FROM SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE TO REVITALISED MOVEMENT

Insights for a renewed response to systemic repression

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"Shrinking civic space" has become a buzzword in international institutions, human rights spaces, and academic papers. How often have we heard that civic space is shrinking in a conference on a given country, or read this phrase in UN or NGO reports? But the term has serious limitations. A study that 11.11.11 commissioned reveals a systemic attack on popular power, the international human rights framework, and social movements, demanding systemic change. More than just a shrinking of civic space, we are witnessing attempts to dismantle, suffocate and eliminate the foundations of dissidence and social movements, worldwide.

The study assessed 11.11.11's own program in support of civil society organizations (CSOs) across Peru, the Philippines, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but also critically reviewed the concept of civic space, how it plays out in these countries, and what best practices of resistance are. The consultants, through an action research approach, conducted interviews, field visits and workshops, in all three countries, with over 300 stakeholders.[1] This paper summarizes their call for a broader understanding of systemic repression and for more innovative strategies to respond to them.

REFLECTIONS ON 'CIVIC SPACE'

Standard definitions of civic space often refer to the respect and protection (in policy, law or practice) of the core freedoms of **association, expression, and peaceful assembly,** which are protected in international human rights law and many domestic legal frameworks. Other definitions include public participation and the specific challenges of marginalized groups. Civic space is 'shrinking' when those rights are being restricted, or when CSOs, social movements and individuals who are trying to promote systemic change are faced with repression, authoritarianism, surveillance, criminalization, or structural violence.

Yet, the study highlighted there is **no such thing as one homogeneous space** that shrinks progressively for everyone at the same pace in a given country. For some groups (e.g., indigenous communities, women or members of the LGBTQI+ community), civic space has never been 'open', or hardly even existed at all. In many countries of the Global South, the researchers highlighted, the colonial roots of the current systems continue to play out up to today, generating multiple inequalities and restricting the ability of groups and individuals to express or organize themselves. In Western countries, growing constraints to public liberties disproportionally affect activists or groups who challenge the dominant economic model (for example because of its climate impact) or express solidarity with Palestine, for example.

The ability or not to exercise one's agency in a civic space is not limited to individual, political rights, but is profoundly impacted by **social, economic and cultural dimensions** as well. The context of inequality, polarization, climate displacement and mass violence against citizens (in particular in countries such as Palestine and the DRC) strongly limit the ability to exercise one's right to express, associate or assemble freely. Many communities, in the countries of research and elsewhere, never had proper access to a space to exercise their rights, following decades of authoritarian leadership, oligarchical power, or criminal capture of state institutions and organized crime.

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[1] The research was coordinated by Emmanuel Raison, Raphael Hoetmer and Suzanne Kruyt. Suzanne Kruyt is a researcher at the Centro de Estudios Populares (CEESP) in Bolivia, and a freelance consultant specialised in human and environmental rights, mostly working for international NGOs. Raphael Hoetmer is the Director of the Western Amazon program at Amazon Watch, and previously worked as the Regional Strategy Advisor for the America's at Amnesty International. Emmanuel Raison has a long experience managing solidarity and human rights programs with different NGOs and as a consultant.

When civic space is shrinking in a given context, it doesn't do so uniformly. Some groups are targeted more, for example due to their opposition to **extractive and other economic interests,** or because they call for systemic change of the dominant economic and political model. For them, rather than shrinking, civic space might have collapsed altogether, with only a slight chance of it opening again, which underlines that shrinking space should not be seen as a gradualistic, reversible process. For others, even in a general context of repression, influence might shift, or even grow, due to their socio-economic status or relations with those in power.

A GLOBAL DISABLING ENVIRONMENT

Even if situations are fundamentally different between and within different countries, they are all influenced by accelerating evolutions on the global level. AI surveillance, extreme right politics, and the decline of liberal democracy are having a negative effect on civic space throughout. The horrific human toll of and double standards around the genocidal violence in Palestine and conflicts elsewhere undermine the functioning and credibility of international law and multilateral institutions. The **rise of authoritarian leaders** (e.g., Trump, Bukele) is weakening global cooperation and worsening the climate of repression in their respective countries. Powerful individuals, economic actors and anti-rights groups mobilise resources and power against the international human rights order and against global solidarity, while legislative restrictions and funding cuts are weakening NGOs and social movements in their ability to fight back.

Citizens around the world are worried about the escalating climate crisis and demand more social justice, women's rights and democracy. Despite the attacks against popular power, many still take the streets in protest, for example against the climate crisis and the genocide in Palestine and the blatant double standards of Western governments. Yet, a large group of citizens seems to have turned its back to politics, focusing on personal survival or consumer needs, convinced that social action won't make a difference, or afraid of criminalization or stigmatization. This makes it increasingly difficult (yet not impossible) for NGOs and social movements to mobilise people in favour of systemic change.

THE EVOLVING PLAYBOOK OF REPRESSION

As the global context evolves, so does repression. States have been exploiting their monopoly of violence and impunity for decades, but they are constantly **updating their tactics**, with new technologies, discourses and lessons they learn from each other. At times, they still use overt and brutal violence but in between, violence is more subtle and institutionalized, leading to decreased international attention and funding, even if accountability or structural changes remain an illusion.

The research identified the following chapters in the playbook of repression:

1. **Direct violence**: State and non-state actors use lethal force against critical voices with blatant impunity. Extreme violence (for example during the Duterte era in the Philippines and the last years of the Kabila regime in the DRC) can lead to a "shock and awe" effect, which terrifies and paralyses organizers and their supporters in state institutions. But even in between those extreme episodes, direct violence continues in specific geographical areas, in particular in resource-rich regions (e.g., Amazon, Eastern DRC), committed by state actors, armed groups and/or criminal networks.

2. **Institutional violence**: through the use of laws and administrative measures (for example the recent anti-NGO law in Peru), states are gradually eroding the basis of popular power. In many countries in Latin America and Africa, rather than straightforward authoritarianism, autocrats are replacing democracy by a system of competitive authoritarianism, with elections becoming a performance rather than a real instrument to hold leaders to account – the consecutive fraudulent elections in the DRC are one of the starkest examples. While many states are unable to respond to increasing demands for social services, they are adopting new regulations to persecute critical civil society, criminalize protests or harass defenders, often using a crime or terrorism framing.

3. **Socio-economic and structural violence**: Even if less visible, communities and organizations are also being weakened by economic and social violence. By depriving communities of their livelihoods (for example land in Peru), repressive forces push them to direct all their energy towards survival and stoke divisions, thereby weakening movements' ability to organize. This is particularly the case in extractive regions but also affects (disadvantaged) urban areas. Individual defenders in Peru, the DRC and the Philippines also face economic ostracism and exclusion, while corruption allows criminal actors and powerful politicians to influence judges and public officials to maintain the status quo. Reduced donor support diminishes the ability of civil society to push back and increases competition between NGOs.

4. **Narrative and cultural violence**: Through the use of social and traditional media, politicians are demonizing activists as "anti-development" or "foreign agents," creating divisions in (civil) society. Women activists are targeted even more by reactionary narratives, including by influencers with a mass following amongst (young) men. Repressive governments are weaponizing their support to research, education and culture to stifle critical narratives.

RESPONSES AND RESISTANCE

Despite the escalating pressure and evolving modes of repression, civil society has also demonstrated resilience and innovation in their strategies to push back. The study identified four types of strategies which are interconnected and can often be used concurrently by the same groups or community.

1. **Confrontation and resistance** against repression, through protests, litigation, and denouncements, against state or non-state actors (armed groups, companies, criminal networks). This requires bold organisers who continue to sustain their communities or organisations despite the repression; and more innovative organisational strategies, such as 'leaderless' ways of operating. These tactics can halt or slow down repression but can also lead to further escalation, which then requires individual protection strategies, including legal and psychosocial support.

2. **Adaptation and negotiation.** CSOs can act upon the cracks in repressive structures, or create new ones, through advocacy or litigation targeted at state or corporate actors. This can be done at the national or international level but at times, more results can be achieved at the sub-national or local level. This strategy can be fruitful at the long term, especially if national actors can garner support from international actors, public figures or social mobilisation; the extradition of former Philippines' president Duterte to the International Criminal Court is a case in point.There is a risk, however, of losing time, energy and resources, or of co-optation by the same actors it is targeting.

3. **Autonomy and self-determination.** When state institutions are unresponsive, inefficient or captured by private interests, movements and communities can seek to strengthen their own autonomy, tackling their internal organization and resolving internal tensions resulting from years of struggle and repression. A good example is the autonomous government of the Wampis nation in Peru. Some groups create their own alternative solutions for the problems that the state (and that market) is unwilling or unable to resolve. During protests, for example, they can provide food, water, security etc. Yet, these initiatives can seem disconnected from structural organizing and limited in scale and scope.

4. **Strategic withdrawal and resilience.** When violence is escalating, communities and activists can decide, rather than mobilizing or communicating openly, to go underground and to prioritize protection (including through temporary displacement of leaders). They can continue their struggles through (less political) cultural actions, survival mechanisms (trauma support, recovery) or the memorialization of victims, as seen for victims of repression in Peru and the Philippines.

Successful efforts usually require civil society to roll out all four types of strategies. However, different strategic choices can also lead to divisions and intense debates within CSOs and social movements.

KEY CHALLENGES, BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The global offensive against social movements, civic space and popular power presents important challenges. Despite the negative trends, the researchers encountered learnings and best practices for civil society, in all three countries included in the study (as elsewhere). These include:

- **The importance of narratives.** As oppressors are also using violent discourses to weaken civil society, movements must also build counter-narratives themselves, through alternative channels and different approaches: some can be mostly evidence-based, while other seek a more compelling narrative, or trigger hope or emotions through storytelling, images and arts.
- **Inadequate protection mechanisms** amid rising threats. Organizations and individual activists need support on physical and digital security, which can include (temporary) relocation in the country, region or elsewhere, but only as a last resort. International NGOs can collectively invest in tools and funds to **prevent and react to emerging threats** for individuals, communities and organizations, and engage in advocacy for more flexible visa rules and procedures HRDs.
- **Implementation is challenging,** even when there are wins with regards to laws, policies, judgements, or international scrutiny. Pushing for implementation is a complex, long-term and frustrating effort, but its absence risks creating a sense that "nothing really changes".

- **Public apathy or backlash** against human rights and popular movements is on the rise, due to state propaganda, polarization and excessive consumerism. NGOs and movements struggle to remain politically relevant, effective and trusted, especially amongst broader and younger audiences. This requires innovative approaches and narratives, including through social media.

- Difficulty in **sustaining post-mobilization momentum.** Especially when citizens get involved (in large numbers), it is important to channel their energy into sustained advocacy.

- **Disconnect between local and national organizing,** especially in large countries. It is important to understand and tackle power relations between national-level actors, who often shape policy agendas, and local actors, who are often more legitimate on the ground.

- Other **internal divisions**, generational gaps, and patriarchal structures exist within movements. These can be linked to a country's political or historical trajectory (for example the 'new' Tshisekedi administration in the DRC), and can often be stoked up by repressive actors, but also by the creation of new groups, such as for example informal miners in Peru.

- There is a need for **new organizing cultures** that reflect digital activism, horizontality, and community-based strategies. Traditional CSOs have lost legitimacy in many countries, due to their hierarchical and bureaucratic ways of operating.

- CSOs should **broaden their demands** and proposals to include the social, economic and cultural dimensions of civic space, beyond the protection of individual human rights defenders, and combine **long-term, structural** engagement with **sufficient flexibility** to adapt to changing circumstances.