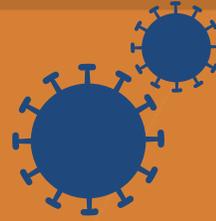


# TOP TRENDS

# COVID-19 AND CIVIC SPACE



The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a parallel crisis for civic space. Many of the emergency laws and other extraordinary measures adopted in response to the virus restrict fundamental rights and freedoms. Based on data from our [COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker](#), the following are key ways governments' reactions to the pandemic are shrinking space for civil society:

## IMPEDING CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE IN COVID-19 RECOVERY

Governments' COVID-19 measures are making it harder for civil society to aid those impacted by the crisis.

Curfews, stay-at-home orders, and other restrictions on movement often fail to exempt civil society organizations and their staff delivering life-saving services. In Burkina Faso and Belize, [movement restrictions](#) have blocked organizations from providing COVID-19 medical aid and relief. In [Rwanda](#), authorities arrested aid workers for violating social distancing orders while they were distributing food in a low-income neighborhood. Activists in [Cameroon](#) were arrested while handing out free protective masks and sanitizing gel, and now face up to four years in prison.

Governments have restricted access to information, obscuring the nature of the crisis and undercutting civil society's ability to respond effectively.

Governments' emergency measures have erected new barriers to public information—including the details of their countries' COVID-19 caseloads, as well as official recovery programs and plans. From El Salvador to Georgia, countries have [suspended](#) access to information laws in response to the pandemic, in some cases [eliminating](#) the deadline for the government to respond to citizens' information requests. Limiting access to timely, accurate information weakens civil society's ability to assess the needs of communities impacted by the virus, and provide effective assistance.

Governments are excluding civil society from decision-making in their COVID-19 response, omitting vital voices.

While the nature of the pandemic has required swift action, civil society has been largely left out the design and review of governments' COVID-19 strategies and plans. Without civil society at the table, governments' responses are less likely to address the needs of marginalized communities. Some governments have moved public hearings

and meetings online, but the shift to virtual participation threatens to reinforce the [divide](#) between the digital haves and have-nots, further excluding low-income, rural, and migrant communities among other already marginalized groups.

## EXPLOITING COVID-19 TO RESTRICT FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Governments are chilling free expression, shielding themselves from criticism while penalizing dissent.

Under the pretense of targeting “misinformation” around COVID-19, more than a dozen countries have [enacted](#) new criminal penalties or ratcheted up enforcement of “fake news” laws that cover criticism of the government’s response to the crisis. Countries have created new criminal penalties for spreading “false information” ([Russia](#)), causing “uncertainty” ([Bolivia](#)), and even sharing online satire related to the virus and the government’s response that could harm “national integrity” ([Jordan](#)). COVID-19 regulations in [Zimbabwe](#) include a prison sentence of up to 20 years for false statements about an official involved in the government’s pandemic strategy.

Lockdowns and assembly bans are stifling peaceful and socially distant protests.

While [limits on gatherings](#) may be a legitimate response to the outbreak of a contagious disease, many assembly bans are absolute, with no exception for socially-distanced, peaceful protests. Some countries, such as [Algeria](#), [Eritrea](#), and [Mexico](#), have issued blanket bans with no expiration date. In others, authorities have taken advantage of lockdown measures and assembly bans to erase physical signs of dissent: Hours after the emergency decree was enacted in [Chile](#), for instance, the government removed protest art from a public square. In many cases, authorities have used these measures to target gatherings of opposition figures, rights activists, minority communities and other marginalized groups.

Governments are employing intrusive surveillance technology to fight COVID-19.

Authorities in [Moscow](#) have deployed a new city-wide facial recognition system to identify people alleged to be breaking quarantine orders. In [China](#), the government has mandated smartphone software that tracks users’ location and shares data with the police. A number of [other governments](#) have adopted or expanded surveillance systems in the name of tracking the virus, but it is not clear that these measures are temporary, or that the data collected will only be used to respond to the COVID-19 emergency.

## GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES ENDANGERING DEMOCRACY

Emergency measures are shifting power to the executive branch, eroding democratic checks and balances.

Some COVID-19 emergency measures are not only empowering the executive branch of government—an understandable response to a crisis—but are weakening the oth-

er branches. In [Hungary](#), the parliament is effectively suspended, allowing the Prime Minister to rule by decree. [Russia](#), [Uganda](#), and others have suspended virtually all judicial proceedings while their countries are in lockdown. As a result, civil society organizations in many countries are unable to bring lawsuits to challenge COVID-inspired laws and practices that infringe rights.

Governments are declaring “war” on COVID-19, securitizing the response to justify measures that restrict civic freedoms.

The US Treasury referred to the “[global war](#)” against the COVID-19 pandemic. Some leaders are presenting themselves as war-time presidents, and the President of South Africa addressed the nation on COVID-19 measures while wearing military fatigues. [Egypt](#) has expanded the military’s legal authority in emergencies, while [Serbia](#), [Lebanon](#), the [Philippines](#) and others have deployed the military to enforce emergency measures. As was the case with post-9/11 “war on terror” rhetoric, casting COVID-19 as a national security threat makes it easier to defend extraordinary government measures that infringe rights and freedoms, and undermines civil society’s ability to push back.

Governments are using COVID-19 responses to justify authoritarian rule, undermining democratic norms.

Some governments claim that an authoritarian approach is the best way to defeat the pandemic. China portrays its authoritarian response as appropriate, and has [sent](#) doctors and medical supplies to countries struggling to cope, positioning itself as a global leader in a time of crisis. [Russia](#) and [Singapore](#) have likewise touted a strict, top-down and tech-enabled approach as not only necessary, but ideal for protecting public health—even at the cost of individual rights.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

State responses to public health threats are stronger and more effective when they [include civil society and protect human rights](#). Policymakers should enable civil society’s participation in decision-making around the pandemic response, and remove barriers impeding organizations engaged in COVID-related aid. Civil society should form broad coalitions to safeguard rights and empower marginalized groups, including people without digital access. The international community should work to safeguard civic space and uphold democratic norms, including by ensuring that civil society has the resources it needs to advocate for laws and policies that protect fundamental rights and freedoms. As we work together to defeat the virus, we must also protect the health of democracy and civic space.