



STUDY

# Civic space and the Covid-19 pandemic

How civil society actors and organisations  
are affected and react

Title:

In June 2020, activists protest with  
100 symbolic graves on Copacobana  
beach, Brazil.

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June 2021

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# Preface

For over 60 years Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World) has been working with partners in more than 90 countries. Many of these organisations are threatened in their existence despite their successes for human rights, peace and environmental protection. Many individuals engaged in valuable work for their societies are personally at risk. They are subjected to smear campaigns and receive intimidating emails. Their offices are being attacked and robbed. Staff members are threatened or arrested. Their websites are blocked. Also, our joint advocacy work, e.g. in United Nations processes, is affected when partners have to give up their independent and critical work.

New and constantly changing legal and administrative red-tape increasingly restrict the possibilities for work. Approvals or extensions for projects are withdrawn. Bank accounts of partner organisations are blocked. In more and more countries around the world – such as India, the Philippines or Nicaragua – it is becoming increasingly difficult or even impossible for independent organisations working for human rights to receive funding from abroad. They no longer have programme funds and can no longer pay salaries to staff. Some of them already have had to give up their important work. As a supporter of these organisations, Bread for the World is directly affected by these restrictions.

This trend has much more far-reaching effects. Without space for civil society to act, there is no development that reaches everyone and reduces inequalities. The negative effects do not only affect civil society organisations and their target groups. They massively harm the political, social and economic development in a country and thus the entire population. Strong and independent civil society organisations are the engine of social and political development. Together with people at the grassroots, they represent a future that focuses on justice, peace and environmental protection; an agenda which seeks to fight corruption, prevent outbreaks of violence, or initiate post-conflict reconciliation processes.

There is no doubt about it: Without civil society – its initiatives, its perseverance, its expertise and its vigilance – environmental and social standards and human rights worldwide would be in a much worse state today.

This is why it is of great concern to us to focus on the state of civil society worldwide, and to make the situation better known to a broad public. Bread for the World, together with CIVICUS, annually publishes the “Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft”, an in-depth analysis of the state of civil society based on the data of the CIVICUS Monitor. The dramatic shrinking of civic space has become particularly apparent since the beginning of the Corona pandemic. Many governments have disproportionately restricted the civil liberties of their citizens during the crisis. They have violated freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly; they have excluded those affected from participation processes and expanded surveillance. In its fourth edition, the “Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft” therefore focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on civil society spaces. Because this topic is of global importance, we have decided to make parts of the report available to our English-speaking partners and readers.

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# The burden of the virus

The pandemic outbreak has posed challenges to the world – governments and civil society alike. Corona was a test for democracy and the discursive capacity of the global society. Many states have failed the test.

The Secretary-General sits at his table like the last man standing. Alone at the headquarters. In front of him a glass of water, on the concrete wall the blue flag and the logo of his organisation – a stylised world map carved out of wood, framed by two branches. It would appear that he just needs to record this one video and then get himself to safety. “The world is at the beginning of an unprecedented test,” he says in a calm voice, like a father trying to explain something painful but inevitable to his children. “This is the moment of truth.”

It is March 31, 2020. The United Nations are holding a virtual press conference. The topic: “Presentation of the Report on the Socio-economic Consequences of COVID-19”. UN Secretary-General António Guterres makes no effort to hide how alarmed he is. Hundreds of thousands of people have already fallen seriously ill, says the Portuguese politician. The virus is spreading rapidly around the world. Societies are in turmoil, economies are plummeting. The message of the report is clear: the impact of the virus demands shared responsibility and global solidarity.

Guterres, however, does not leave it at the usual appeals. Rather, he quantifies what he imagines collective responsibility to be: “a large-scale, coordinated, and comprehensive multilateral response amounting to at least ten percent of global GDP.” “Let us remember that we are only as strong as the weakest health system in our interconnected world.”

It is the end of March and Guterres is speaking to the world. Now, we have to see what kind of sense of responsibility and solidarity we have. Will humanity pass this test?

## Vulnerable in time lapse

The virus has created new challenges for countries around the world – both medical and social. The resilience of a society is not only measured by how its scientists cope with a virus that puzzles them, but also by how open those who have to make far-reaching decisions are to criticism, and to what extent they allow all those affected to have their say. The active participation of civil society in overcoming such an existential crisis is the prerequisite for ensuring that society as a whole suffers

as little damage as possible and that the interests of all groups are taken into account – not only those who have good contacts with those in power. The pandemic was nothing less than a globally implemented test for the discursive capacity of the world society.

Humanity is only as strong as its weakest country. This message from the Secretary-General of the United Nations is the one truth of 2020. The other is: according to Johns Hopkins University, more than 1.8 million people have died in connection with the Corona virus over the course of the year. The economy came to a standstill in many parts of the world. And: democracy has also suffered damage. COVID-19 has revealed how vulnerable humanity has become when a virus no longer takes 20 years to spread worldwide, as the plague once did, but only a few weeks. And it has revealed how fragile basic democratic principles are when people are harassed, persecuted or even shot in the name of health protection.

Human rights are not a luxury. They have emerged as a result of crises and as guard rails especially when a society is put to the test. A pandemic forces governments to weigh up: in which cases is it justifiable and even a state duty to restrict the rights of citizens in order to prevent pathogens from spreading? Where must legitimate interests temporarily take a back seat so that health care systems do not collapse and doctors and nurses are forced to make decisions about life and death? At the same time, however: universal human rights such as freedom of expression or the right to food cannot be fundamentally suspended with reference to infection protection. The year 2020, whose social, political and economic consequences will be felt for years, if not decades, was such a test. There’s no way to tell if the world has passed it.

## Many governments have exploited the pandemic

The seriousness of the situation the virus has brought the world into is exemplified by a document published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at the end of April. Under the heading “Emergency Measures

and COVID-19: Guidance”, it describes the criteria by which governments had to weigh and make their decisions. They are significant questions:

- Are restrictions lawful – that is, are they in accordance with the applicable laws?
- Are they necessary to ensure public health?
- Are they proportionate – is a measure always the least intrusive option?
- Does this discriminate against individual groups?

The total of five pages reads like the rescue plan for the crew of an seagoing vessel caught in storm.

This document states that it can be justified and legitimate to restrict individual liberties in favour of public health, that it can even be a state duty to take measures for the general protection of health and to give priority to individual fundamental rights if the right to physical integrity can otherwise no longer be guaranteed. But they also mean that any restriction must be interpreted as narrowly as possible. And that the burden of justification lies with the authorities: they have to justify any restriction of rights to the population.

In fact, however, many governments have gone off course. The Washington-based international non-governmental organisation Freedom House surveyed nearly 400 journalists, civil society actors and activists. Results: democracy and human rights have suffered in 80 states. In some cases, this is because governments have temporarily suspended data protection or the right to peaceful assembly in the fight against the virus. In others, because governments have seized the moment.

According to Freedom House’s analysis, China, from where the virus had spread at breakneck speed, could prove to be a “dystopian model for the future.” Increased nationalist and propagandist rhetoric is intended to drown out demands for transparency and accountability as well as those for limiting technological surveillance. And anyone who criticises the harsh approach – both inside and outside the country – is to be silenced as far as possible.

But not only in China: in the balancing act between health and infection protection on the one hand and inalienable fundamental rights on the other, many governments have exploited the pandemic to enforce assembly bans or unjustified restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media. They used the situation of a civil society cornered by the pandemic on the one hand and by reprisals on the other to create facts. They

have issued decrees that have undermined the co-determination of parliament, expanded their decision-making abilities and power, and massively curtailed the space of their critics. Including, and especially, for those who stand up for disadvantaged groups. In many places, one could get the impression that the pandemic was not inconvenient for those responsible – after all, it gave them the opportunity to shape political conditions according to their own ideas, while pretending that they themselves were not perpetrators but victims.

In July, David Kaye, until the summer the United Nations’ special rapporteur on freedom of expression, said in a kind of midterm review: People have suffered because “many governments are seeking to restrict freedom of expression in the areas of access to information held by public authorities, reporting on public health data, the sharing of information online and offline, and other areas”. Some governments would rather protect themselves from criticism than allow people to share information about the pandemic or what authorities are and are not doing to protect them.”

## How it all began: China

Wuhan, January 2020. The intersections of the metropolis, where ten-lane roads meet, are deserted. In normal times, there is so much traffic that the authorities built pedestrian bridges. Now, however, an occasional cyclist flits by, a car here and there. If you are on the road without a good reason, such as driving to work or the grocery store, you risk losing your driver’s license. The few people on the pavements protect themselves by wrapping themselves in gloves and multiple masks pulled over each other. A city of twelve million idling – and in fear.

On January 23, the authorities sealed off the city. Initially, as one Wuhan journalist recounts, the government’s measures focused less on containing the pandemic itself than on containing and suppressing information. Censoring all the voices warning people about the virus. The fight against its spread is led above all by the so-called neighbourhood committees, introduced under Mao, so that the arms of the Communist Party reach into the living rooms. The committees are committed to the “People’s War for Pandemic Prevention and Control” proclaimed by President Xi Jinping. “People’s war” – it is a Maoist battle cry that stands for the fusion of Communist Party, state and civil society in the face of



In India, police arrest members of the Calcutta Youth Congress in August 2020. They are protesting against the government's decision to allow admission exams to go ahead during travel restrictions.

a common enemy. The block guards make sure that no one breaks the rigid pandemic rules. They staff control stations, measure fevers, make sure that those in quarantine don't leave the apartment, and if need be, install cameras in front of the apartment and wall up the doors. But they also organise help and the provision of food for those who are not allowed to leave their homes.

Meanwhile, the state establishes a system of complete surveillance. All citizens are required to install an app on their smartphone that provides information about their health and whereabouts and determines whether they are allowed to enter a public place. Based on one's health status, it assigns coloured codes: only those whose phone shows green are allowed to move freely. Red means: confirmed COVID-19 infection. Also a QR code is integrated that everyone has to show when entering a building – even a shopping centre or their own

apartment building. Authorities are entitled to view the QR code. In addition, people must provide name, ID number, body temperature and travel history for the past few days. App data sources and decision-making procedures are in the hands of the government apparatus. They are non-transparent and prone to abuse. For example, people who wanted to take action against the Wuhan local government are said to have fallen victim to false red codes.

There is practically no possibility left to escape surveillance, analogue or digital. Internet platforms such as WeChat and Weibo operate hotlines that allow people to report when they encounter sick people. Some cities even offer rewards for those who denounce others. Chinese companies are installing surveillance cameras that can identify those in a crowd who have an elevated temperature or are not wearing a mask. And a whole range of



apps use citizens' personal health data to alert others that they have been in the vicinity of infected people.

The Chinese authorities justify such interventions with the eternal refrain of the crisis: extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. And the majority of the population supports these because the people themselves feel that it will enable them to return to their normal lives as quickly as possible. At the same time, the rights of many of their fellow citizens are violated. Those whose rights are particularly severely violated include doctors, relatives of the deceased and journalists who resist the authorities' cover-up tactics. They talk openly about what's going on in hospitals. As a result, they either disappear for weeks without a trace or are arrested and later convicted. Because there is virtually no critical civil society left under the Communist Party, most of these cases remain unknown. The death of doctor Li Wenliang alone, who was the first to warn of the virus and was reprimanded by police for spreading "rumours," is causing angry protests. The rights of the citizens must increasingly give way to the measures of the Communist Party aimed at security and stability. However, it was also successful in the fight against the pandemic. By the end of the year the WHO had counted comparatively few deaths at just under 5,000. Many people in China wonder to this day: what good is a democracy if it cannot protect its population from a virus?

## **What is necessary – and what is not?**

The nature of any seduction is that once you fall for it, it is hard to let go. If a civil society is not attentive, it wakes up after the virus in a less free world – in a new reality. This concern worried people all over the world in 2020. Because China is not the only state that persecutes its own population with measures that are not too different from ankle bracelets and muzzles.

Democratic states such as South Korea also relied on the use of the latest surveillance technology in the fight against the virus. Data protection and personal rights were severely restricted. With its rigid digital surveillance strategy, the government was enormously successful in the fight against the pandemic, partly because the majority of the population supported its measures. Some observers attributed the approval to the fact that the South Korean government – like that of Taiwan or Japan – acted

quickly and communicated transparently. Others pointed out that the populations of these countries had a strong sense of community and were better prepared for such a state of emergency because of previous experience with the spread of viruses, such as bird flu.

Taiwan, Province of China (official UN designation) is believed to be the first country to use mobile tracking to monitor quarantine compliance – tracking through data generated by the smartphone whenever it logged into a radio cell. From the end of January, people who were in quarantine were located in this way. The mobile phone number was sufficient, no special app had to be installed. Those who secretly left the apartment had to pay a heavy fine. In South Korea, too, the precept of radical transparency applied: twice a day, the government posted briefings online and published the movement patterns of infected people. Anyone who lived near infected people received a text message.

There are other examples. In Israel, the domestic intelligence service Shin Bet was given wide-ranging powers from mid-March to track down contacts of people infected with Corona. It was allowed to demand that mobile phone providers hand over the location data of infected persons and store it for up to 60 days. At the end of April, the Constitutional Court ruled that the government must initiate a process to legalise this. In July, the Israeli parliament passed such a law. In March 2021, the Supreme Court criticised and curtailed "draconian" surveillance: only if a confirmed coronavirus patient does not cooperate in the epidemiological investigation or does not provide information about encounters with other people, would surveillance be possible. In Austria, a mobile phone provider let the government look into the movement data of all citizens. And in India, the government declared the official Corona app mandatory for everyone who went to work or used public transportation – in a country where many can't even afford a smartphone.

Governments accepted criticism of their own actions by highlighting their successes in the fight against the pandemic. In South Korea, for example, there had been a total of only 900 deaths by the end of the year, according to the WHO, while in Taiwan there were only seven. Only a few countries, including Vietnam or New Zealand, had been able to keep the infection curve so flat. Thus, examples like this present the world with a tricky question: what price is justifiable for the protection of the population from such a global catastrophe? There are no clear answers to the criteria that the United Nations recalled in April.

## The restriction of freedom of expression as a superspreader

Anyone who, “at a site of public danger and in front of a large audience, states or disseminates any untrue fact or misrepresented true fact” and thus “is capable of causing disturbance or unrest in a larger group of persons” ...“shall be punished by imprisonment for up to three years”. And with a further three years if this is done in a way that is “capable of hindering or preventing the efficiency of protection”. This is stated in paragraph 337 of the “Corona Protection Act”, which was passed by the Hungarian government on March 30. The law is a good example of how governments used the pandemic to silence critics. It allowed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to govern by decree for an initially unlimited period. In an interview with international media, the Minister of Justice defended the action:

“This punitive provision is appropriate and necessary to combat disinformation campaigns.” In mid-June, parliament repealed the law. The opposition, however, spoke of an “optical illusion”. This is because with the support of the government camp, parliament also approved a bill that critics say would allow the government to declare another so-called “state of medical emergency”. At the same time, the Hungarian Constitutional Court confirmed that the offence of “scaremongering” was constitutional.

The virus seemed to suit Hungary’s rulers just fine. Long notorious for an autocratic style of leadership that sees freedom of expression as an obstacle rather than an achievement of civilisation, Orbán’s government used the virus to further restrict civil society’s space at a neuralgic point.

The consequences of the blanket phrase “false or distorted facts” could be observed in mid-May. According to anti-government websites *444.hu* and *magyarnarancs.hu*, police searched the home of a man in a village in the northeast of the country and seized his laptop. The 64-year-old was taken to the station to be questioned. On Facebook, he had criticised Orbán’s announcement to relax the Corona safety measures at the beginning of May, warned of a second wave of infection by writing: “You are a merciless tyrant. But remember, so far, every dictator has fallen.” The public prosecutor’s office released the man. The poisoned atmosphere remained even after the laws were repealed: journalists who criticised the pandemic strategy were accused by pro-government media of spreading “fake news”. Quite a few of them received death threats via email and social media.

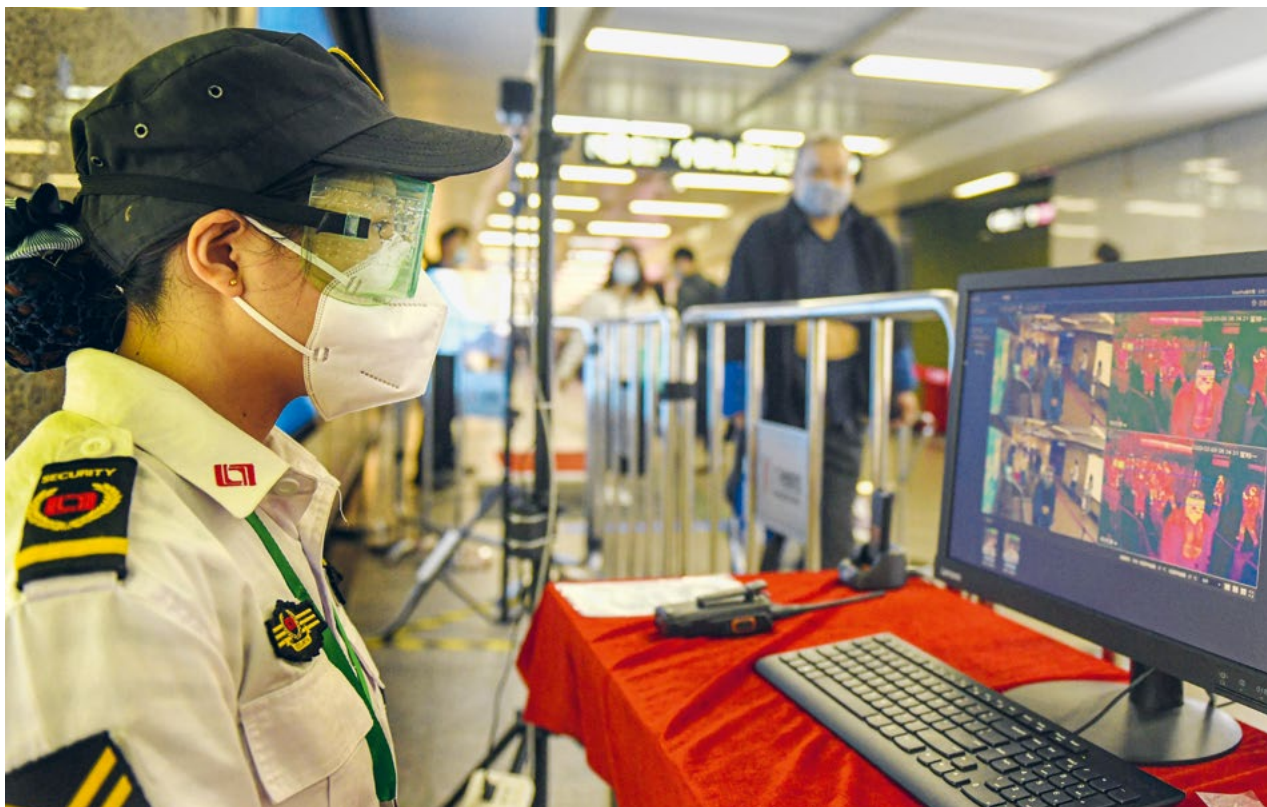
## Journalists in danger

Around the world, media professionals came under increasing pressure. In Tanzania, for example, several television stations had to pay fines for their coverage of the pandemic. At least one journalist and one online newspaper were blocked for six months, according to Reporters Without Borders: Talib Ussi Hamad had reported on the course of a coronavirus infection, supposedly without the consent of the sufferer. He was suspended a few days later. The same penalty was imposed on *Mwananchi* newspaper after it published a photo of President John Magufuli: it showed him shopping with several companions – who were not maintaining safe distance. According to the government, the photo was taken before the pandemic began. In Azerbaijan, too, known for years for its rigid treatment of critics, numerous journalists and activists have been imprisoned for questioning the government’s handling of the pandemic. Opposition member Mahammad Imanli was arrested because the authorities accused him of deliberately spreading the virus. He was sentenced to one year in prison. His father says today: “Our country has reached a stage where police, prosecutors and courts can pass any sentence they want.”

The year 2020 showed: where information does not flow freely, where people cannot obtain information from independent sources, a pandemic spreads all the more freely. Authoritarian regimes thus endanger their population, which they claim to protect, even more. The restriction of freedom of expression is a superspreader.

## Demonstrations of power instead of infection control

Deprivation of rights under the pretext of protecting people’s health had many other faces. Several governments have banned their citizens from taking to the streets to voice their concerns. South Africa, Russia, India, Brazil, Poland, Mozambique, Nicaragua – countries on every continent imposed curfews and banned gatherings with reference to protect against infection. Police officers used rubber bullets against demonstrators and publicly humiliated people – often without even observing the rules of hygiene and distance. In other words, the rules that their governments cite as a reason for harassing the population. But a community that cannot demonstrate



Total control: Only those who pass the infrared check are allowed to use the metro in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. Anyone who has an elevated temperature must go into quarantine. As early as March 2020, the government tries to contain the pandemic via surveillance.

is like a body without legs: it becomes immobile. The right to assemble peacefully in order to demonstrate for one's own interests is one of the most important characteristics of a free society. Without the possibility to build up pressure from the street, the corrective that forces governments to question the course and change it if necessary is missing. The longer the pandemic lasted, the stronger the impression became in some places that the state was not interested in questioning its own actions.

Those who suffered most were often those least able to defend themselves. In Angola, for example, at least seven people were killed between May and July, including young people – 14, 15, 16 years old. Their offenses: they had been playing soccer or visiting relatives. According to Amnesty International, police fired into a group on a sports field. A teenage boy was shot in the face as he was lying on the ground, already injured. “The authorities are taking advantage of the emergency to arbitrarily restrict human rights” – this is how João Malavindele, Executive

Director of the Angolan human rights organisation OMUNGA, described the situation in his home country.

In Central and South-Eastern Europe, the pandemic was a humanitarian catastrophe for millions of impoverished Romani people. Most of them had already been living in precarious conditions before the outbreak of the pandemic: in poverty and tight living spaces, with three or four generations, without access to water. They collected plastic and garbage, and sold household goods or flowers. But now Bulgarian authorities have sealed off entire villages, guarded by police and military.

The pandemic hit migrants and refugees particularly hard. The images from the Turkish-Greek border or from the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos became a kind of infernal ground roar in Europe, because Europe completely sealed itself off in the course of the pandemic. The ports of Malta and Italy have been closed in the meantime. The EU suspended the resettlement program in March 2020, which provides a path to Germany for

recognised refugees stuck in Libya's miserable camps. It was resumed in parts from the summer.

In Latin America and Africa, too, people were living in catastrophic conditions. Uganda, the third largest receiving and transit country in the world, had received 1.4 million refugees in 2019, mostly from countries with ongoing civil wars such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In camps without adequate medical care, worn out from the hardships of flight, people now lacked shelter and essential supplies.

On the US-Mexico border, hostels and refugee shelters stopped accepting people seeking protection. People were living on the streets without any means of protecting themselves and others from the spread. In other countries, such as El Salvador, migrants have been placed in quarantine centres under prison-like conditions. More than 40 civil society organisations issued a joint call in April 2020 with the hashtags #CuarentenaConDerechos and #CuarentenaConDignidad – in English: a quarantine with rights, a quarantine with dignity.

## Pressed from all sides

Clemencia Salas Salazar had already been under the protection of two police units in Mexico since March 2017, ordered by the National Human Rights Commission. Salazar had made many enemies because of her work as a human rights defender. In March 2020, the Yucatán authorities reduced the escort to one police officer with limited powers. The others would now be needed to fight the pandemic, it was argued. It was not until June that she was given more protection, partly because international organisations such as Amnesty International increased pressure.

The case of Clemencia Salas Salazar exemplifies how all over the world all those who stand up for the rights of others were increasingly endangered. Many human rights defenders found themselves in difficulties several times during the pandemic. Firstly, the increasing restrictions on fundamental rights are increasing the pressure on them: where freedom of expression is curtailed, for example, the scope for action of those who raise their voices in response to grievances is narrowed. Secondly, in many places these people filled the gaps that opened up because governments themselves were overwhelmed with the situation or because they deliberately left individual groups to their own devices, so that activists were

even more unprotected. And thirdly, curfews made it even easier for their opponents to obstruct their work or even threaten and kill them. Those who are easier to track down and find become victims all the more quickly.

The consequences include not only numerous murders of human rights defenders and mass arrests. The defenders also felt the consequences in that, once in custody, they were virtually left behind. For example, Iranian activist Narges Mohammadi. The women's rights activist has been in prison since 2015, and in 2016, she was sentenced to 16 years in prison: ten years for founding a group that opposed the death penalty; five years for participating in meetings and conspiracies "with the intent to damage national security"; one year "for spreading propaganda against the system." Between March and April, 85,000 people in Iran were released early in order to eliminate sources of infection in the otherwise overcrowded institutions. But Mohammadi remained in custody even after she showed symptoms of a COVID-19 infection, despite a pre-existing lung condition. Moreover, the authorities denied her any medical care, including the possibility of even diagnosing the infection.

## The year of the dam burst

It has often been said that 2020 has made developments possible that were previously unthinkable. Good developments. Governments threw their strict austerity policies overboard and decided to provide billions in financial aid. People stopped taking pointless flights and began to consider what actually constitutes a good, fulfilling life. Many even hope that 2020 – after the pandemic has been overcome – could be seen as a turning point that has changed many things in the world for the better. Just as true, however: 2020 will go down in history as the year of the dam burst. Governments have used the pandemic not only to violate freedoms, but also to create facts that will continue to have an effect even after the virus has been defeated.

In Peru, for example, the parliament passed a law that guarantees police officers extensive protection, even when they kill people. The law opens the door to excessive violence – and leaves perpetrators unpunished. In the West Bank, despite the pandemic, Israel's destruction of homes and infrastructure reached a new high. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 752 so-called structures were destroyed between the declaration of the state of emergency on

5 March and the end of December. This does not only mean houses, but also, for example, stables or warehouses for agricultural equipment. As a result, 5,000 people not only lost their homes, but often their entire economic basis. This represents a 43 per cent increase in destruction compared to the same period in 2019.

In Brazil, a video of a meeting of the cabinet under President Jair Bolsonaro became public in April. Here, Minister of the Environment Ricardo Salles candidly explained that the attention drawn by the pandemic must be used to weaken environmental laws and speed up deforestation: “With the press exclusively focused on COVID-19, we now have the opportunity to take on the Amazon issue.” Salles was in good company with this assessment: according to a survey of 18 tropical countries by the environmental organisation WWF, rainforest losses in March 2020 were about 150 percent higher than the March average from 2017 to 2019. The area shrank by 6,500 square kilometres – about seven times the area of Berlin.

## And what about Germany?

In Germany, too, the pandemic has raised fundamental questions. What criteria were used by those with political responsibility, but also by citizens, to assess whether measures were proportionate or not? Was the right balance struck between personal and health protection, for example in the use of technology? What form of protest did the state not only have to endure, but even enable?

Politics and society had tough debates to fight out. For example, when the Corona app was initially up for debate, the state could slide into surveillance fantasies similar to South Korea or Taiwan. Or when, after a statement by the National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in spring, criticism arose that the interests of disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, migrants or students had not been adequately taken into account. Often, civil society actors and the courts had to put the state in its place before it could go too far in its own restrictions. On 16 April, for example, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that demonstrations could not generally be banned with reference to the pandemic.

The discussions about freedom of assembly were most intense in summer, when opponents of the coronavirus restriction, as well as other groups, wanted to take to the streets – for example, to draw attention to the precarious situation of those in the arts. It was not always

thanks to federal or state governments that demonstrations became possible again under certain conditions, but often thanks to those who fought for them before the courts. Only in those instances where people refused to comply with the requirements for protection against contagion did the police stop the demonstrations.

Despite all the complaints about a supposed “coronavirus dictatorship”: in the CIVICUS ranking, Germany is listed as one of the states that passed the Corona Democracy Test: The society is open.

## The gloomiest forecast in the history of the UN

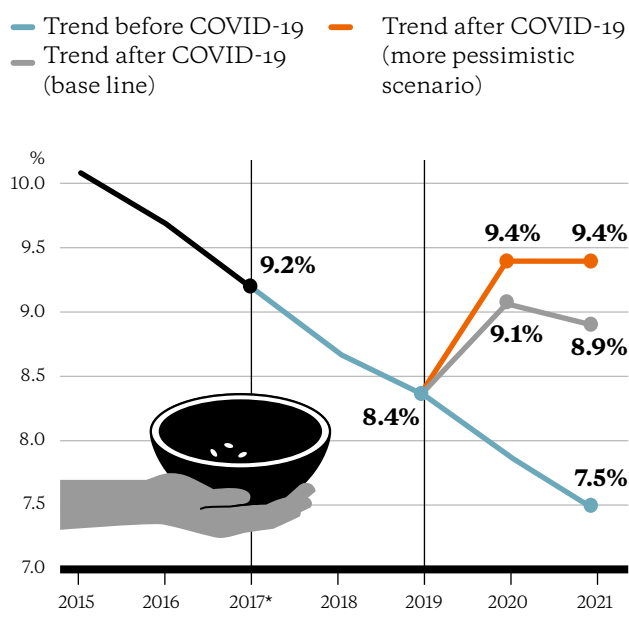
The world will change because of the pandemic – and it is quite possible that it will not be a better one. The virus and its consequences have not only intensified discrimination and racism but it has also exacerbated existing inequalities and poverty. The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of a global economic system that has undermined public welfare or even prevented it from being established in the first place. People who have to earn their money in illegal employment, such as day labourers in Ecuador or street vendors in India, can only keep their heads above water as long as business is good. But if such a “hand-to-mouth” life, which often provides for entire families, falls apart, for example because people are no longer allowed to leave their homes or their customers fail to appear, millions of people are suddenly faced with ruin.

“So, the picture is bleak for the world’s most vulnerable” said UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock at the publication of OCHA’s Global Humanitarian Overview for 2021 in early December. It states that the pandemic disproportionately affects those “already living on a knife’s edge”. Conflict, climate change and COVID-19 have created the greatest humanitarian challenge since the Second World War. The UN estimates that 235 million people will need humanitarian aid and protection – a 40 per cent increase on last year. The World Bank does not have any better news: It projects that the pandemic will increase the proportion of people worldwide who fall below the absolute poverty line of \$1.90 a day from 8.4 per cent in 2019 to nearly 10 per cent.

The organisation Oxfam has calculated that more than one third of the world’s population has no financial support from social security systems. In total, governments

## Rising Poverty

Percentage of the world population living on less than US\$1.90 per day



\*Figures collected until 2017, forecasts thereafter. The forecasts are based on three scenarios. 1: Forecast based on the “Global Economic Prospects” as of January 2020. 2 and 3: Forecasts based on the adjusted outlook as of June 2020 (decline in global growth of five and eight per cent, respectively).

Source: World Bank (2020): *Reversals of Fortune*

around the world spent an additional \$11.7 trillion in 2020 to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, according to the report. Of this, about \$9.8 trillion, or 83 percent, was spent by 36 rich countries, compared to just \$42 billion, or 0.4 percent, by 59 low-income countries. While many rich countries massively expanded their own social security systems, they increased their assistance for social protection in developing countries by only 5.8 billion dollars. According to Oxfam’s calculations, that equates to less than five cents for every \$100 raised to fight COVID-19.

Organisations that work for human rights or against poverty are also feeling the effects of the pandemic. They lost both private donations and public funding during the pandemic. Countries in the global North, such as Germany

or the USA, which in the past were the main donors of NGOs, particularly in the global South, are themselves under financial pressure because of the pandemic. The result: in a survey of more than 1,000 African organisations published in June, more than half said they had already suffered financial losses. And 66 percent said they expect to do so over the course of the next few years. Civil society will not have an easier time in the coming years in advocating for those who desperately need help.

This is also indicated by a survey of 53 organisations conducted by the Small International Charities Network in the UK in August. The network brings together those NGOs that hardly receive any government funding for their work in the poorest regions of the world. 77 percent stated that they had already been affected by the financial consequences of the pandemic. 28 percent believe that the crisis will hinder their work in the coming years.

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**“It is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.”**

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In November 2020, the Paris Peace Forum, a conference of international peace actors, heads of government of donor countries, civil society and the private sector, took place for the third time. Their goal: to solve global problems with global cooperation. The conference, like so many others this year, migrated into the digital sphere.

Michelle Bachelet, the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN, also made a statement via video. It only takes a little more than a minute, but it contains everything which has to be on the agenda of a world community which is serious about global responsibility. “We need to build more equal, inclusive, sustainable, safer and greener societies that support human rights – and are therefore more resilient,” she says. The world must put an end to all forms of discrimination and focus on the causes of inequality within and between states. The last sentence in her statement reads: “It is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.” The future will show whether the world will be ready for this collective wisdom.

## Philippines

# At war with its own people

President Rodrigo Duterte is using the same methods in the fight against the Corona virus as he did with the “war on drugs”: excessive violence, arrests and drastic curtailments of fundamental rights. Many people are fighting for their survival, even against the police.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte delivers his annual address to the nation in Parliament in late July 2020. For an hour and 40 minutes, he boasts about his drastic approach to the pandemic – the restrictions are among the toughest in the world. The country’s 107 million inhabitants are being harassed in the fight against the pandemic like no other people.

As of March 15 in the greater Manila area and gradually in the rest of the country, people are hardly allowed to leave their homes. One pass is distributed per household, mostly to women, which entitles them to buy food or medicine. A second pass is issued to people in jobs relevant to the system: for example, in the health sector, the military

and police, or in supermarkets. Transportation – buses as well as private taxis or tricycles – is suspended. All public institutions are closed – courts, authorities, schools and universities. The country is largely at a standstill.

To ensure that no one violates the measures, heavily armed police and soldiers check everyone on the road. Major intersections are sealed off. Emergency vehicles with machine guns on their roofs roll through the streets. Police officers go from house to house, checking people for symptoms of COVID-19. Neighbours are called to report suspects. Anyone who appears to be infected will be taken for testing. Healthy people end up in quarantine centres just like the sick.



The poster reads: Fascist, terrorist, puppet of China. People protest against President Duterte’s new Anti-Terrorism Bill carrying posters like this one on 4 June 2020. The government can also use this as a reason to lock up critics.

In late July – in that sprawling speech – Duterte looks back on his “war against the virus,” which is really a war against his own people. A war from which the poorest suffer the most. Duterte, however, is satisfied: “Together we shall fight this pandemic with the same fervor as our campaign against illegal drugs, criminality, insurgency and corruption...” Despite his martial tone, the pandemic is approaching its peak at this time: in early September, the Philippines recorded the highest number of infections in all of Southeast Asia.

## **Critics are arrested and humiliated**

Since taking office in June 2016, the Philippine president has known only one strategy to address national crises: violence, arrests and increasing curtailment of basic rights. In the name of his supposed war on drugs, tens of thousands have been murdered – with the participation or acquiescence of the government, police and judiciary. In the pandemic, Duterte continued this campaign against his own people unchecked. Anyone who causes trouble or endangers police officers will be shot, Duterte threatened in a TV address on 1 April. The order to shoot was withdrawn by the head of the Philippine National Police after strong protests on social media: his security forces would not use weapons.

However, according to official figures, from mid-March to early September alone, more than 100,000 people were arrested who – thus the allegations – were not complying with the pandemic rules. Yet arrests for violations of pandemic measures are illegal under Philippine law without a warrant, according to the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, an independent constitutional body with a relevant mandate but severely limited influence. In the same period, more than 900 complaints about police violence, mistreatment and arrests were lodged with the police. With this strategy, Duterte not only violated laws – he also increased the risk of infection: the prisons, which had long been overcrowded anyway, became hotspots themselves.

Those who did not comply with the curfew were publicly humiliated and punished by police officers, according to human rights organisations. In the city of Santa Cruz, for example, seven youths were locked in dog cages overnight because they had violated the nightly curfew.

In Paranaque, a city in the Metro Manila region, police officers abused detainees by exposing them to the blazing sun for hours without water.

## **Oppression as a strategy**

However, the president did not only use his security forces to monitor compliance with the quarantine regulations and to harass the population. His government also made former military generals the top COVID-19 fighters. Duterte appointed the ex-intelligence chief as the new head of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation in late August. The Philippine Commission on Human Rights demanded that the government finally adopt a public health approach instead of reacting to the pandemic with the military. A critic of this strategy, Filipino politics professor Aries Arugay, who lives in the country, said in a newspaper interview that the government always responds to threats in the same way: with violence and curtailment of basic rights. In doing so, it was behaving like a “one trick-pony”.

Similar to Duterte’s “war on drugs”, the poorest in the big cities suffer the most from this policy of brutal crackdown. The majority of the poorest are among the approximately 40 percent of the workforce who work in the informal sector. They are day labourers who sell goods in the market, collect crops or work in construction or sell street food. Those who cannot earn money because of the curfews are starving. Many of the poorest also live on the streets or in cramped conditions in already overcrowded settlements, without sufficient water and thus without the possibility of protecting themselves against infection. And even these provisionally built, semi-legal shelters were forcibly evicted by the police during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to human rights organisations.

## **State aid: meagre and non-transparent**

The government launched the “Bayanihan To Heal As One Act” – an emergency relief programme for 18 million low-income families – through the Emergency Powers Act at the end of March. Each of them should receive around 5000 to 8000 pesos (the equivalent of 90 to 140 euros) by the end of June. But by mid-August, more than



a third of the families had received no help. One reason for the lack of aid is corruption: By the end of August, the Ministry of Justice and the police had investigated more than a thousand cases of suspected theft of state COVID-19 funds – including cases against elected politicians such as mayors and municipal representatives.

## Is pressure on the media soon to be as strong as under dictator Marcos?

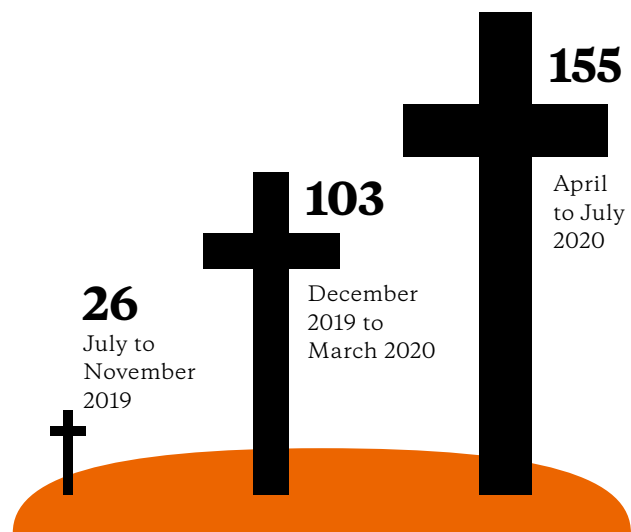
With the outbreak of the pandemic, the government also further restricted freedom of the press and freedom of expression. However, media representatives had already been intimidated, defamed and murdered – although defamation is a criminal offence in the Philippines, with up to four years in prison. In fact, however, it is precisely this fact that is problematic, since according to the Philippine Penal Code, even statements of facts can be interpreted as defamation. Even if journalists report on facts and proven violations of the law, there is a threat of punishment. In June 2020, judges sentenced journalist Maria Resa, editor-in-chief of *Rappler*, one of the last independent online media outlets in the country, after a legally questionable trial. The sentence was still unknown as of December 2020, but could mean up to six years in prison. *Rappler* had exposed in October 2016 that Duterte’s campaign team had built a veritable online army of paid trolls spreading fake news on social media and attacking political opponents.

With the pandemic, the pressure on free media intensified further. Those who spread alleged false reports in the context of COVID-19 under the Emergency Law risked up to two years in prison. In the months that followed, several authors of social media posts critical of the government, including students and artists, were arrested under the Emergency Law. Added to this: in May 2020, congress did not renew the broadcasting license of ABS-CBN, the largest news channel to date. ABS-CBN had reached every second household and regularly criticised the government for its repressive course. Reporters had meticulously counted and published the number of people murdered in Duterte’s “war on drugs”. Philippine human rights organisations estimate that more than 27,000 people have been murdered since Duterte took office.

Many people protested against the revocation of the license – nevertheless, the station had to cease operations. Thus, during the pandemic, an important source was

## State responsible for killings

Number of people killed by the police in connection with the “war on drugs”



Source: Human Rights Watch based on government statistics

missing to inform the public in a factual and critical way. The station had already been shut down once, in September 1972, then by President Marcos. At that time, he had imposed martial law – thereby making himself dictator.

## Silenced under the pretext of fighting terrorism

The Philippines are considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders. At least 182 of them have been murdered since Duterte took office until August 2020, according to Action Network Human Rights – Philippines (AMP). Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Philippine government is brutally targeting human rights defenders and other civil society actors and organisations who advocate for human rights, environmental protection or equitable land distribution in the country, or who document, denounce and report on violations by the police or companies. The government declares such activists – keyword “red-tagging” – to be communist rebels. Both are a common method of

silencing critical voices and organisations. They are intimidated, assaulted, arrested, criminalised, defamed – and murdered. Even contact with people and groups who appear on the arbitrarily drawn up terror lists of the military or some ministries is dangerous. This makes any encounter with them risky. The psychological pressure is immense, also because it is often unclear who is suspected.

Among those who have paid for their commitment with their lives is Zara Alvarez. The staff member of the health NGO Negros Island Health Integrated Program for Community Development (NIHIPCD) worked for the rights of landless smallholder families and agricultural workers. For years, Zara Alvarez had been intimidated and received death threats. A fabricated charge in 2012 accused her of being involved in the assassination of an army general. The court case dragged on for two years. In 2014, Zara Alvarez was released from prison, but was not acquitted until March 2020 – for lack of evidence. Yet her name ended up on an official terror list. It is true that the picture and name were removed from the list after her objection. But in August 2020, she was shot dead by as-yet-unknown perpetrators outside her home. Zara's case is an example of just one of the numerous murders of human rights defenders. Impunity is a major problem in the Philippines – especially in the numerous cases of arbitrary executions and political killings.

The government can prosecute activists even more easily with the new anti-terror law – now also backed up by law. Parliament passed it in July 2020. Terror suspects can be monitored for 90 days and detained for 24 days. The law also allows the government to freeze the accounts of organisations without a court order. What falls under the accusation of “suspected terrorist” or “terrorist-supporting” is deliberately defined very vaguely in the law. This means that almost every person and every organisation in the Philippines can be suspected, monitored and hindered in their own work. Or, as Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, puts it: “The recent passage of the new Anti-Terrorism Act heightens our concerns about the blurring of important distinctions between criticism, criminality and terrorism.”

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## “Some get punished, others have parties”



Interview with **Abbie Litao**, Program Director “Human Rights Defense in Times of Pandemic”, and Attorney **Mario Maderazo**, lawyer at the non-governmental organisation IDEALS

### **Ms Litao, Mr Maderazo, how has the pandemic changed health care in densely populated areas and slums in the Philippines?**

**Abbie Litao:** It revealed the flaws that existed before: people in the poor districts can't afford doctors or medicines because since 2016, we have had a president who has different priorities.

### **You mean: the poor are on their own in the pandemic?**

**Abbie Litao:** They are entitled to government health care, for sure. But since the lockdown, everyone has to register with local authorities. Those who are not on the list or have not been able to register due to lack of identification documents will not receive financial assistance for medical treatment.

### **How do people get food and medicine?**

**Abbie Litao:** This is a big challenge for many. Right at the start of the lockdown, the government did launch a welfare program. But there was only a one-time payment of 5,000 pesos (the equivalent of approximately 90 euros) either in cash or in kind. This aid does not last long because of the high prices. Some local governments provide food parcels to their population, especially the elderly. But for many it is very difficult to survive. People are not afraid of the pandemic or going to jail if they're hungry.

**Since the start of the pandemic, more and more people are being detained. Why?**

**Mario Maderazo:** They are imprisoned for not wearing masks or for doing informal work, such as selling vegetables by the roadside. Even the drivers of jeepneys, the mini-buses with the open windows, are not allowed to transport passengers. Medical experts even consider these vehicles to be safer than the buses of large transport companies, whose air-conditioning systems make it easier for the virus to spread.

**So, breaking the rules is punished severely?**

**Mario Maderazo:** Yes, with many government officials not complying with the rules themselves. A high-ranking police officer posted photos on social media of his birthday party with many guests during the lockdown in May. He has been head of the national police since November. This shows how much the government discriminates against people: some are punished if they violate restrictions. The others are having parties.

**What are the consequences of the pandemic for the poor?**

**Abbie Litao:** Above all, they are suffering from it. People are supposed to stay at home, but for women, their own home is often not a safe place. Our social workers are

reporting that more women are being abused than before the pandemic. In addition, mothers are expected to teach their children at home, while taking care of the household at the same time. This adds to the tension that many are experiencing during the pandemic.

**Mario Maderazo:** Or take schools: much of the teaching now takes place online. But many schools and parents do not have access to the Internet or computers. There was a story on social media about a little boy who raised money to do his school work in an internet café. Others stand on the roof of their house with their smartphones so they have a good connection.

**This climate of pressure and tension – what does it do to the cohesion of society?**

**Mario Maderazo:** People are already showing solidarity. This can also be seen on social media, where there have been online protests against the government, for example. But solidarity is also limited: we had two super typhoons. Even the Catholic Church is struggling to help. There are no masses and no donations. People are tired of donating.

**How do you deal with this situation?**

**Mario Maderazo:** It's hard, mentally and emotionally. At the beginning of the pandemic, I wondered: how long is this going to take? That's when I stayed home, too. But



Even more vulnerable in times of the pandemic: In Metro Manila, many people live in temporary, semi-legal and desperately poor settlements. The police also evicted several of them in 2020.

the bulk of our work takes place outside with people. After a month, I thought: I can't just sit around at home. Thus, we asked ourselves how could we move our work online – the legal advice, the support for human rights defenders, the educational programmes.

#### **What have you done specifically to achieve this?**

**Abbie Litao:** We launched an online platform where people can ask questions about unemployment, domestic violence or civil rights. Our lawyers respond. So, we were able to continue our work. But this pandemic has also been very stressful for us. We have online meetings every day where we talk to a computer. When you meet people in person, you get positive energy back. But now we hold video conference after video conference.

#### **Do the new forms still work?**

**Mario Maderazo:** Yes. We get a lot of good feedback. But challenges remain – for example, convincing people to write about a very personal issue in a chat when they would rather talk to a lawyer.

#### **What will your human rights work look like after the pandemic?**

**Abbie Litao:** I think we will see a mix of on and offline formats. People find help online and then we pick the cases that need face-to-face support. And we will remind the government that it is not fulfilling its responsibilities: the right to health is a human right. The current health situation will become the new normal. Our work will be even more necessary than it is today.

#### **And what will IDEALS look like after the pandemic?**

**Mario Maderazo:** Our organisation is very fortunate to have young people like Abbie. Most of our lawyers are young, I have been here the longest. The younger ones have creative ideas and a large amount of idealism. The challenge is to support them through the difficulties and risks that come with working at IDEALS.

**Abbie Litao:** There is also a great opportunity for us at the moment. The pandemic has spurred our creativity. When we started our human rights work, we focused on documenting human rights violations in our president's war on drugs. Now, we look at the many connections between all human rights and develop new ideas. We need to communicate their value in a positive way to counter the government's misinformation. Now, we are finding ways to engage communities in this work.

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## **Short and brief**

**Our partner:** The Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS)

**Origins:** Founded by lawyers in 2005, since 2016 partner of Bread for the World

**Project Area:** Metro Manila

**Main areas of work:** Marginalised population groups such as women or victims of human rights violations are strengthened and supported in demanding their rights. IDEALS fights for political and legal equality for all and also works together with government representatives.

**For more info, visit <http://ideals.org.ph>**

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## Colombia

# COVID-19 as fire accelerant

The outbreak of the virus exacerbates the conflicts in a country that was trying to find peace through the peace agreement between the rebel group FARC and the Colombian government. Excesses of violence reach record levels in 2020.

In September 2020, nearly 50 non-governmental organisations publish a joint declaration. In doing so, they are rebelling against a fact that, in addition to COVID-19, acts like another pandemic in Colombia: police violence against its own population – by a police force that has become increasingly militarised.

The reason for the revolt is the death of the lawyer Javier Ordóñez. Police officers had injured him so severely with electric shocks and beatings that he died. Since then, thousands of people in the capital Bogotá and other cities have protested against police violence, which has increased during the pandemic. Nightly riots, looting and arson attacks on police stations continue.

In their statement, the NGOs deplore the “abuse by the police” and “excessive use of firearms”. Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, is also concerned: at the meeting of the 45th UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, she reported 13 deaths during protests in Bogotá and Soacha. More than 300 people were injured, 77 of them by firearms. This is a new peak in a long simmering development. 2019 was already considered a record year for violence; never before had the police and military, as well as paramilitary groups, committed more crimes. 2020 trumped the previous year.

The outbreak of the virus acts as a fire accelerant in Colombia and primarily aggravates the situation of human



600 kilometres in four weeks: On 19 October 2020, protesters from the province of Cauca arrive in the capital Bogotá. Most of them are indigenous peoples, demanding more protection from the armed groups in their territories.

rights defenders and activists. Just four years earlier, the former civil war country had hoped to enter a new era. The peace agreement that had just been concluded between the Colombian government and the rebel group FARC was intended to help free Colombia from the structures that had caused so much havoc in the country: Colombia is one of the countries with the greatest social inequality in the world. Through the exploitation of mineral and natural resources such as oil, sugar cane or coal, and through mega-projects such as dams, the country has generated great wealth. But it is mainly the elites in politics and business who benefit from the wealth. They have connections to actors in the illegal economy, to paramilitaries and other criminal groups. And to drug trafficking: Colombia is one of the main coca-growing countries for cocaine production. The wealth of the few is contrasted with the poverty of a large part of the population.

The November 2016 peace agreement was supposed to bring calm to the society. Its central goals: a land reform that distributes the land fairly so that small-scale farmers can also earn a living. The disarmament and reintegration of FARC fighters. The democratic opening and political participation of different groups. An end to violence. And the creation of various bodies to deal with the crimes and the past, including a truth commission and a special court. But even after the agreement, the killing continued. Since the signing of the peace agreement, 1,108 human rights defenders and *líderes sociales* – social leaders – had been killed by the end of 2020, according to the peace institute INDEPAZ. The latter in particular, as representatives of farming, indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities, are campaigning for land to be returned and for soil, forest and water not to be exploited any further. In this way, they stand in the way of the economic interests of some companies and groups that want to gain or retain control over those areas that the state is neglecting.

## Only 40 percent of the peace agreement implemented

The election of right-wing conservative Iván Duque as president in 2018 dashed many hopes. In contrast to his predecessor, who negotiated the peace agreement, Duque's policies are primarily aligned to the interests of the elites, and he entered the election campaign as an opponent of the agreement. He stands for a policy of the

hard hand. His approach also found support among those who are convinced that the FARC, also responsible for many kidnappings and murders, had got off too lightly in the peace agreement.

The new president did not stop the agreement, but delayed its implementation. Neither the agreed protection system for human rights defenders and social leaders nor the land restitution programmes have progressed since then. This is also criticised by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, which evaluates the implementation of the agreement on behalf of the parties. According to the Institute, three years after signing, the government has not implemented 60 percent of the agreements at all or has only begun to do so. Above all, land reform is stagnating: many farmers are still waiting for the government to offer and promote alternatives to drug cultivation. According to Oxfam, one percent of landowners control 81 percent of the land area.

In many regions, armed groups, including paramilitary units, FARC dissidents or criminal gangs, have taken advantage of the absence of the state to fill the power vacuum left by the demobilised FARC. The rural conflict regions have remained lawless spaces – with many murdered human rights defenders and *líderes sociales*. The state should actually protect these people, with police and military forces that do not attack their own population. Moreover, the state would have to legally clarify the dealings between political or economic elites and armed groups. It would also have to guarantee public services such as health care, social aid and education. But Duque is instead backing further militarization and repressive security policies.

## During the Corona crisis, Duque increases pressure and violence

Duque also remains true to his line in the fight against the spread of the virus. The government imposed strict curfews and hygiene rules in the spring of 2020. It was not until September that they were gradually lifted. Despite this, COVID-19 has hit the country hard: by the end of 2020, there was expected to be nearly 1.6 million infected people and about 43,000 deaths, according to official figures. The consequences are also particularly dramatic in the quasi state- and lawless regions: there, armed groups imposed curfews. At the end of March, the



**Tear gas against criticism:** On 9 September 2020, police in Bogotá crack down on people protesting over the death of Javier Humberto Ordóñez. He had died in a hospital after the police had given him electric shocks. The accusation: he had violated social distancing rules.

ELN guerrilla group declared a one-month ceasefire, which was proclaimed as humanitarian gesture because of the virus. But in order to protect lives, their fighters would be forced to kill people if the people did not respect the orders to prevent COVID-19.

Police, (para-)military and guerrilla groups also used a massive amount of violence. For 2020, INDEPAZ reported 90 massacres with a total of 375 deaths; most of those murdered lived in indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The number of human rights defenders and *líderes sociales* murdered also increased in 2020 compared to the previous year, from 279 to 310. The people, who are hardly protected by the state anyway, were even more defenceless during the pandemic: those who cannot leave their homes because of curfews are easy to find.

The work of human rights organisations supported by Bread for the World was also severely hampered. In order to move around the country, passes were needed, which were very difficult or impossible to obtain. Because of the curfews, human rights organisations could no

longer accompany the human rights defenders and social leaders at risk. Protection programmes that helped threatened activists to find a new place to live, where they would be not be recognised, have been withdrawn by the government. Only in individual cases and after national and international pressure – including the German Embassy – it was possible, for example, to bring Leyner Palacios, the Chair of the Inter-ethnic Truth Commission of the Pacific region, to a safer region.

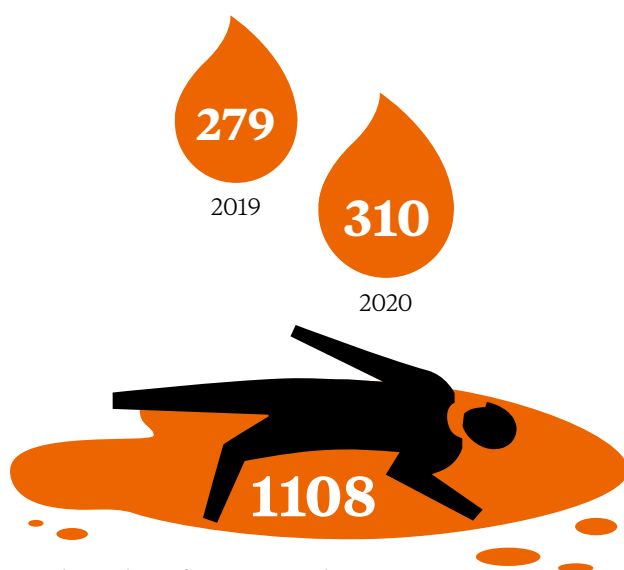
## No masks or clean water

Even today, the poor suffer the most from the pandemic. They do not enjoy any health protection in the first place – and the pandemic makes them even more vulnerable. In Chocó, a province with a population of around half a million – mainly indigenous and Afro-Colombian – that has always been neglected by the state, there was only one hospital with 27 intensive care beds in May. In the entire

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## Deadly commitment

Rise in murders of líderes sociales\* and human rights defenders in Colombia



Total number after passing the peace agreement on 24 November 2016

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\*Social leaders the communities.

Source: Indepaz

Amazon, which has high infection rates, there was not a single intensive care bed at the time. Hardly any tests are delivered to the rural and neglected areas – the number of people actually infected and dying is probably much higher than officially reported.

Many people in Colombia simply could not comply with the strict rules to contain the virus during the pandemic. According to official figures, only 35 percent of households in rural areas have direct access to water, while in cities the figure is around 88 percent. Added to that: many people work in the informal sector. They earn their money as day labourers or wandering traders. They have no employment contracts and literally live from hand to mouth. If they cannot work, they starve. To them, curfew actually means danger to their lives.

In April, Duque's government announced emergency aid, such as a one-off payment of 45 euros, special payments for all those participating in state social programmes, and a deferral of charges for water and

electricity. But much of the help does not arrive. The reason: corruption and mismanagement. At least 27 cases of corruption involving the Ministry of Defence and numerous local authorities are being investigated by the Contraloría General de la República. To alleviate the worst of the need, local initiatives have been helping. The mayor of Bogotá and the mayor of Medellín organised fundraisers – with the money they bought food for the poorest. In Bogotá, a total of 13 million US dollars was raised, and in Medellín, almost 3.3 million US dollars. The population also showed solidarity: those who were hungry hung a red cloth in front of the window. Neighbours then helped these families.

Venezuelan migrants also suffered massively as a result of the pandemic. They were excluded from the emergency aid programmes. Many therefore went back to Venezuela. However, those who wanted to go to Colombia because of the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela were faced with closed borders. The reason given was to prevent the spread of the virus. Those who nevertheless made it back to Colombia are now living there illegally – often without any help.

## More people mobilised

And yet, despite repression and lockdown, many organisations were able to operate. They advised and accompanied threatened persons digitally or by telephone. Or they rededicated their funds and provided those in need with medicine or food.

In addition, the pandemic is accelerating a development that has been observed in Colombia for some time: more and more people are demanding a social and democratic constitutional state that guarantees basic services and security for all people in the country. Issues such as climate change, the fight against corruption and the rights of minorities and women are also being discussed and demanded more strongly in Colombia today than they were before the pandemic.



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## “Many guards pay a high price”



Interview with **Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo**, Human Rights Coordinator of the “Association of Indigenous Councils in the North of Cauca Province” (ACIN)

**Mr Lectamo, the peace agreement was signed in 2016. Why are indigenous territories still not safe for those who live there?**

**Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo:** Because since then, all the violence levels have gone up there, the murders, the massacres. We saw the peace agreement as a way out of the spiral of violence. It seemed, despite shortcomings, as the best approach. For almost a year, there was peace, which gave us hope. But the state did nothing to implement the agreement. The peace process was abandoned.

**What does that mean?**

**Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo:** Where the state withdrew, it left a vacuum. Numerous groups took advantage of this – drug cartels as well as guerrillas or paramilitaries. Today, we have six or seven armed groups in the region without structure, without commanders, without education or training. Very young people who are absolutely criminally minded. They have assassinated several indigenous leaders who have championed the right to life, an intact environment, and democracy and peace. Some also murdered them because they want to plunder their land.

**Military and police do not protect indigenous communities?**

**Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo:** No. When communities are attacked, the military and police often do not intervene. They are often even involved in it. Or they form alliances with other armed actors. That’s why people don’t trust the security forces. If a case does end up before a military court, it usually comes to nothing.

**How are indigenous communities fighting back?**

**Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo:** Many try to resist peacefully and unarmed through their Guardia Indígena. This peace actor, which has many young members, has a long tradition. The Guardia is very well respected – that makes it strong. It does not take sides with any of the armed groups, but asks them to leave the indigenous territories in peace. Unfortunately, many guards pay a high price for this: dozens of men and women were murdered because they belonged to the Guardia.

**In October, thousands participated in a protest march, the “Minga Indígena”, from the province of Cauca to Bogotá. What was different from previous Mingas?**

**Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo:** This march woke up the country because it mobilised many people and brought together different social movements: students and farmers, Indígenas and Afro-Colombians, people from the rural areas and from the city. We have to develop a common agenda. This is crucial for the future.

**The aim was also to talk to President Iván Duque.**

**Did it happen?**

**Eduin Mauricio Capaz Lectamo:** No. We did ask the president to talk with us – we kept a chair free for him at all meetings. It remained empty at all meetings.

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## Short and brief

**Our partner:** Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte de Cauca – ACIN

**Origins:** 1996 founded as the umbrella organisation of the 20 indigenous administrative units (cabildos) in the Cauca region, partner of Bread for the World since 2005

**Project area:** Northern Cauca, Colombia

**Main areas of work:** Promotion of indigenous self-government and community mandates in health, education, culture, economy, environment and sustainable solidarity-based development.

**For more info, visit <https://nasaacin.org>**

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## Zimbabwe

# The announced state failure

The pandemic reveals the whole failure of the Zimbabwean government in recent years. Corruption and mismanagement have led to unemployment, poverty and hunger. Those who resist are kidnapped, abused or arrested.

It is an unusual step that the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference decided to take on 14 August 2020. It addressed the people of Zimbabwe with a pastoral letter published on the internet and read out in churches throughout the country. Under the title "The March is not Ended", the bishops name the grievances in the country: widespread corruption, economic collapse, growing poverty, food crisis, misappropriation of COVID-19 funds and increasing human rights violations. They criticise the government's handling of criticism in plain terms: "The crackdown on dissent is unprecedented." And they ask: "Is this the Zimbabwe we want? To have a different opinion does not mean to be an enemy. It is precisely from the contrast of opinions that the light comes. Our government automatically labels anyone thinking differently as an enemy of the country: this is an abuse."

A few days later, Monica Mutsvangwa, the Information Minister, spoke out. She accuses the President of the

Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Robert Ndlovu, of triggering a "Rwanda-type genocide" with this "evil minded" message. Because of this, many civil society and church organisations showed solidarity with the bishops. Social media is dominated by the anti-government hashtags #IStandWithTheCatholic Bishops, #ZimbabweanLives-Matter, #TheMarchIsNotEnded.

## A country in permanent crisis

Even before the pandemic, Zimbabwe was in deep political and economic turmoil. In November 2017, the military ended the reign of then-President Robert Mugabe after 37 years in a coup. He was first placed under house arrest and then deposed. The reason was that, shortly before, Mugabe had dismissed the then Vice President and party colleague Emmerson Mnangagwa. Once the



Peaceful protest: On 14 September 2020, students and human rights activists accuse the government of preventing any kind of public criticism under the pretext of protecting the country against infection.

bearer of hope for a new and self-confident Africa, Mugabe had increasingly developed into a ruler with dictatorial tendencies.

Three days later, Mnangagwa was sworn in. The nearly 15 million people in Zimbabwe had high hopes for him. At the swearing-in ceremony, Mnangagwa promised his compatriots a better future. In fact, however, he continued the course with which Mugabe had run the country down in almost four decades. Massive corruption and government mismanagement soon destroyed any sense of optimism.

Three crises were affecting the country, overlapping and exacerbated by serious government failures: a monetary crisis, an economic crisis and a food crisis. In four of the five years since 2015, the country has suffered from severe droughts. Harvests are failing. In addition, the government rushed to introduce the Zimbabwean dollar as the new national currency in 2019. As a result, food prices also rose. Rapid inflation devalued the incomes of the population. The economy slumped, down eight percent in 2019 alone, according to the World Bank. According to their surveys, twice as many people were extremely poor in 2019 as in 2011: 6.6 million – more than 40 percent of the population. They have just \$1.90 to spend per day. The health sector has also suffered massively from state failure for a long time: doctors, carers and nurses went on strike for months in the first half of 2020 because they were working in state hospitals without the necessary medical protective equipment. The currency devaluation had also dramatically devalued their salaries, and what little they had was transferred late – while the directors of the same hospitals received expensive foreign SUVs from budget funds. The government responded to criticism of such conditions with repression and violence. A common way in Zimbabwe to intimidate and punish activists and opposition members is to kidnap them. Sometimes even by the police.

In May, for example, they arrested three female politicians from the main opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) – one of them a member of parliament, the other two from the party's youth movement – in the capital Harare. Shortly before, they had taken part in a peaceful demonstration organised by their party's youth movement. They remained missing for 48 hours until they were found seriously injured on a road. The women reported that they were tortured, raped, covered with excrement and thrown into a hole in the ground. However, the state did not look for the perpetrators, but

charged the three female politicians: they were accused of violating pandemic regulations by attending a meeting with the intent to commit violence and incite others against the government and pandemic regulations.

Another example: in 2019, a voluntary co-worker of a church organisation that is supported by Bread for the World was kidnapped. The woman had denounced the sexual violence of miners towards young women: many are raped and infected with HIV. But voicing such criticism in Zimbabwe is risky: the president's wife also has a stake in a mining company. A few days after her disappearance, the woman was found abused on the side of a road. The perpetrators remained unknown and unpunished. In September 2019, catholic and protestant churches had already sent a joint open letter to the president: no case has been effectively investigated so far and no perpetrator has been seriously prosecuted, the churches criticised.

## **Lockdown exacerbates crisis**

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 thus hit Zimbabwe at a time when the country had long been suffering from massive problems. The pandemic further intensified the crisis. The government responded to the first five confirmed Corona cases with a strict lockdown on 30 March: people were only allowed to leave their homes within a radius of five kilometres to buy food and medicine or to look after relatives. Only people in system-relevant occupations such as food sales or electricity supply were allowed to go to work. To enforce the lockdown, the government gave the police and military almost unlimited powers.

For example, the government banned informal traders from selling their goods in markets for three months. Despite the hunger crisis, it burned food in unauthorised markets as a punishment and deterrent. The police often vandalised small stalls, confiscated goods, abused street vendors – and even shot some of them. However, the new rules hit all women and men working in the informal sector hard – nine out of ten people in Zimbabwe. Those, who already had little savings, lost all income with the pandemic. Those, who had previously sent money to their families from the cities, now had to return to their villages – without money and without the prospect of new employment.

With the pandemic, money transfers from family members abroad also dried up. According to estimates by the UN Development Programme, one in four people

born in Zimbabwe lives and works abroad, mainly in South Africa. Until the outbreak of the pandemic, their remittances accounted for about eight percent of gross domestic product. When South Africa also imposed a strict lockdown, this flow of money collapsed.

## Collapse of the primary care system

In July 2020, inflation reached almost 840 percent compared to July 2019. Many families could no longer afford even basic provisions such as maize: in June alone, the price doubled. Not everyone benefited from direct food aid from the government either. As was already the case under Mugabe, these are tied to political conditions: those close to the opposition get no help in some places. Partly because of this, the World Food Programme (WFP) feared in December 2020 that the number of people without adequate nutrition could rise to nearly 6.9 million by March 2021 – almost 50 percent of the population. WFP

Regional Director Lola Castro warned of a humanitarian disaster in the country as early as July 2020.

The pandemic exposed another vulnerability: the deep-rooted corruption that has also been weakening the medical sector for years. According to health experts like Mthabisi Bhebhe, the former head of the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association, the entire health service collapsed during the pandemic. Bhebhe complained that there was a shortage of doctors, nurses, carers, medicines, masks and protective gowns. Shortages and kleptocracy in the health sector are killing people, warned a doctor at Harare Central Hospital in July 2020, whose tweet was published on the BBC website – including a photo showing the bodies of infants wrapped in green cloth. In one night alone, seven out of eight babies delivered by emergency caesarean section did not survive. The doctor said in his tweet: “These are not isolated cases. It happens every day.”

However, it was not those who had embezzled the funds who were charged, but those who brought the corruption to light – nurses as well as media representatives. In mid-July 2020, the country’s best-known investigative



Queuing for porridge: It is estimated that since the start of the lockdown, the number of those dependent on food aid has doubled in Zimbabwe.

journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono, was arrested. Together with Jacob Ngarivhume, the leader of the opposition party Transform Zimbabwe, he used Twitter to call for a demonstration on July 31 in Harare – it was supposed to be a protest march against the economic and health crisis, against corruption and arbitrary arrests. The official reason for the journalist's arrest: Incitement of public violence. Chin'ono had shortly before uncovered a fraud in the procurement of medical protection materials. Members of the president's family were also reportedly involved in the scandal.

Mnangagwa fired his Health Minister because of it. He also had to appear in court, but was immediately released on \$50 bail. It wasn't the same for Chin'ono: he remained in maximum security prison for six weeks before being released on bail. After his release, he reported terrible prison conditions: the cells were overcrowded. The inmates would have to eat in the courtyard where sewage is discharged. Masks are only for the few who have to appear in court. And those who receive a positive COVID-19 diagnosis are isolated and given only hot water to drink.

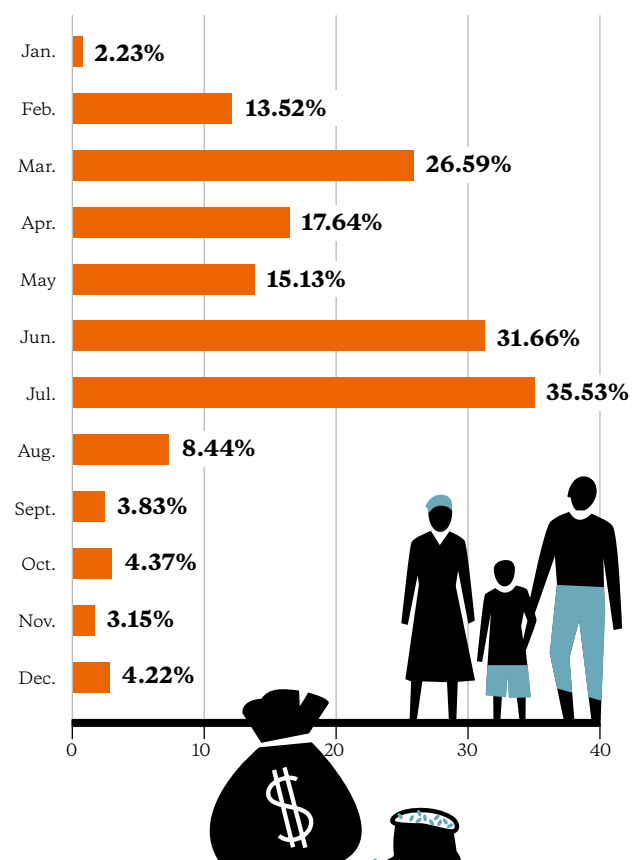
The demonstration he helped organise had not taken place. Nevertheless, approximately 60 other people were arrested, including Tsitsi Dangarembga, the internationally renowned writer, and Fadzayi Mahere, the lawyer and spokesperson of the opposition party MDC. On July 31, the planned day of the demonstration, the government had the city centre of Harare sealed off. It imposed curfews and restricted the hours of shops, further intimidating people. Chin'ono became a symbolic figure of the resistance. It didn't protect him: a tweet in which he questioned the independence of the courts landed him in jail again for 17 days in November 2020 – and again in January 2021.

## Democracy is being eroded

At the same time, the president used the pandemic to further expand the powers of the government and weaken legislative and judicial oversight. Under the planned "Patriot Bill", critics from civil society would be prosecuted if they contacted foreign embassies, for example. And a draft law against cybercrime aims to suppress criticism on the Internet. Both bills were drafted after the large-scale protests in the summer.

## In an unaffordable country

Month-on-month inflation increase in Zimbabwe in 2020



Source: Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency

Even before March 2020, the president had planned to amend the constitution. Among other things, Parliament's right of veto over bilateral agreements and loans is to be abolished, which would make procurement processes even more intransparent, enabling even more corruption. In addition, the president – rather than an independent judicial commission, as has been the case to date – is to decide on the tenure of justices beyond 70 on the Supreme Court. This makes the judges susceptible to blackmail.

Mnangagwa wants to push through a total of 27 constitutional amendments. As of December 2020, that hasn't happened. But the "reform" will probably be approved by Parliament – the ruling party has a two-thirds majority.

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## “Democracy is too fragile to be left to politicians alone”



Interview with **Kenneth Mtata**, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Zimbabwe

**Mr Mtata, you have been the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Zimbabwe since 2016. Why did you leave Geneva, where you worked for the Lutheran World Federation?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** From a professional point of view, it did not seem sensible to leave Switzerland and return to Zimbabwe under unsafe conditions. At that time Robert Mugabe was in power and there was no sign that this would change quickly. But my work for the Lutheran World Federation had shown me that churches in Africa can have a great impact in transforming a society. So, I quickly accepted.

**What were your goals when you returned to your home country?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** One goal was for the Council of Churches to become a relevant voice in the search for a lasting solution for Zimbabwe. I think we have achieved that to a large extent. Another was to convince and strengthen the churches to get involved and identify the challenges faced by the people of Zimbabwe. We've made progress there, too. But we still have a long way to go. Because it needs the participation of all church leaders.

**Was it difficult to convince the church representatives?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** Especially at the beginning, many hesitated; there was also complete resistance on the part of some church leaders. Many church representatives felt that it was not part of their duties to take a public position. I remember a large church meeting to which a bishop invited me. After my speech, he said to the others: “What you have heard here is not the position of our church.” But

even today, church representatives come to me in private and say: “What you're doing is right. But I'm scared.”

**Where does this fear come from?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** Many are afraid that if they speak out publicly on the issue of justice, they will be seen as opposition sympathisers and risk being blackmailed. That can mean the end of their careers; it even happened to Catholic Archbishop Pius Ncube. One way to deal with this fear of being marginalised is to speak and act together as church leaders. Strength grows from this and you protect each other. However, it remains a risk to speak publicly about these issues.

**Who are your enemies?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** That's a tough one to answer. What many abroad do not understand is that we live in a very hostile atmosphere, everything is polarised. There are many groups fighting because they want control. One group doesn't like what you do, the other appreciates it. There are also groups that deliberately discredit others by cracking down on critics of the government. And yet, in such a highly fragmented environment, it's hard to blame just one group. So, if you ask me about my enemies, I would say that is anyone who feels threatened by what I am doing along with our church leaders.

**How do you personally deal with it?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** I try to be as careful as possible. I only eat or drink when there is a buffet and I can put the food on my plate myself. Before any long journey, I check my tires and my brake lines and pay close attention to where I'm driving at night. And I presume that someone may be listening in to all my conversations, whether on the phone or on the computer. Also, I try to stick to facts and not say anything that could be considered illegal. Another way is to involve our international partners in our work. The more the world shares what is going on in our country, the more protected we are. But I'm aware that you're never quite sure. We do what we can, and otherwise place our safety in God's hands.

**What do you see as the role of the churches in Zimbabwe?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** This is a central question that we must continually ask ourselves. The task is not static, it is constantly changing. But it derives from three basic principles. The first: the church must contribute to a peaceful

coexistence of all people. In other words: we must preach peace – no matter what is happening in politics or in the economy, those who act must remember that all people should be able to share in the fullness of life.

#### **And the second principle?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** Society must be united. An understanding of coexistence that is shared by all is needed. We do not want a uniform society. But it takes a willingness to cooperate and partner. Otherwise, a society will fall apart. Churches can and must be advocates for this. As it says in the Bible in Acts 2: People speak in different languages. But they can understand each other. So we have to constantly ask ourselves: how can we ensure that society speaks different languages but that people can still hear and understand each other?

#### **What is your answer?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** By trying to establish justice. This is the third principle. It's the hardest to follow. It feels contradictory to talk about peace and justice at the same time. Peace means convincing and encouraging all people to live together peacefully. Justice means: The law regulates how people behave in public spaces, and it applies to everyone. Yet, injustice is constantly being committed in our society – and that is where the churches must speak out. It's not easy. The churches find it easy to talk about peace – but very difficult when it comes to justice.

#### **Where are the injustices in Zimbabwe?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** Especially in the distribution of our country's natural resources. As far as mineral resources are concerned, Zimbabwe is very rich. But this wealth is not evenly distributed. Our task is to continually criticise the government when it fails to live up to its responsibilities. We have a great constitution. But it has not been fully implemented – many laws still need to be brought into line with the constitution.

#### **What is your vision for Zimbabwe?**

**Kenneth Mtata:** I envision a Zimbabwe that is developing and democratic, which is united and peaceful and where national wealth is equitably distributed. But it is not only in Zimbabwe where we are seeing how fragile democracy is. That is why it should not be left to politicians alone. It is worrying that democratic structures are also under threat in countries that introduced democracy a long time ago. But what are the prospects in countries

where democracy is still relatively young? It is all the more important that we encourage people in the churches to speak out publicly and contribute to democracy and inclusive development. Only if we succeed in encouraging the righteous to take on public duties we do have a chance of changing the political culture of our country.

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## **Short and brief**

**Our partner:** Zimbabwe Council of Churches

**Origins:** The Zimbabwe Council of Churches was founded in 1964 and has been working with Bread for the World since 2001.

**Project area:** nationwide

**Main areas of work:** With its member churches, the ZCC advocates for justice, good governance and civic engagement at local and national level. It promotes ecumenism as well as greater social cohesion in the country.

**For more info, visit <http://zcc-eco.org>**

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## Cambodia

# The end of the dream of democracy

Cambodia comes through the pandemic relatively unscathed in 2020. Yet, the government is still threatening to restrict fundamental rights and to silence its critics. The country is ultimately turning into a one-party state.

Compared to other countries, Cambodia came through the pandemic relatively unscathed in terms of the number of infections in 2020. As COVID-19 spread across the world from China, Cambodian authorities responded with a set of rules in mid-March. They closed schools, museums, cinemas, theatres, fitness clubs and swimming pools, as well as bars and nightclubs. Events, including religious ones in temples and pagodas, were also cancelled. Many buses stopped running. During the New Year celebrations in mid-April many people usually visit their families, but now they were not allowed to leave their provinces even during the two weeks of festivities. Tourists were not given visas. Those who already had one were only allowed into the country after they tested negative for COVID-19. According to official statistics, the number of cases remained low throughout the year, with fewer than 400 people infected out of a population of 16 million. The number of Corona-related deaths in mid-December: zero.

The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) used the pandemic to initiate what many see as the final assault on the people's fundamental rights. In mid-April, the Cambodian parliament passed the "Law on Governing the Country in a State of Emergency": a vaguely worded law that empowers the government to declare a state of emergency. According to this, the executive itself can react to undefined "dangers" to which the nation is exposed. The law gives the government unchecked powers. It is allowed to restrict the freedom of assembly, expression or movement as drastically as the right to work and property. The law not only violates existing international human rights, but also the Cambodian constitution.

The CPP did not leave its motives in the dark. After one of the many waves of arrests that followed the law, a party spokesperson told local media that the "CPP's royal government" has a proverb: "Don't let a spark become a fire. Put it out before the fire grows." And he added: "If one rises, one is beaten. If two stand up, two are beaten."



Women mobilise: For years, female activists and textile workers have been fighting against the miserable working conditions in the factories, the low wages, and the ban on trade unions.



## De facto a one party state

The law means the final end for the democratic process that began after the terror regime of the Khmer Rouge in the early 1990s. With the help of their largest mission to date, UN peacekeepers were to help the country move in a democratic direction. But Prime Minister Hun Sen, in office since 1985, and the CPP turned Cambodia into a de facto one-party state. In the Senate and the National Assembly, the CPP holds all the seats and controls the country down to the local governments.

However, the CPP did not win many of its mandates through free and fair elections, but through violence and repression. Under the rule of Hun Sen, countless people were deprived of their rights, persecuted without reason and arrested for their political activities. In 2017, the government banned and dissolved the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). After that, repression increased. Trade unionists, human rights defenders and environmental activists are and have been monitored or intimidated. Journalists are being hindered in their work.

For several years now, the number of political prisoners has been higher than at any time since the 1990s. For example, between August and November 2019, at least 125 former CNRP members or activists were charged, 78 of whom went to prison. The charges against some: they had welcomed opposition leader Sam Rainsy's announcement that he would return to Cambodia in November. Rainsy has been living in exile in Paris since 2015. However, he was denied entry into his homeland. In 2020, 130 human rights defenders and CNRP supporters were arbitrarily arrested.

## Laws hinder NGO work

The government is trying to silence its critics with several laws. One of these is the 2015 Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO). It is increasingly making it impossible for civil society organisations to operate. Those who engage in the very broad issues of peace, stability, public order, national unity, culture or tradition can be punished. Or the organisation will be disbanded altogether.

For several years, local and international human rights groups and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published analyses with concrete proposals on how to bring this law into line with international standards. The EU called on the government to repeal the

repressive law. The Cambodian government did not implement the recommendations. As a consequence, defender of human rights or the environment no longer meet for fear of arrest, they are monitored or are persecuted. This is especially true for those NGOs that are not registered under the LANGO. Their work is considered illegal. But even registration does not protect against persecution.

## Massive intrusion into private life

Under the pretext of stopping the pandemic, the Cambodian government tracked critical voices in their private social media channels. In March 2020 alone, 17 people were intimidated, accused or arrested for expressing concerns about the pandemic and the government's response on social media. The authorities classified the posts as fake or even incitement, even though some of them were private messages or audio clips in closed social media groups. Among those detained was a 14-year-old girl. She had shared a post about COVID-19 with her friends via Facebook messenger. She later had to publicly apologise in a Facebook stream.

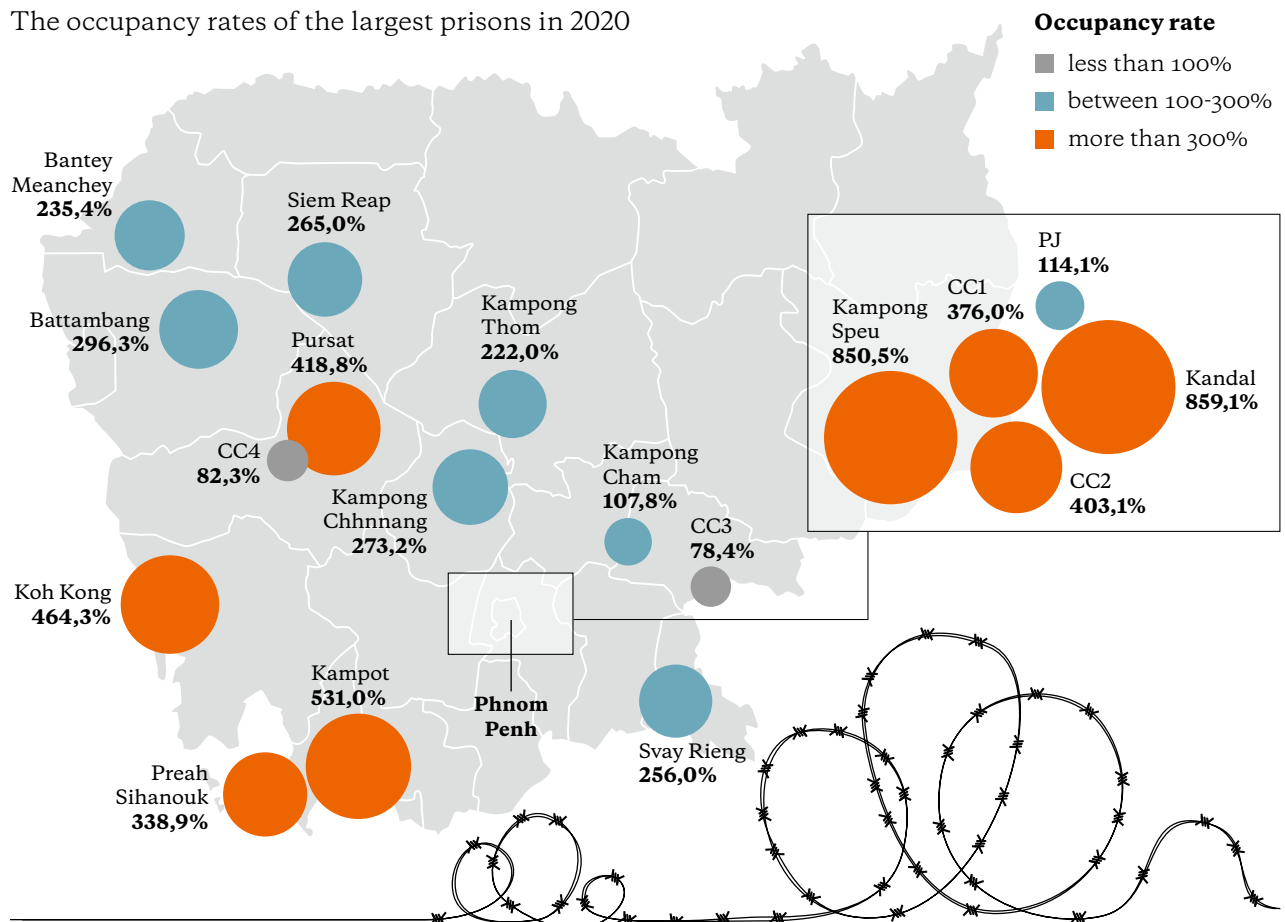
The government's access to private phone calls and digital communications was made public by Hun Sen in a speech in 2018. In March 2020, the Ministry of the Interior confirmed that the ruling party had the right to intercept every private telephone conversation in the name of "national security". When political prisoners were arrested in autumn 2019, private Facebook messages were considered evidence in many cases. With the surveillance of social media, last spaces of retreat where citizens could express critical views in the past are disappearing.

## Arrested after peaceful protest

Anyone who comes into the focus of the authorities in Cambodia runs the risk of ending up in one of the already overcrowded Cambodian prisons. At the end of July, for example, Rong Chhun, a trade union leader and critic of Prime Minister Hun Sen, was arrested for "inciting crime". He had previously criticised the displacement of farming families in the border area with Vietnam. Many people in the country called for his release at demonstrations or on social media. At least 13 of them were arrested in the process, among them the prominent Buddhist monk Luon Sovath. For years, he has been

## Punishment in overcrowded cells

The occupancy rates of the largest prisons in 2020



Source: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, LICADHO

fighting for land and human rights and has filmed attacks on the defenseless. He now lives in exile. On the same charge, the police also arrested and charged journalists who reported on the government, local officials or the Prime Minister. Radio stations had already been banned and newspapers closed down or sold to government-affiliated owners in previous years. In 2020, the government withdrew media licenses from other online services and radio stations. Artists were also imprisoned during the pandemic – the young rapper Kea Sokun, for example, because of a song about the pandemic and the situation on the border with Vietnam.

## Textile workers rendered unemployed by pandemic

The pandemic is also wreaking havoc on the country's economy – exacerbating inequities. Forecasts suggest that the poverty rate in Cambodia could double – to 17.6 percent. The most important sector is the textile industry, which employs over one million people. Even before the crisis, workers in the textile factories – where most of the workers are women – suffered from long hours, lack of participation, sexual harassment and low pay. Workers in the textile and garment sector have been receiving a minimum

wage since their week-long general strike in the winter of 2013/14. But no family will be able to support itself on the equivalent of around 154 euros per month in 2020 – especially when life in the cities is becoming increasingly expensive. To survive, workers would need to earn three times as much. The pandemic has made this struggle for existence even tougher. Fashion brands in Europe and the USA cancelled their orders. Many textile and clothing factories in Cambodia had to close down. According to the Ministry of Labour, around 110,000 textile workers lost their jobs in the first months of the pandemic. Others were dismissed because they took to the streets and demanded financial compensation. Some factory owners used the situation to get rid of trade union representatives. For example, the trade union leader Soy Sros was arrested because she complained via a Facebook post that female workers, including pregnant women, had been dismissed. They are not supported by any social safety net.

## Displaced and deprived of their land

People also lost their jobs and income because the pandemic meant that tourists were not able to travel and the construction industry collapsed. For many unemployed Cambodians in the cities, there was only one alternative: return to their families in the rural areas. But even there, the social and economic situation is difficult. In the name of the country's economic development, tens of thousands of families have been victims of land grabbing and displacement for years. The government grants land concessions to private investors who agree to use the land for agricultural purposes. International sugar companies and the country's economic elites are thereby securing huge areas of land for themselves. In this way, the population has lost around 2.2 million hectares of land for its own cultivation – around 60 percent of the total arable land. It is the poorest people in rural areas who are particularly affected by the struggle for land. For them, their land is not only the economic basis of their income – it is also the land of their ancestors. But those who resist the expulsion must expect violence, including from the military. Community members and land rights activists who want to help the affected people claim their rights are criminalised.

## Tightening despite international pressure

Because NGOs, including partner organisations of Bread for the World, raised awareness and lobbied, the European Union could no longer ignore the fact that Cambodia has fallen far short of being a democratic state. In August 2020, the EU partially withdrew the country's duty-free access to the EU market. Until then, this had been guaranteed by the Everything But Arms (EBA) Agreement. Now, about 20 percent of Cambodian exports to the EU have to be cleared through customs.

But that hasn't made the Cambodian government change course. It continues to plan laws that severely suppress the freedoms of the population. In July 2020, it was announced that the government was preparing a "Public Order" bill: Authorities would be able to prevent gatherings even more easily than before, as well as punish anyone who, for example, speaks loudly or wears clothing that police officers find offensive.

Another planned law on cybercriminality would allow the government to declare all online content that criticises the ruling party as "fake news". Anyone who spreads this "fake news" can end up in jail. In addition, the legislative initiative provides for national Internet access. This would force internet providers to restrict access to all sites and content that the government arbitrarily deems harmful to public order, dignity, culture, tradition and customs.

The fact that the withdrawal of trade preferences is not having any effect and that Cambodia is instead introducing legislation that deeply interferes with the personal freedom of the population points to a further development: In recent years, China has become Cambodia's largest foreign direct investor and closest ally. As part of the gigantic "New Silk Road", the Chinese government has financed the construction of seven hydroelectric dams. They generate half of Cambodia's total electricity needs. Since the mid-1990s, China has also built around 3,000 kilometres of motorway, numerous bridges, casinos, hotels and apartment blocks in Cambodia, including in the port city of Sihanoukville – projects in which human rights have been massively violated and people put under pressure. Today, China is obviously not only Cambodia's most important economic partner, but also a role model when it comes to restricting fundamental rights.

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## “You can smell the fear in people who are in constant survival mode”



Interview with **Naly Pilorge**, Director of the non-governmental organisation LICADHO

**Ms Pilorge, your organisation has been highlighting the disastrous conditions in Cambodian prisons since before the pandemic began. Why do so many people end up in prison?**

**Naly Pilorge:** In Cambodia, the unspoken rule is: if you get in trouble, you end up in jail. Be it because of crime or drugs, be it because of psychological issues or because you belong to a minority. It can be enough that the parents do not agree with a homosexual relationship. Unless you're wealthy. The result is overcrowded prisons, some of which cram up to five times more people than they can actually fit.

**What is life like for the incarcerated?**

**Naly Pilorge:** They get miserable food, sleep on concrete floors and are at the mercy of violence, disease and abuse. And the same conditions apply to everyone in these overcrowded cells, whether they are teenagers, pregnant women or drug addicts.

**How do the detainees deal with these conditions?**

**Naly Pilorge:** They live like sardines. One way to make money in prison is to sell your sleeping place: you sit down so that someone else can lie down.

**How do the authorities react to such conditions?**

**Naly Pilorge:** By building more and more prisons. Also, because those responsible profit economically from it: they make money on every new build. But the prisons are also an expression of a political agenda: You solve social problems by locking people up.

**Your organisation has been active in prisons since 1993. What does your work look like?**

**Naly Pilorge:** We go into prisons with our own doctors, lawyers, social workers and sometimes even investigators. We are lucky that the directors let us in for our humanitarian work. In addition, I have visited imprisoned human rights defenders at least 50 times. I've even been in court several times because of my work. However, I received support every time, which saved me from being convicted. That is why I want to support my colleagues as best I can.

**What impressions remain with you after such visits?**

**Naly Pilorge:** Besides the terrible conditions, it's the noise and the smell. You can smell the fear of people who are in constant survival mode.

**How has the situation changed with the pandemic?**

**Naly Pilorge:** In many prisons, guards have become infected. No one can say how many detainees have been infected, there are no tests for them. Together with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, we called on the government to intervene in December. Under such conditions, it only takes one infected person – and thousands become infected. We wonder, of course, why the authorities do not react differently. The government is being supported from abroad to deal with the pandemic. Outside prisons, even people who have only had indirect contact with infected persons are tested. So, it can't be the money. I believe that the government, and to some extent the public, is convinced: if you're in prison, you don't deserve protection. Those incarcerated are denied their humanity.

**During the pandemic, the number of political prisoners increased. Why?**

**Naly Pilorge:** The government is exploiting the judicial system and prisons to intimidate civil society. In dealing with critics, there are regularly such waves in Cambodia. Since the dissolution of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party in 2017, an increasing number of people from civil society have been fighting for free elections, decent wages or the fair distribution of land. However, anyone who raises their voice is considered an enemy of the government in Cambodia. There have also been brutal attacks, detentions and murders in the past. The killings have largely stopped. But the government wants to make sure that the public and NGOs, as well as the international community, do not support the protests related to the pandemic.

**Is it succeeding?**

**Naly Pilorge:** Yes and no. Yes, because people get to know what is going on in the country through media that is loyal to the government and through social media. They know: those who become conspicuous must expect consequences. It's not just the Prime Minister talking about it publicly. Also some of our donors from abroad tell us: you'd better keep quiet. This is ridiculous: if we keep quiet about this, we might as well shut down our NGO.

**And why not?**

**Naly Pilorge:** Because we are noticing that our country is changing. The people in Cambodia demand something that people all over the world expect: a roof over their heads, a job with which they can feed their families, health. Young people in Cambodia now make up the majority of society. They are educated, take trips abroad, and keep themselves informed through their own social media channels.

**But that alone is not enough for the country to change ...**

**Naly Pilorge:** You can suppress people to a certain point. But if you overdo it, people will fight back. This does not happen as a result of any particular strategy. It just happens, like in the Arab Spring, Thailand or Hong Kong. What worries us is the level of violence. Those in power have gone too far. People defend themselves with stones and clubs. But the government has grenades, machine guns and a corrupt judicial system.

**And where do you get your optimism that change is possible?**

**Naly Pilorge:** I prepare myself for each of my prison visits. I'm less interested in the medical conditions or the realities than I am in how people are really doing. Despite all the horrors and injustices, I experience a lot of courage and resilience. We are not dealing with machines, but with people. And we are very diverse, complex creatures. Almost every time I return, I am surprised because I have more energy than before. I've often asked myself why. And my answer: the stay in such a prison is a test. The courage and strength one develops under such conditions outlast despair.

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**Short and brief**

**Our partner:** Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)

**Origins** 1992; partner of Bread for the World since 2008.

**Project area:** nationwide and international (lobby and advocacy work)

**Main areas of work:** LICADHO claims human rights, monitors them and documents violations. Victims of these are provided with legal advice, representation in court, psycho-social and medical care.

**For more info, visit:** [www.licadho-cambodia.org](http://www.licadho-cambodia.org)

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## El Salvador

# The Twitter President Trumpito

In El Salvador, a man is in power who defames dissenters and curtails freedom of expression. His measures against the pandemic are drastic. Those who violate them disappear into quarantine centres, often for many weeks.

Many people had high hopes for Nayib Bukele when he took office as president of El Salvador on 1 June 2019, at just 37 years of age. People are longing for new self-confidence and stability. The smart Bukele seems to embody just that.

He founded his first company at the age of 18. Shortly after, he joined his father's advertising agency and took over the campaigns for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The party was formed during the civil war in the eighties, originally as coalition of various guerrilla groups and left-wing currents. Bukele ran successful PR campaigns for them. Later, he gradually

took over other companies such as Yamaha El Salvador. In 2012, he became mayor of the small town of Antigua Cuscatlán, taking up the same post in the capital San Salvador just three years later. During this time, he broke with his former client, the FMLN: the party expelled him. He was accused of splitting them.

But this dispute did not prevent his rise to power. Bukele's campaign for the presidency – now as the candidate of the centre-right party Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GAN) – was conducted primarily on social media. In this way, he was able to appeal above all to younger people, most of whom had not voted before.



For better protection: Doctors and nurses protest in San Salvador on 16 July 2020 for better equipment in view of the increasing number of COVID-19 victims.

Critics accused him of being supported by an army of trolls who spread “fake news”. But his strategy worked: Bukele made it to the highest office and has since liked to govern via short messages on Twitter – without a majority in parliament. He mocks journalists and promises simple solutions to complex problems. In El Salvador, he has his own nickname: Trumpito – little Trump.

## The toughest pandemic rules in Central America

Unlike the former US president, however, Bukele’s government reacted as early as hard to the pandemic. The measures in El Salvador are considered the most drastic in Central America. As early as March 11, Bukele declared a national state of emergency. Borders, shops and factories were closed. Ten days later, he announced a nationwide lockdown of 30 days. In fact, this restriction lasted until August. Only one person per family was allowed to leave the house or apartment to buy food or medicine. Exceptions were made for those employed in the health sector or in the basic supply of electricity and water. For months, there was no public transport in the capital.

Even before the lockdown properly began, Bukele’s government conjured up an atmosphere of perpetual insecurity. Even before the rules had officially come into force, the police and military had already arrested 70 people – because they had allegedly violated these rules. Others were detained because they weren’t wearing masks – although the decree did not require this and there was a shortage across the whole country. Anyone who violated the lockdown ended up in one of the so-called quarantine centres that the state had set up: improvised group accommodation in places like gymnasiums, where people were crowded together. Hotels were used for the wealthy. Two concrete examples: in a poor district of San Salvador, a woman was arrested for accompanying her child to a latrine during the night. Officers shot both legs of a 19-year-old who was being checked for a quarantine violation and refused to pay \$50 to avoid the quarantine centre.

From mid-April onwards, the authorities, police and military were allowed by presidential decree to enter homes at any time if they suspected people infected with the coronavirus to be inside. Those who showed suspicious symptoms were interned in the quarantine centres – if there

weren’t any, then in police stations. People who were driving risked having the car impounded. On 16 May, the government extended the state of emergency without parliamentary approval. From then on, citizens were only allowed to leave their homes for shopping two days a week, and only within the boundaries of the district. In big cities, the police raided individual districts. When tropical storms swept across the country in May, some of the quarantine centres were flooded with water.

The social impact was dramatic – especially for all those working in the informal sector. These are, for example, day labourers or traders – half of all employed persons in the country. The government promised to support the population. But the aid money only flowed for a few weeks, then it was replaced by food parcels. However, the aid never reached many of those in need – mismanagement and corruption are too widespread in the country.

## People held for months

Nearly 17,000 people ended up in quarantine centres between April and October, according to government data. One of them was Ana Cristina Barahona. On Easter Monday, the human rights defender went to the market to buy food and medicine for herself and her three-year-old son. On her way home, she was arrested and initially ended up in a police station. According to the charge, she had violated the curfew. She was told that after a COVID-19 test, she could go home. Still, she was taken to a quarantine centre – and not tested for three weeks.

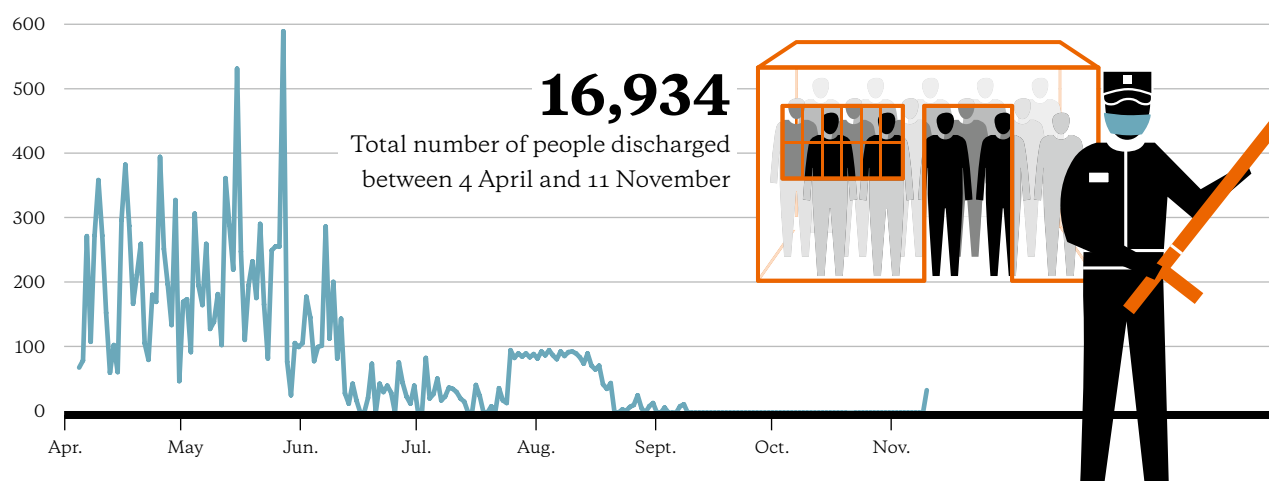
Six days after her arrest, her family initiated legal action, and five days later the Constitutional Court declared that there was no legal basis for Ana Cristina Barahona’s arrest. She should be tested and immediately be released and remain at home under quarantine. But Barahona remained in detention. She slept on the floor on a dirty mattress, without clean masks and not at a safe distance to other prisoners. The few toilets and bathrooms were often locked or flooded. Many first became infected there.

As a diabetic, Ana Cristina Barahona belongs to a high-risk group. But she did not receive her medication until the fourth day of detention, and only sporadically thereafter. When she was finally tested after three weeks, the result was negative. She tested negative on the second and third tests as well. She was told some of her fellow detainees had tested positive and that she can’t be released.

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## In the infection halls of El Salvador

Number of people discharged daily from quarantine centres in 2020



Source: Gobierno El Salvador

On 20 May, nearly a month after a court ordered her release, and 37 days after her arrest, she was finally released.

### Courts overturned some bans

Human rights organisations in El Salvador, including partner organisations of Bread for the World, filed a complaint with the constitutional court against the repressive pandemic decrees and laws. They had success: in several rulings, the Supreme Court of El Salvador declared measures to contain COVID-19 unconstitutional. There had been no legal basis either for the detention in police stations or for the deportations to quarantine centres, the invasion of homes and the confiscation of cars. In June, the Supreme Court declared the decree extending the national quarantine unconstitutional.

But that didn't bother the president. He has been ignoring the judge's rulings for a long time. Back in April, he railed against the Chief Justice on Twitter: "Five people will not decide the death of hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans. I don't care how much ink and seal they have." He called on the police and military in another Twitter message to "get tougher on people who violate quarantine". He said he didn't mind the police to "bent

someone's wrist" during an arrest. In the hours that followed, hundreds of people were arrested for breaking quarantine rules.

### Strong alliance with the military

Instead of the principles of the rule of law and the separation of powers, Bukele relies on the power of the strongest. The president is a friend of the military – and not just since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. On 9 February, he had soldiers in combat gear and carrying assault rifles parade in and around the Legislative Assembly in San Salvador. Previously, Parliament had refused to approve a \$109 million loan. The majority of the money was to go to the army. However, its use was not defined in detail. The marching of the soldiers and the strong alliance between the president and the army reminded many people of the military dictatorship during the civil war.

### No investigations

The importance of symbolic politics for the Twitter president is also reflected by his handling of the investigation



of the crimes committed during the bloody civil war from 1980 to 1992. An estimated 70,000 people died during this period. But the crimes have not been dealt with until today. A 1993 amnesty law prevents this from happening even though this law was declared unconstitutional in 2016. No one has yet been held accountable.

So far, Bukele has not changed this. At the beginning of his term in office, he promised the victims investigations and justice, ordering via Twitter to rename barracks that bore the name “Domingo Monterrosa” – the officer considered responsible for the massacre of El Mozote, in which soldiers killed 986 people, including 552 children, in December 1981. He also promised to open the military archives at the end of 2019. But in September 2020, the Ministry of Defence denied the responsible judge access to the archives – as this would endanger national security. Bukele is “another president of impunity”, says victim advocate David Morales.

## Spiteful propaganda

The president’s intimidation tactics are also felt by all those who criticise the government. On social media, Bukele is stirring up aggressive sentiment, supported by public officials and the ruling party. According to the initiative Sistema Regional de Monitoreo de Agresiones, they increasingly hinder and endanger the work of human rights defenders. The former PR professional Bukele and his people also target journalists who criticise repressive coronavirus policies or expose cases of corruption. He retweets their posts on Twitter with spiteful comments.

In Bukele’s first year in power between June 2019 and June 2020 alone, the Salvadorian Journalists Association counted 61 attacks on journalists by members of the government, security forces and civil servants. Such attacks were also publicised by the network IM Defensoras, a partner of Bread for the World. Two specific examples: unknown persons stole the laptop containing explosive research from the house of investigative journalist Julia Gavarrete of the news website Gato Encerrado in San Salvador. Her colleague Carmen Valeria Escobar, like Gavarrete, was researching corruption within the government and therefore becoming a target of Bukele supporters and of a candidate for the Legislative Assembly allied with the government. For weeks, they discredited Escobar’s work on social media, used sexist hate speech and threatened to kill her.

But it is not only individual journalists who are under fire. Editorial offices critical of the government were hacked. Legal action was taken against others. The Ministry of Finance, for example, investigated the renowned online newspaper *El Faro*, known for its research, for alleged money laundering and tax evasion. *El Faro* had previously investigated secret negotiations between Bukele’s government and the criminal organisation Mara Salvatrucha.

In August 2020, Parliament intervened against such overstepping of boundaries by the executive. It convened a special commission to investigate whether and how the free and independent media are obstructed. At the end of February 2021, Bukele won a two-thirds majority in Parliament with the party he has since founded, Nuevas Ideas. Bukele can therefore rule by decree without opposition control. His party has the power to appoint the attorney general and one-third of the Supreme Court justices, and amend the constitution.

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## “If a woman or child is raped, nothing happens”



Interview with **Morena Herrera**, feminist and Coordinator at the Asociación Colectiva de Mujeres para el Desarrollo Local (CMDL)

### Ms Herrera, how does the Corona pandemic affect the situation of women?

**Morena Herrera:** We are experiencing severe repercussions right now. The curfews and school closures affected and continue to affect women more than men. Women already take care of the household and often the income – and now educating their children.

### Aren't they fighting back?

**Morena Herrera:** Very few. Many women do not question this role because that is how they have been socialised. We're a macho country. Women are not valued, and certainly not accorded equal rights. For years, El Salvador was the country with the most femicides. Today, we are still at the top of that inglorious list, along with Brazil and Mexico. If anything, violence against women has increased during the pandemic. Many do not press charges. Some out of fear. The others because they couldn't leave the house because of the lockdown. Even women's shelters were often closed because of COVID-19.

### What role does President Bukele play?

**Morena Herrera:** He's fanning the flames of hatred for women. And is doing a lot of damage. Many men listen to him. El Salvador has long known violence against women. But there used to be at least a consensus that the state had to take action against it. Today it is different. If a woman or child is raped, nothing happens. And impunity further encourages perpetrators of violence.

### How do the police react?

**Morena Herrera:** They are very confrontational with women – this is also a consequence of Bukele's military demeanour. My organisation used to train a lot of police officers, for example on women's and human rights or equal rights. We used to be allowed to go into prisons and counsel detained women or even bring them fried chicken. Today, however, we no longer have any relationship of trust with the police. They have lost all sense of society and also of their civil role. That's bad.

### Do you have an example?

**Morena Herrera:** A colleague supports a woman who was raped. The perpetrator was even caught in the act, they know his name, where he lives. My companera called the police over and over again, but they did not arrest the man. It didn't matter at all to the officials. When my colleague approached the police chief about it, he just said: So what sue me! He wasn't scared at all. That scared me.

### What does that do to a society when one half has fewer rights than the other?

**Morena Herrera:** It makes them a less happy, less complete society. At the same time, it makes us a society that is always struggling. And I mean that even in a good way.

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## Short and brief

**Our partner:** Asociación Colectiva de Mujeres para el Desarrollo Local

**Origins:** Founded in 2009, partner of Bread for the World since 2016.

**Project area:** In four regions of the country

**Main areas of work:** The network promotes women's rights and works on the topic of gender equality – for example through an online radio station. The aim is to enforce women's rights more strongly at the local level as well.

**For more info, visit:** <https://colectivafeminista.org.sv>

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## Georgia

# Divided national soul

The pandemic has hit a deeply insecure society. Fake news steered from Russia, among other places, sow the seeds of distrust of state institutions. The government suppresses protests and tries to push through its plans behind the backs of the population.

When the first Corona infections occurred in Georgia, the source of the virus was quickly identified: the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research had spread it itself – at least that’s what those claimed who saw the approaching pandemic as another opportunity to divide the country. The institute, named after the Republican U.S. senator who died in 2019, is a symbol of the conflict for supremacy in the country that has raged between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces since the early 2000s. This was not the first time that the Richard Lugar

Center for Public Health Research was in the spotlight. It was established in 2004 as a result of an agreement between Georgia and the US. The institute began operations in 2013. Today, the facility also serves as a public health reference laboratory – and, among other things, to combat infectious diseases in Georgia.

On several occasions, the centre has been accused by Russia of spreading diseases on behalf of the US government. In March 2020, the pro-Kremlin website *News Front* added another chapter to this conspiracy narrative,



Protesters at an opposition protest march in Tbilisi on 18 November 2020.

despite the fact that the Richard Lugar Center was instrumental in helping contain the virus at the start of the pandemic. The fake news served several functions: it discredited not only a health institute and its expertise, but also Georgia's cooperation with Europe and the US.

## Legacy of the past

With the collapse of the USSR, the Kremlin initially lost its direct influence on independent Georgia. In the course of the conflicts over the two Georgian autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the 1990s, however, Soviet and later Russian troops repeatedly intervened to achieve and secure a ceasefire. When Georgia launched a military offensive against South Ossetia in the summer of 2008, Russia again intervened militarily, recognizing both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states and expanding its presence there – in Georgia's eyes an interference in its internal affairs and a constant threat to its own sovereignty.

Russia's influence in the region, which has increased again in the wake of these conflicts, is now also being felt through campaigns. In October 2019, the pro-Kremlin channel News Front went online in Georgian. From the beginning, it has relied on spreading its news through Facebook, the most successful social media platform in Georgia. In the spring of 2020, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Georgia's largest independent election monitoring organisation, revealed how News Front as well as the news portal Sputnik artificially boosted their reach on Facebook: with twelve fake Facebook accounts, *News Front* reached half a million users. ISFED observed that the tailor-made provocative messages were directed at both pro-government and pro-opposition Facebook groups – the aim was obviously not to inform but to divide. In late April 2020, Facebook permanently deleted the Georgian *News Front* page. ISFED also uncovered the systematic use of fake Facebook accounts at Sputnik. They reached almost two million users – about half the population. Facebook subsequently deleted *Sputnik's* accounts as well.

But disinformation campaigns are not limited to the pro-Kremlin media. Many Georgian politicians also defame opponents, especially civil society organisations that work against corruption and expose it. The chair of the Georgian parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, described representatives of civil society as “accomplices of fascism”.

## Government cuts off civil society from important decisions

The Georgian government responded quickly to the pandemic. On March 21, 2020 – just ten infections had been confirmed – it declared a state of emergency and imposed far-reaching restrictions, such as on freedom of movement and assembly. It also made access to public information temporarily difficult.

These steps are evaluated differently: international observers such as the Washington-based human rights NGO Freedom House praises the government for its swift, strict and transparent intervention. On the other hand, some civil society organisations in the country are convinced that the government has deliberately used the pandemic to prevent the population from participation in decision making processes regarding major infrastructure projects. They also criticise the high penalties for anyone who violates the emergency measures – even allegedly: fines of the equivalent of US\$1,000 and imprisonment of up to six years in the event of a repeated offence. In such a situation, the Russian-directed disinformation campaigns seemed like fog at intersections without traffic lights. *News Front* wasn't just trying to stir up anti-American resentment. The web page also took advantage of the reluctance of the Orthodox Church to recognise the rules of hygiene or restrict religious services. For example, church leaders refused to break with the tradition of the collectively used spoon for communion because of the pandemic. *News Front* reinterpreted the Corona restrictions as an attack on Eucharistic practices, calling on the faithful to continue attending services and receiving communion with a shared spoon.

## The master mind behind the scenes

Such attacks hit a society in 2020 whose trust in political institutions is at an all-time low. The ruling party “Georgian Dream” is opposed above all by the “United National Movement” and its splinter party “European Georgia”. They accuse each other of abusing their respective roles for particular interests. Bidsina Ivanishvili, Founder and Chair of the party “Georgian Dream” – and the richest man in the country – is considered a key political figure. He hasn't held official government office in years. But it is said that even after he left office as



In February 2021, people in Kutaisi protest against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant that would flood their villages. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has decided on several controversial construction projects without involving the citizens meaningfully.

Prime Minister in 2013, he continues to take all critical decisions alone: as head of the ruling party, Ivanishvili effectively appoints and dismisses Prime Ministers and other members of the Georgian government. Opinion polls regularly show how low the public's trust in political parties is, including the one conducted by the National Democratic Institute in April 2019: according to the survey, 81 percent of those questioned believed that it was above all the politicians who promoted polarisation and division. A December 2020 poll by the same institute confirmed the deep-seated scepticism of Georgians: only 15 percent were satisfied with their government during the pandemic. 41 percent, on the other hand, were convinced that Parliament does not deal with the issues that are important to people's everyday lives.

## Religious conservatives and right-wingers intimidate dissenters

The general election at the end of October 2020 is an expression of this deep-seated mistrust. The ruling party

“Georgian Dream” claimed victory in the elections. According to the official final results, they won the election with 48.15 percent of the vote. The strongest opposition party, the United National Movement, accounted for 27.14 percent. However, all opposition parties in the country refused to recognise the election results.

According to international observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the election process was not free of problems. NGOs reported numerous cases of violations of election secrecy and voter bribery. Tens of thousands protested peacefully against the election. Without warning, the police used water cannons and tear gas.

A young generation of activists sees peaceful protest as the only means to achieve political goals. However, the liberal and western-oriented groups are increasingly opposed by right-wing extremist groups with conservative, nationalistic, xenophobic and homophobic attitudes. Although no direct links between them and Russia have been proven so far, the great similarity on issues such as Euroscepticism and homophobia is striking. They have been mobilising for their counter-demonstrations for several years. And because state authorities do not put the

brakes on them, they are becoming increasingly intimidating and disruptive – both offline and online. On the streets, right-wing extremists often act so violently against LGBTIQ or young people that they often cannot even start their demonstrations or have to call them off. The far-right groups are supported by a number of ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist groups such as the Orthodox Parents' Union: They have a radical interpretation of the Orthodox religion and try to win over the general population to their side. Admittedly, the church does not officially support the right-wing extremists. But their ideas suit some church representatives. Individual clergy and church representatives join far-right groups in anti-LGBTIQ demonstrations.

This mixture of unresolved ethnic conflicts, targeted disinformation and influence from outside as well as fierce domestic political disputes has led to a xenophobic atmosphere that was particularly evident during the pandemic. At the end of March, the civil society platform “No To Phobia” published a statement condemning widespread xenophobia against the Azeri ethnic group – Turkic-speaking Shiite Muslims living in the cities of Marneuli and Bolnisi. After a resident there tested positive for the coronavirus, the two cities were designated as quarantine zones. Social media was full of hateful and inhumane messages. Some users even called for Azeri citizens to be expelled from the country.

For observers like Giorgi Gogvadze, the Deputy Director of the Georgian Centre for Security and Development, this hostile atmosphere in the country is the result of invisible influence from Russia. Those who are not born in the country or who love and believe differently from the majority in the country are demonised under the pretext of endangering tradition, religious values and national identity. The increasing xenophobic, homophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric “pours water on Russia’s mill,” Gogvadze says. For him, the artificially created atmosphere is an attempt to get Georgia out of the western orbit in which the country has been since its independence.

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## “The pandemic serves as an excuse for everything”



Interview with **Manana Kochladze**, Founder of the environmental organisation “Green Alternative”

### **Ms Kochladze, what has your work been like since the outbreak of the pandemic?**

**Manana Kochladze:** We deal mostly with court cases. Because of the pandemic, civil society is hardly ever heard in decisions on major infrastructure projects. Many people have asked us to join them in filing complaints at the court.

### **Why do people go to court?**

**Manana Kochladze:** Take road construction. There’s a lot of money in that one. But it doesn’t create roads that better connect communities, it creates roads for trade with foreign countries – even though that trade hardly exists. Studies clearly show that our taxpayers barely benefit from the new roads. The situation is similar with large hydropower plants. Many such projects cause great damage to the environment. In some regions, the air is heavily polluted. In other regions, plants consume so much water that rivers dry up. But because of travel restrictions, it’s hard to get evidence.

### **Do you have an example?**

**Manana Kochladze:** One community informed us that a large agro-industrial plant including a meat factory had already been built, although the approval process had not yet been completed. When we complained officially to the Ministry of Environment, they told us: you’re imagining things. We then delivered the evidence using a drone.

### **How does Green Alternative help as an environmental organisation?**

**Manana Kochladze:** For example, by supporting communities in their protests against the construction of hydroelectric power plants. In one project, people blocked roads for more than three months to stop construction. We participated in mobilising and defending people against the propaganda of the government and investors. They say: anyone who opposes the construction of such power plants is a Russian spy and is operating on behalf of Russian businessmen. Or: Georgia has problems with energy supply because of you. We react to this with independent expert analyses.

### **And beyond that?**

**Manana Kochladze:** We gather facts on all cases, also look at land rights, for example, and take them to court. And with the court decisions we try at political level to influence national or European laws or the money flows of international development banks .

### **Has the situation been exacerbated by the pandemic?**

**Manana Kochladze:** Yes. The government is using the pandemic to speed up the construction of these projects. The pandemic serves as an excuse for everything. The government doesn't provide information but at the same time accuses us of being ill-informed. Public hearings have been moved online. This seems sensible from an infection control point of view, but the consequence is that many communities will not be able to participate, as many do not have internet access, especially in the mountainous regions where people are most affected by such projects. And those who have one, often do not know how to register. You also have to prove that you have the right to be heard in the first place. Many do not even find out that such hearings are taking place. It all follows a pattern: there is always someone who is offended by such hearings, be it politicians or business people. Everyone knows that there is also a lot of protest at these appointments.

### **Twenty years ago, you were already vilified as an “enemy of Georgia”. Where do you get the strength for your fight?**

**Manana Kochladze:** If you don't praise the Georgian government, you are automatically an enemy. When we started our work, it was still easy to attack us. We were maybe twenty people advocating for our issue – now we are

thousands. So much has changed in Georgia, the government's attitude, unfortunately, has not.

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## **Short and brief**

**Our partner:** Green Alternative

**Origins:** In 2000 founded by fellow campaigners from “Friends of the Earth – Georgia”.

**Project area:** Nationwide

**Main areas of work:** Protect the environment and biodiversity and the cultural heritage of Georgia. Economically sensible and socially acceptable alternatives are to be promoted and public access to information and decision-making processes is to be ensured.

**For more info, visit:** <http://greenalt.org/home>

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# New ways out of hardship

The good news: many civil society groups have been able to fill the gaps left by governments. And many organisations have used the crisis to grow even more.

Every crisis holds the opportunity to grow. It obliges you to question routines and look for creative solutions. The Corona pandemic is a crisis of global proportions, the most severe since World War II. It caused hardship to millions and death to a countless number of people. The crisis also had serious consequences for civil society organisations. During the pandemic, people around the world were dependent on the support of non-state actors. However, many of those involved in civil society organisations were themselves overwhelmed by the effects of the pandemic. They themselves contracted COVID-19 or died from it. Where possible, they worked from home. But in many cases, a poor internet connection or lack of electricity made work impossible. And because of travel and contact restrictions, some have had to temporarily suspend their activities.

But even in this dramatic global crisis, signs of hope emerged after a short time. A new development quickly was noticeable: organisations in many countries of the world overcame the initial shock and asked themselves: how can we change our work so that we can continue to help those people who cannot survive without us? Many civil society groups were not discouraged by the crisis, and in many places they even surpassed themselves. Around the world, social initiatives, human rights defenders and activists found innovative ways to continue their work. They supported others with food, psychological support or by giving a voice to particularly vulnerable groups. They stepped in where the state was overwhelmed or unwilling to help or where the market failed. They invented new forms of protest and encouraged people to get involved for the first time in their lives.



At the „So geht solidarisch Demonstration“ (This is how solidarity works) in Berlin in June 2020, up to 20,000 people protested against injustice and racism. The distance rules were creatively implemented with colourful ribbons.



This is the good news of this pandemic – and it is coming from all corners of the world.

For example, from the **Ukraine**. The so-called People's Republics in the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, which are controlled by pro-Russian separatists, pose a particular risk. Many younger people have left the conflict area. As a result, the proportion of elderly people has risen to 50 percent. The years of war have not only increased poverty, medical care is also extremely inadequate. Because the border was closed, people could not collect their pensions on the territory controlled by Ukraine. In addition, the prices for food rose sharply. In this exceptional situation, actors from Ukrainian civil society stepped in: for example, employees of the Mozhlyvist Foundation, a partner organisation of Bread for the World, visited elderly people in quarantine and brought them food.

The list of civil society organisations that took on responsibilities that governments and authorities did not sufficiently fulfil can be continued almost endlessly. In **India**, the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact provided care for indigenous groups, who were even more discriminated against during the pandemic than before: they distributed information about the pandemic and mediated between authorities and those most in need. The Council of Churches in **Zimbabwe**, a partner organisation of Bread for the World (see interview on page 30), translated information material on COVID-19 from English into the most important languages such as Shona or Ndebele, explained via social media how to avoid infection and distributed disinfectants to hospitals.

In **Morocco** and **Spain**, the NGO Caminando Fronteras stepped in to provide masks for the estimated 700,000 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. In **Cameroon**, where the government made the masks compulsory without making any available to all, the Crusaders for Environmental Protection and Ozone Watch, an NGO working on environmental issues, were on the spot. They distributed masks and disinfectants and set up stations with clean water. In **Japan**, soup kitchens not only gave homeless people something to eat on a regular basis but also distributed information on how to protect oneself from the virus. In the **UK**, the charity Doctors of the World translated a COVID-19 guide into over 60 languages and put it online, both as text and audio files – by the summer, the booklets had been downloaded 60,000 times. In **El Salvador**, a one-year project was launched in September, with the support of Bread for the World, that

enables 260 families to provide for themselves. In addition, women's groups learn how to produce disinfectants and how to prevent infection from the virus.

In **Brazil**, the partner organisation Assesoria e Serviços a Projetos em Agricultura Alternativa (ASPTA) bought food from small farmers who were no longer able to sell their products due to closed markets and transport. They then distributed them to those who work as day labourers without fixed contracts or worker's rights. During quarantine, they didn't know how to get their families through this time. ASPTA joined food assistance with policy work: The organisation called on the Brazilian government to promote small-scale agriculture and thus ensure the nationwide supply of healthy and sustainably grown food for the Brazilian population. This is often cheaper than the processed food of the big supermarket chains.

## The web as a new space for action

However, many civil society organisations did not only provide people with knowledge about the virus or with food. One of the most common questions they were confronted with was: how do you reach those who are desperately in need of help but are no longer allowed to leave their homes? Many organisations answered this question by using the web as a new space for action.

The **Turkish** organisation Mor Çatı is committed to helping women who suffer from domestic violence. Many of them did not know that they were allowed to go to the police even during the lockdown. The activists used their social media channels to repeat this information over and over again. In **Lebanon**, the women's rights organisation Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering developed interactive online trainings to educate women and girls about their rights. There, women also hung banners on their balcony railings with the telephone number of a hotline that victims could call if they had become victims of domestic violence. There was similar support in **Bolivia**: Centro Juana Azurduy, a partner organisation of Bread for the World, spread awareness campaigns via social media and its own radio station and, together with the police, rescued women and children in danger from their homes.

In **Argentina**, the organisation Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia, a group that campaigns for equality and justice, published, among other things, a website for people with disabilities. It provides detailed

information on the rights and services available in an emergency situation such as the pandemic and helps those affected to obtain their rights. For this purpose, the site alone provides 120 document templates for download. In the **Philippines**, our partner organisation IDEALS combined online and offline counselling services: it provided support to all via computer or smartphone and additionally visited those who needed more intensive support, for example in cases of human rights violations or in disputes with authorities (see interview on page 18). Many organisations focused on the needs of families, children and young people. In **Ukraine**, the Special Child Development Centre, a partner organisation of Bread for the World, runs a pre-school for children with ADHD and psychosocial development disorders. With the onset of the pandemic, it moved the teaching sessions for children and the counselling services for parents online. In **Kyrgyzstan**, the situation became particularly precarious for migrants in the settlements around the capital Bishkek: they mostly work informally in markets and construction sites that were now closed. The partner organisation Center for the Protection of Children continued its work online with both the parents and the children of these families in order to be able to continue the necessary counselling and therapy sessions. In the **Philippines**, young people learned to grow their own vegetables in the Kids Who Farm online programme. In this way, they were able to contribute to their families having something to eat where food was not available.

## Partner, not opponent

Governments and civil society organisations did not clash with each other everywhere during the pandemic. There are also examples that show: where state authorities regard civil society groups as partners, the result is cooperative coexistence for the benefit of all. In **Somalia**, for example, Action Against Hunger partnered with the Somali Ministry of Health to train hospital staff in dealing with the virus and provide masks and gowns. In **Latvia**, civil society organisations reported constructive dialogue with the state on what support they needed to fulfil their role during and after the crisis. **Ecuador's** government set up a COVID-19 portal where civil society initiatives could publish information.

Joint activities also developed at regional or local levels – even in countries whose national governments tend

to feel threatened by the engagement of civil society actors, such as **Brazil**. There, the organisation Social Good Brasil brought data scientists together with decision-makers in the state of Santa Catarina when Jair Bolsonaro's government wanted to bring the country out of lockdown for economic reasons. The researchers helped the officials to base their decisions on data and facts. The partner organisation Federação de Órgãos para assistência social e educacional helped to spread the official messages and guidelines of the authorities as well as information on the prevention of the spread to those places which would otherwise not have received it at all or incorrectly – to the periphery of the big cities as well as to rural areas.

## New forms of protest

Finally, the pandemic presented civil society with a challenge of its own: how can you protest while displaying the level of responsibility that governments are often accused of ignoring? Taking to the streets in large crowds as usual is out of the question when masks are compulsory and social distancing rules apply. New ideas were needed – and new ideas were found.

This is the case in **Germany**, where the Fridays For Future movement organised, in compliance with hygiene and distance rules, a large protest at the end of April, in which thousands could participate without having to be at the location. As part of the fifth global climate strike, around 20 activists laid down 10,000 signs on the field in front of the Reichstag, which they had previously collected from all over Germany from those who wanted to remind the German government of its failures in climate protection. The demonstration was accompanied by a livestream on the internet, in which celebrities, citizens and activists exchanged views on the lessons to be learned from the pandemic for the even bigger problem of global warming.

People in **Poland** also invented a new form of protest: queuing. To demonstrate against the government's attempts to tighten abortion laws in the slipstream of the pandemic, protesters queued outside shops, equipped with masks and protest signs. In doing so, they adhered to the pandemic rules – taking their protest to the shopping streets. Again, the action was accompanied by a protest on the net with the hashtag #ProtestBezPrzerwy – “Protest Without Break”: For eight hours, the women talked about their anger. In **Hungary**, NGOs, legal

experts and economists organised the first ever online protest against the Hungarian government's "Corona Protection Act". In a livestream, people with different professional backgrounds talked to each other, about 40,000 people participated. After half an hour, the live-stream suddenly ended under unexplained circumstances. In the post-Corona era, protest is no longer conceivable without the involvement of the internet.

The battle for the sovereignty of interpretation in 2020 was also a battle of images – and many activists decided it in their favour. On June 11, for example, photos of the Copacabana beach in **Rio de Janeiro** went around the world. Overnight, members of the organisation Rio de Paz had dug a hundred symbolic graves with wooden crosses into the sand – in memory of the almost 40,000 people who had died in Brazil up to that point because the Bolsonaro government had failed.

## What follows from 2020, the year of Corona?

Many associate 2020, the year of Corona, with the hope that this dramatic time has sent out reminders that will no longer be forgotten. Such as: a political system that places the desires of the market above those of the people can only ensure the prosperity of the few, not the prosperity of the many or social cohesion. Or: Authoritarian states only seem to get through a crisis better – the long-term damage weighs much more heavily than any short-term success. Or: Solidarity and public spirit also need regular nourishment so that they do not wither away.

"Building Back Better": this is the slogan of those who are working to ensure that the measures to overcome the economic and social consequences of the crisis lead to a new start in a sustainable and united future. Civil society has a central role to play in this process: as an *agent of change*. Thus, looking back, the year 2020 could one day turn out to be a turning point: it has revealed that ingenuity and solidarity can reach new dimensions when the need becomes particularly great. It is therefore all the more important that governments do not hinder civil society organisations in their work, but support them with action and strength.

# What needs to be done

## **Governments and parliaments should always ensure – even in acute emergencies – that ...**

- ... universal human rights are protected and guaranteed.
- ... human and fundamental rights, for example, during a crisis such as the Corona pandemic, can only be restricted for a limited period of time – and only if and as long as it is necessary, legal, legitimate, proportionate and non-discriminatory.
- ... they repeal all laws enacted under the pretext of fighting the pandemic, which contradict international human rights standards.
- ... they do not reduce but expand the protection programmes for human rights defenders during the pandemic.
- ... they release human rights defenders who have been imprisoned for their work.
- ... civil society actors are supported and can work for just and sustainable development without fear of persecution and repression.
- ... civil society and particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups can participate effectively in political, social and economic decision-making.
- ... hate crime can be punished more quickly and efficiently.
- ... the guiding principles of data protection, transparency and voluntariness apply when digital technologies are used to control the pandemic.
- ... its own foreign policy and foreign economic decisions do not violate human rights.
- ... Embassies defend human rights and their protectors worldwide – and make staff available for this purpose.
- ... Embassies observe civil society spheres of activity in the host country – and intervene when politicians and laws there violate international human rights.
- ... companies are obliged through supply chain laws to respect human rights along the production and supply chains – and that violations are sanctioned and those affected are able to seek redress.
- ... vaccines are available worldwide and are distributed fairly.

## **Companies should also ...**

- ... recognise that civil society organisations are indispensable for democracy and political decision-making – especially on issues such as human rights, peace, climate change, social justice or gender equality.
- ... ensure that they respect human rights in production and supply chains. This also applies to its subsidiary companies and their subcontractors.
- ... respect basic rights like freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly or the right to information – and thus also criticism of and protests against their businesses.
- ... consult and cooperate with human rights defenders and local civil society to ensure that their domestic and international business activities do not violate human rights in the first place.
- ... ensure that private security firms or contractors working for or on behalf of businesses do not threaten or attack human rights defenders.

## **We should all ...**

- ... support civil society engagement as volunteers or through donations.
- ... oppose and take a clear stand against xenophobia or exclusion based on skin colour, nationality, sexual orientation or religion. Enemies of democracy should feel the headwind.
- ... buy consciously – i.e. make sure that environmental and human rights standards have been observed in the production of goods.

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