processes of deliberative democracy:

Following the **gilet jaunes protests**, which had been triggered by a hike in fuel taxes, President Macron convened a Citizens' Climate Assembly, giving 150 randomly selected French citizens a mandate to discuss

and propose policies for addressing the climate crisis. And the citizen's assembly came back with the proposal to criminalise ecocide! If you ask the people, for most of them, criminalising ecocide is a 'no-brainer'.

Since then, a law within France has been proposed. It is a very watered-down version compared to the Assembly's proposal, but it still offered us the opportunity to create a buzz and have a broader conversation.

Six national governments have so far shown interest in including ecocide into their legislation or government programmes. There are also 11 states with parliamentarians interested in the definition we are working on.

We have been helped by a **surge** of grassroots activism and mobilisation. Whether it is the school strikes inspired by Greta Thunberg or the actions by XR in the UK or the Sunrise Movement in the USA, there is broad street mobilisation. This has pushed the conversation into the media and has echoed among governments. The climate and ecological crises are increasingly becoming a part of mainstream discourse, and a lot of it can be credited to public mobilisation.



Activists project flames and commentary on the side of the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC, as wildfires rage through the USA on 21 October 2020. Photo by Jemal Countess/Getty Images for Climate Power 2020



## GLOBAL DAY OF CLIMATE ACTION 2020

September's global day of climate action saw **thousands of mobilisations** across the world. While numbers were necessarily much lower than 2019's hugely well-attended global day, many people mobilised online or in safe and distanced numbers to keep up the climate pressure. One innovation was a 24-hour Zoom call, in which people from across the world shared their climate stories around the clock, making the point that climate change is a matter of global concern, and participants offered each other activism advice.

Strikes and protests on the global day of action in India pointed to the impacts of the country's growing heatwave problem, while in the Philippines, people marched to express their concerns about the climate crisis but also the government's misuse of sweeping laws to restrict protests, including those on environmental issues. In Bangladesh, a country that is already particularly vulnerable to floods, action called attention to the existential threat posed by sea-level rise. Fridays for Future activists organised a **shoe strike** in which people took off their shoes to express their vulnerability to climate change and to demand compensation from the countries most responsible for it.

In South Africa, the **Climate Justice Coalition**, an alliance of South African trade unions, grassroots and community-based organisations and other CSOs, marched to the finance and energy departments at government headquarters in Pretoria, calling for a green and just recovery from the pandemic and an increase in **renewable energy** usage. South African activists **pointed** to the connections between the climate crises and other great scourges, including unemployment, poverty, gender-based violence and inequality.

Young climate activist **Vanessa Nakate**, who launched Uganda's Fridays for Future movement, led a **march** in the capital, Kampala. The march called attention to the severe effects of climate change on the African continent, a particular injustice since historically, Africa has only contributed **three per cent** of global greenhouse gas emissions. Under the government of authoritarian President Yoweri Museveni, however, protests of any kind are never easy (see also this report's chapter on democracy under the pandemic), and over 20 young Ugandan climate activists were arrested by the police, purportedly for failing to secure permission to hold a protest.

The day also saw Greta Thunberg **return** to her familiar location outside Sweden's parliament, with the event limited to less than 50 people who practised distancing to

comply with pandemic regulations. In Germany, the easing of pandemic restrictions meant that Fridays for Future activists were able to hold their first collective strike on the global day of action since the virus had forced people to strike in isolation. Thousands **rallied** on the streets across Germany.

Just ahead of the day, young British climate activist Mya-Rose Craig staged the most northerly **climate strike** ever, from a piece of broken-off sea ice in the Arctic Circle. Craig challenges UK stereotypes about climate activism, tapping into her internet following as a young Black ornithologist to promote climate activism; her organisation, Black2Nature, encourages Black people and people from the UK's other ethnic minorities to gain equal access to the natural spaces from which they are often excluded.



As part of the global day of action, climate activists protest outside the Union Building in Pretoria, South Africa on 25 September 2020. Photo by Alet Pretorius/Gallo Images via Getty Images





People carry banners against climate change on their bikes during the 2020 global day of climate action in Leiden, The Netherlands. Photo by Getty Images News

## BACKLASH AND RESTRICTION

But the difficulties in making progress on the climate were indicated in the Netherlands by a series of **farmers' protests** that took place in 2019 and 2020. In the protests, farmers used their tractors to block roads and occupy public spaces. The protests mobilised in opposition to a proposal to cut livestock numbers drastically in order to reduce agricultural nitrogen emissions, a key contributor to climate change. More generally, protesters complained about what they saw as excessive regulation of the agricultural sector and the lack of respect afforded to farmers. Around 50 farmers were **detained** after blocking the road with their tractors in protest at a new law on cattle feed in July. While the protests positioned themselves as grassroots mobilisations of farmers, evidence emerged that protesting farmers were receiving **financial support** from large agricultural companies, giving rise to the question of to what extent this was astroturfing – corporate funding of apparently grassroots organising.

In general, farmers' and workers' protests against measures to reduce emissions reveal the existence of tensions and contradictions, including for civil society. The *gilets jaunes* protests in France, which resulted in the citizen's assembly, similarly came in response to a proposed environmental tax on fossil fuel. States can expect to find it challenging when taking measures to cut emissions that parts of the population believe will have negative impacts on their daily lives, particularly when governments do not make efforts to mitigate those impacts. For civil society, the challenges are those of making common cause and respectfully airing differences between protest movements making contradictory demands, and of demanding that green transitions take people with them and mitigate for impacts on livelihoods.

Elsewhere, protests met with police restrictions. In Ireland in February, the police **refused** to provide policing support for a Fridays for Future march that was timed just ahead of Ireland's election, with the aim of reminding politicians and voters of the need for climate action. The police's grounds for refusing to engage seemed to be that those planning to take part were too young, and the police warned that if there were any problems, any adults involved could face criminal proceedings. Hundreds of students **took part** in a smaller protest that went ahead regardless, asserting their right to have a say in their future, even if they were too young to vote. In the UK, even though in late May some level of outdoor interaction became permissible, several XR activists were **arrested** when they held a silent, distanced protest in London. The protest called for the convening of a citizen's assembly, following France's example, to focus on the UK's post-pandemic recovery plans, with the aim of moving from an emergency response to the pandemic to one on the climate.

Italy's XR movement faced **heavy fines** and further legal costs in fighting back against the fines, forcing it to launch a **crowdfunding appeal** in November. Actions that attracted fines included a protest in September in the city of Turin, in which eight people chained themselves to the columns of the Royal Palace and set off smoke bombs. While the protest caused no harm, the police subsequently filed eight complaints of causing 'dangerous ignitions and explosions' against the protesters. In October, the movement staged a week of activities in Rome, during which around 100 people mounted a two-day blockade of an entrance to the headquarters of oil giant Eni. The protesters subsequently received notification of fines for failure to respect pandemic distancing rules, even though XR maintained that it had complied with all

such rules. The fines XR activists faced amounted to around €20,000 (approx. US\$24,000).

Five activists in North Macedonia were **detained** by the police for holding what was described as a 'guerrilla action' at the Ministry of Environment in February, when they made **handprints** in red paint on the windows of the building. The country's Fridays for Future movement complained that the police response had been disproportionate to this harmless action. The challenge North Macedonia's environmentally concerned young people face in protesting

was underlined that same month when a group of high school students were **prevented** by their school from joining a protest on air pollution.

In Finland, a further peaceful protest by Elokapiina (XR Finland) in October brought a **violent** police reaction. On the grounds of breaking up a traffic obstruction, police **sprayed** protesters several times with pepper spray, and reportedly also prevented some of the protesters rinsing their faces with water. Police also detained dozens of protesters, in what seemed a response entirely out of proportion with the nature of the protests.



Greenpeace activists hang a banner from Ponte Sant'Angelo in Rome, Italy, to demand that people and the planet be prioritised over profit on 10 December 2020. Photo by Stefano Montesi/Corbis via Getty Images



## STAND AS MY WITNESS: ASYA TULESOVA, KAZAKHSTAN

Imagine being in prison? The 'crime'? Speaking up and standing for what you believe in. In 2020, CIVICUS shared the stories of people behind bars and urged people to call on governments to protect rights, uphold justice and stop harassing and imprisoning human rights defenders across the globe. Among the human rights defenders who were the focus of the #StandAsMyWitness campaign was **Asya Tulesova**, a young environmental and civic rights defender from Kazakhstan.

Asya was detained on 6 June while taking part in a peaceful protest and was held in pre-trial detention for over two months. Thanks to international pressure, she was finally released on 12 August, but she faced a one-and-a-half year **conditional** discharge on probation and a fine, and announced she would appeal against the sentence.

Asya Tulesova tells her story:

For the past few years, I have worked for a CSO, the Common Sense Civic Foundation, that focuses on community development. We work on environmental and educational projects aimed at improving the quality of life of local communities. In 2015 we launched our air quality monitoring project in the city of Almaty with

the aim of giving people access to free, up-to-date air quality information. The project had a considerable effect on people's understanding of the importance of the issue.

As I realised that air quality is a political issue, I tried running for the local council. However, my candidature was withdrawn due to minor discrepancies in my tax income declaration. This same reasoning was used to take down hundreds of independent self-nominated candidates all over Kazakhstan. We sued the central election commission but were unable to persuade the court to restore my candidacy regardless of the fact that we had all the evidence to support my case. My case is now being considered by the UN Human Rights Committee.

We continued our environmental activism by publishing articles, doing research on air pollution, participating in public events and organising public talks on the issue. In April 2019 my companion, activist Beibarys Tolymbekov, and I were arrested for holding a banner at the annual Almaty marathon; our friends Aidos Nurbolatov, Aigul Nurbolatova and Suinbike Suleimenova were fined for filming us holding the banner. Being an activist in Kazakhstan is associated with a certain degree of constant pressure from the government and so-called law enforcement authorities. Many activists and human rights defenders, as well as journalists, live under intense scrutiny and are under constant surveillance and intimidation by or on behalf of law enforcement agencies.

During the protest on 6 June I witnessed police brutality towards peaceful protesters. This wasn't the first time; every 'unauthorised' peaceful rally we have had so far has been accompanied by the excessive use of force by the police. But this time, I decided to stand in front of one of the police vans filled with people unlawfully detained by the police in an attempt to prevent the van from leaving. I was attacked by several officers, who dragged me away from the van and, after I attempted to return, pushed me down to the ground. In such emotional state, I then knocked off a police officer's cap in protest against the unlawful police actions and detention of peaceful protesters. It's hard to articulate what was going through my head at that moment. I was definitely in a state of shock.

This was captured on video, and I was charged with 'publicly insulting a representative of the authorities' under article 378, part 2 of the Criminal Code, and with 'non-dangerous infliction of harm to a representative of the authorities' under article 380, part 1.

I was in prison for more than two months. I can't say that I feel I have been detained for a long time, but it was long enough for me to grow appreciation and compassion for activists and other people who have spent months and years in prison.





Many times during 2020, where real-world participation possibilities were limited, the online sphere became a vital arena of climate action. Social media was essential. But the risks of relying on these platforms were indicated in Belgium in October, when XR Belgium's Facebook page was **suspended** without warning. This had first happened the month before when Facebook's automatic systems somehow flagged a post in support of a women's rights march as 'hate speech'. This seemed to be only the latest in a recent history of the suspension of several local XR groups and other environmental groups around the world. Given the way in which it has allowed far-right extremist groups to proliferate across its platform for its profit, Facebook seemed open to accusations of being on the wrong side of history.

In Singapore, even a lone climate protest could attract state repression. Two young people who held separate individual climate strikes under the Fridays for Future banner in March faced police **investigation** for protesting without a permit. It marked the first time that actions associated with the school strike movement were seen in Singapore, but the way the two young people highlighted the **heavy involvement** of oil companies in Singapore's economy appeared to embarrass the government. Human rights defender Jolovan Wham, who has been repeatedly targeted by the state for his activism (see this report's chapter on democracy under the pandemic), was also **charged** for holding a solitary protest in solidarity with the two young people. Ironically, the heavy-handed response to these small and symbolic acts of protest, in which people took social media photos with their signs before moving on, may have helped to spread their messages and intensify their impacts.

Any significant action to curb climate emissions must involve China, currently the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, which won some praise in September for announcing at the UN a **commitment** to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, although its latest five-year plan is **not consistent** with that ambition. But in a state that suppresses any public action not sanctioned by the ruling party, its announcement naturally did not mean it would tolerate any scrutiny to hold it to account on such commitments. **Ou Hongyi** has been described as China's first climate striker. In September, just days after China's President Xi Jinping made his speech at the UN, Ou was **arrested** and interrogated by the police, along with three other climate strikers, for holding a silent protest in the city of Shanghai. She was also forced to write a 'letter of self-criticism'. Once again, it should be clear that climate action in response to

climate demands is unlikely to come in contexts where those demands cannot be articulated.

Regardless of these challenges, the global, diverse and youthful climate movement will keep mobilising. People are acting because they must, and because the price of doing nothing is too high. As still more impacts of climate change become distressingly apparent, the numbers of those fighting for humanity will only continue to grow. As governments work to recover from the pandemic, the climate movement will keep demanding that societies and economies do not go back to harmful practices that will ruin lives and deny futures, but rather help build a viable future for all. The pressure on states and big business to move urgently from lip service to actions that start making a real difference is only going to intensify.



Even under the pandemic, young people around the world mobilised in 2020 to demand urgent climate action. Photo by Omer Messinger/Getty Images