

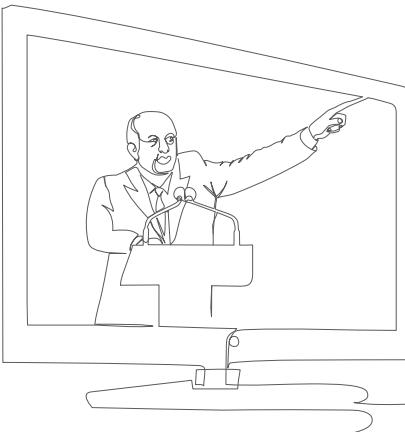
RIGHTS REVEALED

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ESCALATION OF AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD

PART 2

AN HR EDUCATIONAL EXPLAINER

This guide is for anyone who wants to understand how the tactics of authoritarian power can silence, divide or control. It is not about which political affiliation or government system is best. It is about understanding how fear and division are used politically, how narratives are manipulated to justify authoritarian practices, and how we can start to question the systems and stories that allow injustice to grow.



RESISTING AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES IN DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

INTRODUCTION

In *Rights Revealed: Human Rights and the Escalation of Authoritarian Practices Around the World: Part 1*¹, we looked at how authoritarian practices function as tools to concentrate power, evade accountability and erode rights. We explored the power of fear-based stories that target certain groups, justify repression, restrict freedoms and silence dissent.

Now, in this second part, we will take a closer look at the signs and tactics used by those seeking to use authoritarian practices to shut down our collective space to speak up, organise, resist, and shape the societies we live in. You'll see examples from around the world showing how governments and powerful groups restrict freedoms and target those who dare to challenge them. These authoritarian practices manifest in various forms and contexts, yet the patterns are strikingly similar.

But this is not just a story of repression. Across the globe, people are resisting, disrupting and transforming the systems that failed so many, to assert our rights. From small acts of care and solidarity to large-scale movements, individuals and communities are finding creative and courageous ways to demand justice and defend human rights, dignity, and equality.

By learning to recognise authoritarian practices, we can better see how power works and how it can be challenged. Exploring how people defend human rights, push back against abuses, and carve out space for freedom reminds us that human rights are not just abstract principles or legal texts. They are a shared responsibility and a call to action.

AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES: RED FLAGS OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

When we think of systematic human rights violations, we often think of emblematic cases. We might think of countries in active conflict, under military or tyrannical rule. But the erosion of human rights is not always announced with sirens or tanks. It can start subtly, with a whisper, perhaps with the warning: *“You shouldn’t say that”*. Then, a headline gets twisted. A peaceful protest is declared illegal. A children’s book is banned from the shelves. A journalist gets arrested. A person gets snatched from the streets and unlawfully deported, without a court case or without their family or friends knowing where they are. And just like that, the space in which people think, speak, act and express themselves freely begins to shrink.

In free and fair societies, power is kept in balance through the **rule of law, accountability, and public participation**. These are often called the “pillars” of a free society. These principles are crucial. They mean that no one, not even those in government, is above the

law. It requires courts to be fair and independent, and police and military to abide by the law. It means people have the right to protest peacefully, organise, and speak freely. And it means governments can be questioned and held to account without fear of reprisals.

But when leaders reject being questioned, when they ignore or undermine these principles, they start to crack those pillars. This is when freedom is eroded and the seeds of repression are sown



DEFINITION: CIVIC SPACE

Civic space is the shared room we have to speak up, organise, protest, and help shape our societies. It includes everything from street marches and community meetings to the ability to form unions, conduct independent journalism, and participate in civil society organizations and youth-led campaigns. When governments start closing that space and limiting public participation, for example by banning protests, spying on people, censoring media, and restricting critical voices, that's called **shrinking civic space**. This isn't just happening in highly repressive regimes. It's increasing all over the world, including in countries with regular elections, parliaments and formal institutions. We speak of **authoritarian practices** when governments and others in power use certain tactics to stop people from speaking out, limit civic space, entrench power, weaken or undermine the rule of law and violate human rights.

AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES: RED FLAGS OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Authoritarian tactics don't always declare themselves as such. They may be dressed up as "national security", "public order" or "protection of traditional values". Often, a call for "unity" comes with efforts to erase cultural identity or shut down initiatives that promote diversity, equity and inclusion. They rarely say "we are restricting your rights". But the patterns are recognisable. Here's what to look out for:

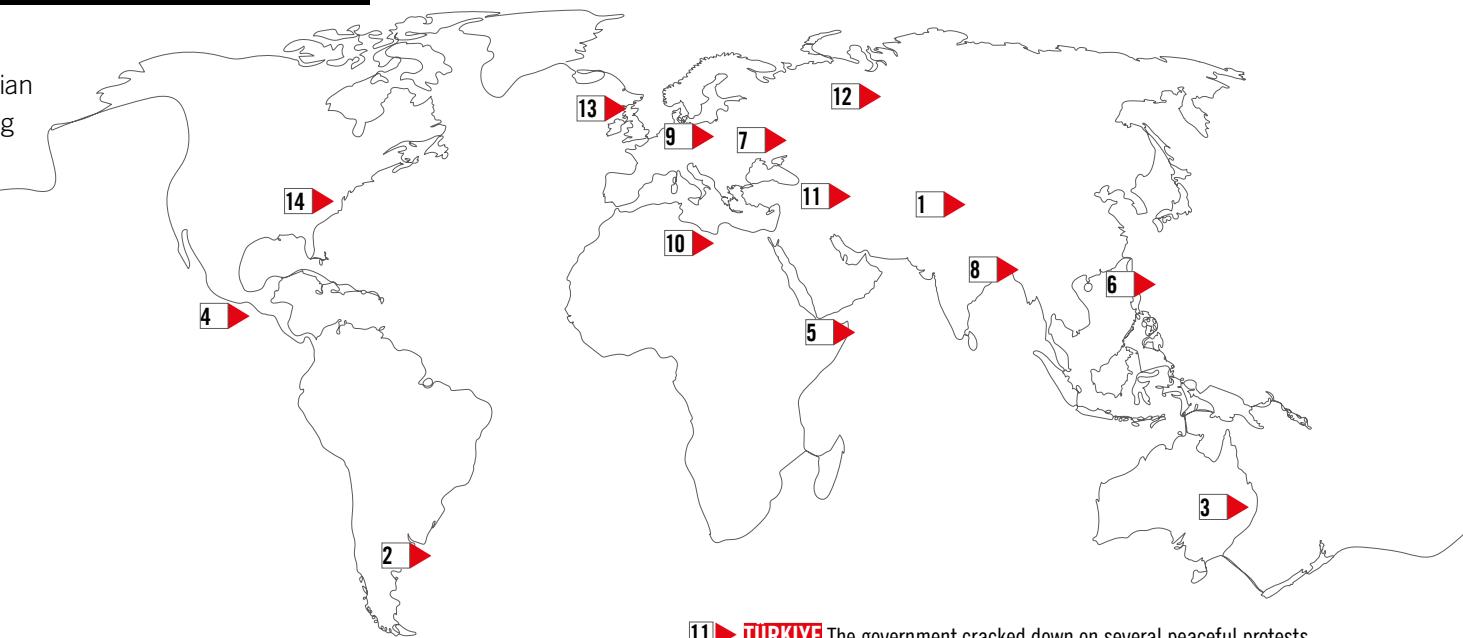
- ▶ Emergency laws used not to protect people, but to grab more control. Parliaments silenced or bypassed. States of emergency that never end. Measures meant for crises become tools for permanent control.
- ▶ Constitutions changed to undermine the separation of powers. Laws passed to silence civil society or manipulated to enforce political goals.
- ▶ Courts packed with political allies, weakening independence, justice and accountability.
- ▶ Militarized policing. Armoured vehicles and riot gear used against peaceful protesters or communities of colour or other marginalized communities.
- ▶ Surveillance without oversight. People monitored for their beliefs, identities or online opinions.
- ▶ Criminalization of critical thinking and dissent. Teachers, students, journalists, artists and human rights defenders punished or locked up for speaking out or for offering different perspectives on the dominant narrative.
- ▶ Smear campaigns and disinformation. Authorities control information channels and reshape public narratives to portray critics, migrants or minorities as threats. This is also called "demonization". They might label them as "immoral", "threats to the nation", "unpatriotic" or "foreign agents", in order to justify crackdowns and silence opposition. These narratives are amplified through disinformation campaigns to cause confusion, gain support for their policies and smear those who criticize them

You don't need all of these to be present to be concerned. Even just one, or a slow buildup towards some of these, is a reason to pay attention.

AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES: RED FLAGS OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Let's take a look at global patterns of escalating authoritarian practices in countries that have all committed to upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights since 1948:

- 1 ► **AFGHANISTAN** The Taliban imposed severe restrictions on women and girls, completely cutting them off from public life and effectively limiting all aspects of their lives.²
- 2 ► **ARGENTINA** Soaring levels of inflation and increased poverty caused pensioners to take to the streets, but police used excessive force, like tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons during peaceful rallies, injuring elderly people and arresting children.³
- 3 ► **AUSTRALIA** Several states passed anti-protest laws, issuing fines of up to \$50,000 Australian dollars to "disruptive" protesters, and authorized potential imprisonment for up to 2 years.⁴
- 4 ► **EL SALVADOR** The government's prolonged "anti-gang" state of emergency entrenched mass arbitrary detention, torture, and inhumane prison conditions, institutionalizing repression and eroding rule of law.⁵
- 5 ► **ETHIOPIA** Authorities recurrently shut down the internet and restricted telephone communication, arbitrarily arrested journalists and peaceful protesters, and suspended prominent human rights organizations in the context of an internal armed conflict.⁶
- 6 ► **HONG KONG** The government used national security legislation to target and criminalize people and subject them to long periods in detention.⁷
- 7 ► **HUNGARY** The rushed anti-Pride law expanded state control over public assembly and expression, enabling authorities to ban Pride marches, criminalize LGBTI visibility, deploy surveillance tools, and weaponize "child protection" rhetoric to justify discrimination and suppress dissent.⁸

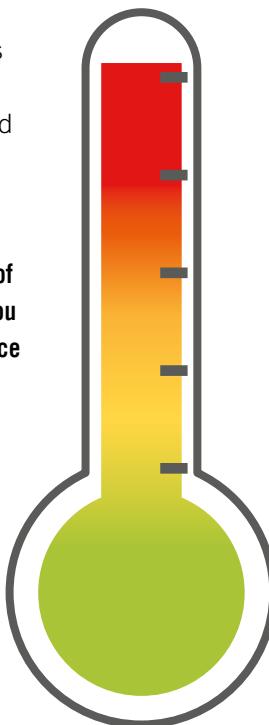


- 8 ► **INDIA** The Citizenship Amendment Act (CCA) was weaponized against minority Muslim population.⁹ The authorities clamped down on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, disallowing student protests against the CAA.¹⁰
- 9 ► **THE NETHERLANDS** Peaceful demonstrators were harassed by police during unannounced and intimidating house visits, when they were questioned about their participation in peaceful demonstrations or their social media posts.¹¹
- 10 ► **TUNISIA** Since the 2021 power grab, the president dissolved parliament and undermined judicial independence, enabling arbitrary detention, politically motivated prosecutions, and widespread repression of activists, migrants, and civil society to consolidate authoritarian control.¹²
- 11 ► **TURKIYE** The government cracked down on several peaceful protests, using unlawful force and arbitrarily detaining protesters, including 43 members of the Youth Movement for Free Palestine and 169 people who attended a night march to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.¹³
- 12 ► **RUSSIA** Laws branded NGOs, journalists, media outlets and activists as "foreign agents" and banned them from engaging in educational or awareness-raising activities, silencing dissent and erasing checks and balances to erode public trust and justify repression.¹⁴
- 13 ► **UK** Hundreds of people were arrested for peacefully protesting against the proscription of a pro-Palestinian direct action group as a terrorist organization.¹⁵
- 14 ► **USA** Books are banned, protests are unlawfully restricted, educational systems are being dismantled, and citizens and migrants were deported to El Salvador's mass-incarceration prisons with no due process.¹⁶

AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES: RED FLAGS OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

As we see, authoritarian practices can and do take different forms. But they share several common features: undermining of human rights, a disregard for the rule of law, and efforts to shrink civic space and limit peaceful protests with the intention of entrenching power, evading accountability and silencing dissent.

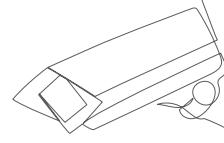
Take a moment to reflect on your own context and if and where these types of practices are occurring. How would you measure the temperature of civic space where you live?



THE CIVIC SPACE THERMOMETER¹⁷

What if you could take the temperature of a country's civic space, to see how healthy it is? The Civic Space Thermometer below is not an official measurement, but a simplified tool designed to help us think critically about how open or restricted civic life can be in different societies.

- **LOCKED DOWN:** Only state narratives allowed, rights restricted
- **CRITICAL:** Protests banned, media controlled, civic groups dismantled
- **SHRINKING:** Arrests of critical voices, smear campaigns, increased surveillance
- **WARNING SIGNS:** Legal restrictions increase, intimidation starts, disinformation spreads
- **WIDE OPEN:** Free press, protests without repression, strong civic networks



SELF-REFLECTION:

- Can you think of examples of countries at each temperature?
- Where would you position your country or community? Why?
- From the red flags and the country examples given here so far, were you surprised? How did it make you feel?
- Thinking about your own country, do you think civic space has become more open or closed over time? What made the difference?
- And what actions could you or your community take to limit or reverse authoritarian practices?

Recognizing authoritarian practices is the first step in resisting them. And this is where human rights frameworks come in. Not as foreign ideas, but as tools people can use to resist authoritarian practices. These frameworks give language, protection, and power to those defending human rights. States have the principal duty to respect, protect, fulfil, and ensure the comprehensive exercise of human rights. Human rights are not optional and they are universal.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION: SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND PROTECTION

When power is used to silence critical voices and restrict human rights, how do we respond?

In a healthy, free society, the law acts as a shield and protects your right to speak out, to organise, to protest and to seek justice. But when those in power begin to use the law as a weapon – by targeting critics, twisting rules to entrench power, and creating fear – people face new risks. Selective enforcement, criminalization, surveillance, retaliation and public demonization become common tools to target human rights defenders, activists, journalists, migrants and refugees, people of colour, and other marginalized people, in fact anyone who are perceived to be a threat to the interests of those in power. Yet even in those moments, **people have shown they don't give up: they adapt, organise, and resist.** Around the world, communities have built powerful,

non-violent responses to shrinking civic space and erosion of accountability and civic freedoms, such as the freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Human rights are not only protections, they also serve as a call to action. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – developed as a direct response to authoritarian governments – reminds us that states have a duty to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. And every individual and every part of society can help promote and defend these rights and freedoms.

There are plenty of tools we can use to stand up to authoritarianism, and real-life examples of powerful, non-violent resistance. Think of:



1 ➤ MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

- ▷ Use local networks to support each other with food, safety, care, and information.
- ▷ Support and protect those targeted, through legal defence funds or rapid response groups.
- ▷ Organize boycotts to resist repression, censorship, or companies involved in human rights abuses.

2 ➤ EDUCATION, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY AS RESISTANCE

- ▷ Educate others and raise awareness to help build a universal culture of human rights, starting in our own communities.
- ▷ Use art, music, humour, satire, and storytelling to mobilize people and challenge harmful ideas and messages.
- ▷ Host cultural events that celebrate diversity and show resilience, even under pressure.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION: SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND PROTECTION

3 ► DIGITAL TOOLS AND ONLINE ACTIVISM

- ▷ Use encrypted messaging and secure platforms to organise and mobilize safely.
- ▷ Create open-source tools to document human rights abuses and map threats.
- ▷ Build online platforms to crowdsource information, build community and bypass censorship.

4 ► STRATEGIC LITIGATION AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

- ▷ Run public campaigns or organize peaceful acts of civil disobedience that challenge unfair laws or practices and spread rights-based solutions and hope-based messaging
- ▷ Practise citizen journalism by taking photos and videos, or write reports to document abuses and bring attention to injustice.
- ▷ Take cases to court, ask international bodies like the United Nations or regional human rights courts for support.

These are just a few ways in which all of us can help counter authoritarian practices.

Of course, not all action will lead to immediate change, but speaking up when you hear anti-rights or hateful language being used allows for the possibility of change.

“Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral”

Paulo Freire

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION: SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND PROTECTION

THE LEGACY BOX

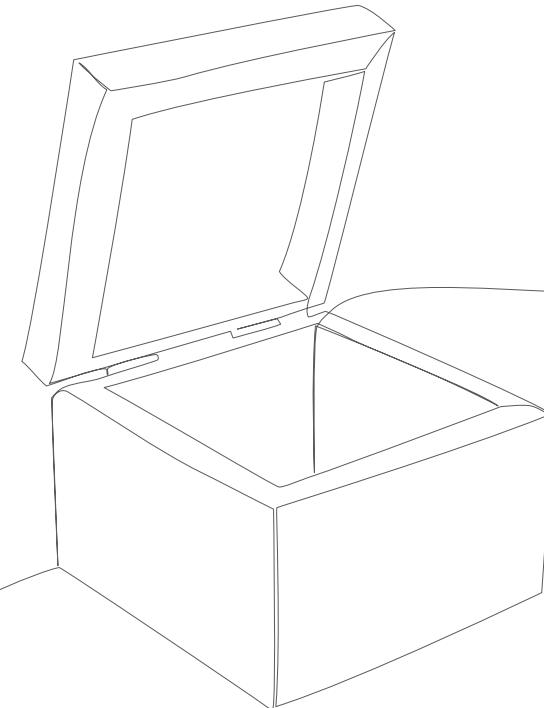
Imagine you are handed a large wooden box labelled *The Future*. You didn't ask for it, but here it is. Heavy, scratched, passed down through generations. You open the box, and it is filled with instructions: "Speak like this", "do not trust these people", "money is success and success is power", "nobody looks out for you except yourself".

You find some beautiful things too. Stories of love, dreams of justice, tokens of peace and songs of solidarity. But they are buried under files marked "colonialism", "profit" and "control" and cannot be accessed.

Discussion prompt:

- ▷ What ideas or systems have you inherited that you want to keep? What parts of this heritage should be challenged, reconsidered, or thrown out?
- ▷ Now imagine that someone tells you "*you* are not allowed to change what's inside". Well, if that's so, who gets to decide what stays and what gets removed from the box?
- ▷ And when we ask who decides on the future, we also have to ask: who benefits and *who is being pushed out, and are people being denied their rights?*
- ▷ Do you believe we have any power to challenge and change these things so everyone can access their human rights?

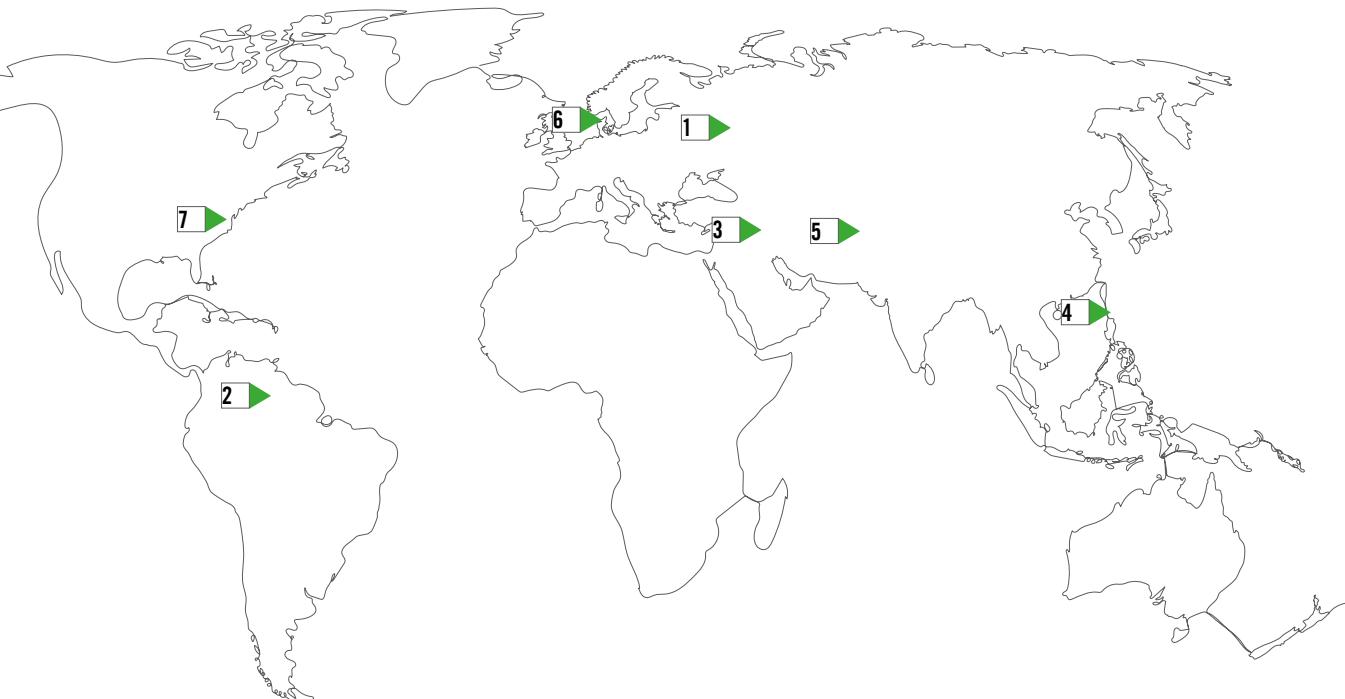
*As rights holders,
we can all shape the
world we live in.*



HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION: SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND PROTECTION

While resisting new or long-standing authoritarian practices may feel almost impossible, the actions of individuals, groups and communities are key to safeguarding human rights for everyone.

Here are some examples of people refusing to stay silent in the face of authoritarian and other anti-rights measures by governments or powerful corporations from around the world:



- 1 ► In **BELARUS**, large groups of women dressed in white formed human chains to protest police abuses and a crackdown on protests
- 2 ► In **COLOMBIA**, street art campaigns were organised against police violence
- 3 ► A **GLOBAL** citizen's initiative, the Freedom Flotilla, tried to bring aid and supplies by ship to Gaza, which has been systematically cut off by Israel from receiving any humanitarian aid
- 4 ► In **HONG KONG**, pro-democracy protesters use Tinder, Pokémon Go or AirDrop to share messages anonymously to breach China's Firewall
- 5 ► In **IRAN**, people switch off lights and chant "Women, Life, Freedom" from behind the windows in the dark, in a coordinated protest across neighbourhoods as a form of symbolic resistance and to avoid recognition by security forces
- 6 ► Activists in **UK**, **DENMARK**, and **SWEDEN** targeted companies over continued energy trade with Russia during the Ukraine war
- 7 ► In the **USA**, neighbours shout the rights people have during raids by immigration and customs officers (ICE agents)

Can you think of some forms of peaceful resistance and human rights defence that you have seen around you recently? Or what about more historical examples?

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION: SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND PROTECTION

While these actions are peaceful, they may – and often do – carry risks. When taking any kind of action, it is crucial to assess your risks and investigate carefully how to protect yourself and protect others, both in real life and in the digital world, and to know your rights, even when they're denied.¹⁸

When rights are threatened, it's easy to feel powerless. But people everywhere are resisting, and across borders and identities, we are part of a global story of courage. When we protect each other, when we stand up against oppression, when we keep asking questions and challenging power, we make space for freedom. And that is people power.

Knowing is a first step. Feeling is the next. Acting is what creates change. Whether you're learning these issues for the first time or living them daily, your role matters. Speak, share, support, show up. In small circles or global campaigns, action begins when people choose to care out loud. The struggle for human rights is not someone else's. It's ours.

SAFETY FIRST: PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PROTECTION

- ▷ Learn your rights (and teach and share with others)
- ▷ Use secure messaging (e.g. Signal)
- ▷ Know your emergency contacts
- ▷ Never act alone if risks are high
- ▷ Protect others' privacy
- ▷ Take care of your mental and physical health

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION: SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND PROTECTION

SELF REFLECTION EXERCISE: WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER TO ME?

Why do human rights matter to you personally? What do you believe in?

Let's take a moment to reflect on our values, our hopes for the future, and the kind of society that we want to live in. Complete the following sentences in your own words:

- ▶ **I care about human rights, because...**
(Reflect on your experiences, your community, or a specific issue you feel strongly about)
- ▶ **One human right that matters to me specifically is...**
- ▶ **The society I want to live in is one where...**
- ▶ **The rule of law is important, because....**
(Think about fairness, equality, accountability, and what happens when power goes unchecked)
- ▶ **One action I can take to support human rights, is...**
- ▶ **I believe that change starts...**
(Where? With what?)

You don't have to be an expert or a leader to make a difference. You can start where you are and with what you have. In your school, your family, your group chat, your neighbourhood. Change begins when ordinary people speak up, organize, protect each other, and imagine better. Human rights start in small places, and so does hope.



SO WHO GETS TO SHAPE THE FUTURE?

Around the world, from Russia to the USA, from China to the UK, from Venezuela to the Democratic Republic of Congo, from Israel to Myanmar, authoritarian practices take many forms. But what they have in common is their aim to concentrate power, undermine the rule of law, evade accountability and the blatant disregard and violation of human rights.

While it may seem hard to believe change can happen, human rights gains over many decades show us this is possible, even in contexts where authoritarian narratives and practices appear to be spreading like wildfire.

The first step in limiting and reversing authoritarian practices (in whatever form they take) comes in recognizing the narratives that are fuelling them. The next step is knowing we do have the power to contribute to change and respect for human rights. This power to challenge and change these practices is both individual and collective, as we discuss below: be it to stand up for our own rights and in solidarity to defend the rights of others.

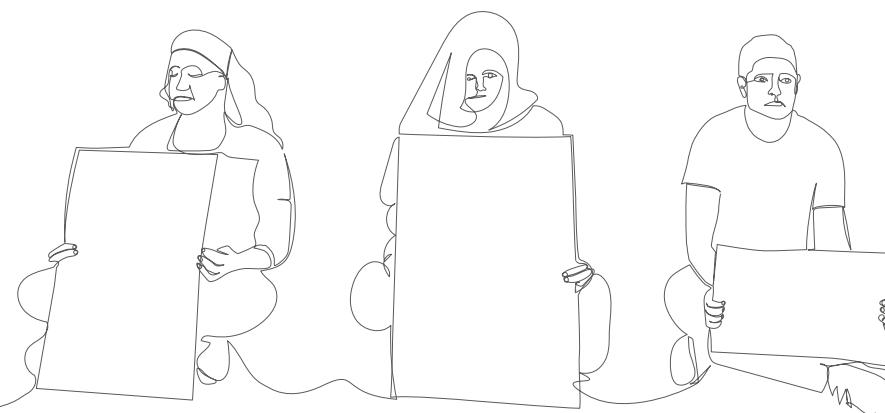
The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any

Alice Walker

It's important to keep learning, asking questions and forming your own opinion, especially when misinformation, propaganda or biased stories are used to protect the interests of those in power.

As you reflect on everything we've explored, from shrinking civic space, the rule of law, to peaceful resistance – what stands out to you? What made you stop and think, or sparked your curiosity?

Maybe you are left with more questions than answers. That's okay. In fact, that's where learning begins. The key is to stay curious and seek out reliable, rights-based sources to dig deeper.

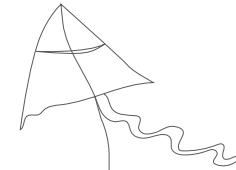


TAKING THE STEPS TOWARDS IN COUNTERING AND RESISTING AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES

We encourage you to dig deeper. Here are some prompts to guide your thinking. Some may require a bit more research:

1. Can you identify narratives of fear, repression and control you've encountered in your community or in the media? How did it affect you or others?¹⁹
2. Think of a time when you heard those in power blaming a specific group for a larger societal issue (e.g. poverty, insecurity, housing). What alternative explanation could be offered using a human rights lens?
3. People push back against fear and injustice in various ways. What might resistance look like where you live? Who or what inspires you to act, speak out, or show up?

4. When have you seen everyday resistance make a difference? Have you ever seen small actions, like speaking out, asking questions, or helping someone feel safe, make a difference?
5. What do you think the phrase "if it happens to one of us, it happens to all of us" has to do with the topics discussed here, or with human rights?
6. When is silence a form of safety, and when is it a form of complicity? How can we tell the difference? What's something you used to think was "normal" that now seems like a warning sign of shrinking civic space?



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

You can take self-paced courses on various human rights issues in the Amnesty Academy, where there are short courses from 15 minutes of learning, to longer ones spanning several hours. Check it out!

<https://academy.amnesty.org/>

You can also explore interactive quizzes on Kahoot here

<https://create.kahoot.it/course/f9699fd2-623d-4980-acaf-8245c3a56598>



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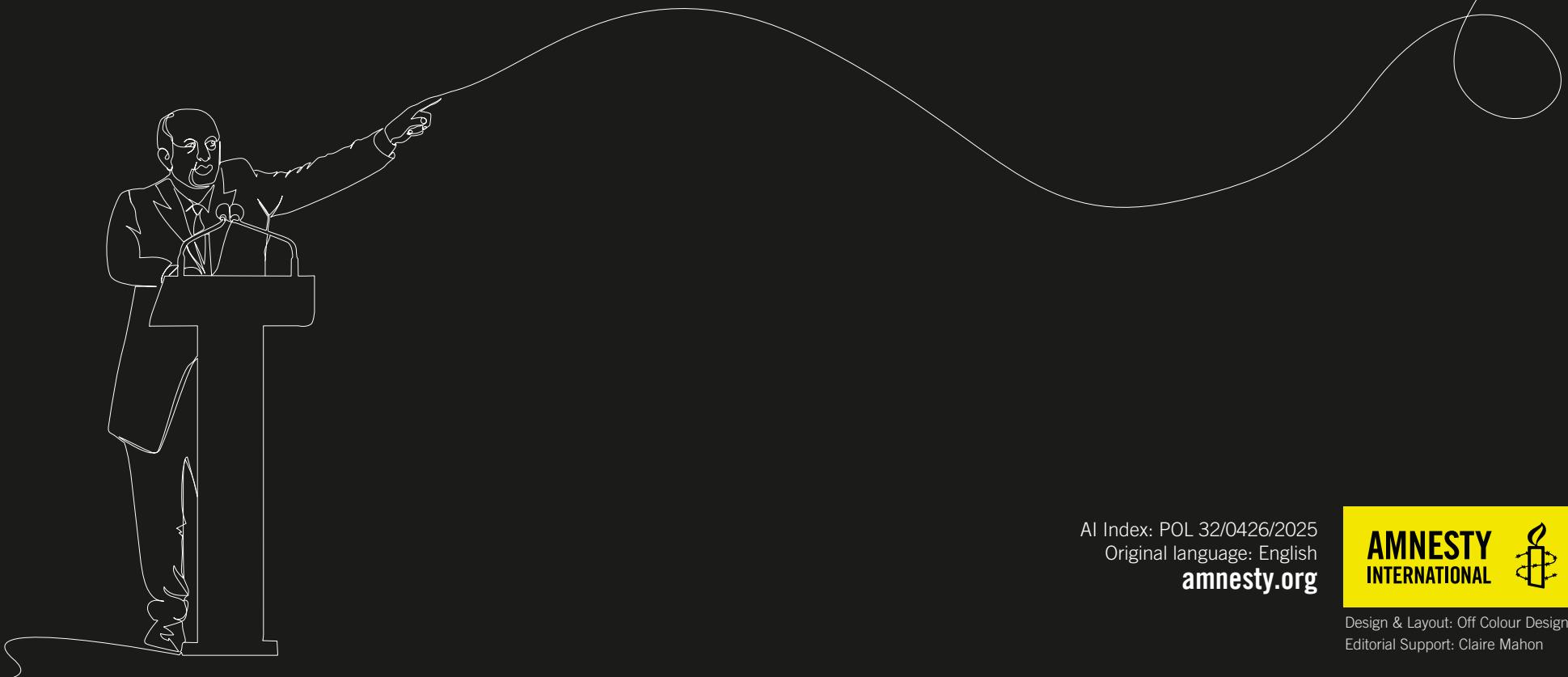
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