

IFEX Submission

Silencing media, controlling the narrative and obscuring human rights abuses: The impact of “challenging times” on freedom of opinion and expression

*Submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression
21 June 2024*

[IFEX](#) is a global network that promotes and defends freedom of expression and information as a fundamental human right. It is a nexus for free expression expertise contributed by 119 member-organisations spanning over 70 countries who are committed to collaboration and transformative advocacy. We are pleased to present this submission to the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression in response to the call for inputs to the report on freedom of expression in challenging times, to be presented at the 79th UN General Assembly.

Introduction

While restrictions to freedom of opinion and expression were already of profound concern in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel before 7 October 2023, the rapid [deterioration](#) in the local and broader context since then has been unprecedented. As of 14 June, IFEX member the [Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms \(MADA\)](#) reported 149 journalists and media workers killed in Gaza alone, while IFEX member I’lam documented over 50 violations against Palestinian journalists in Israel, including confiscation of equipment, obstructing coverage, arrests, and physical attacks by Israeli military and authorities, leading to a climate of fear and self-censorship. Israel has also [targeted](#) journalists in Lebanon with airstrikes that killed one and injured six others in December 2023. Foreign journalists [blocked](#) from entering Gaza and media outlets under pressure from Israel’s targeted and hastily passed laws also present major obstacles for access to information. Al Jazeera was [banned](#) under the [Al Jazeera Bill](#) approved in April, after authorities cited them as a ‘threat to national security’, while the Associated Press had equipment [confiscated](#) under Israel’s foreign broadcaster law, also passed in April.

Israel’s targeting of media freedom attempts to control the narrative on Gaza by obscuring grave human rights violations, which constitute [war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) and may amount to [genocide and ethnic cleansing](#). This submission highlights how State crackdowns on ceasefire protests and expressions of solidarity with Palestinians helps to distort the narrative, which is simultaneously bolstered by the policies and practices of social media platforms amplifying harmful content while censoring content related to Palestine. Consequently, the free expression and information landscape is facing systemic challenges in which colonial practices and structural discrimination are being reinforced through State repression and tech companies’ increasing power over the digital space, while normalising an environment of censorship that has alarming global implications for democracy, civic space, and human rights.

Escalating State repression

As States crack down on protests in support of Palestine, including among those with democratic reputations, global norms for promoting free expression and civic space are at risk. In the Middle East and North Africa, IFEX member Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) reports security and military forces in Bahrain [threatening](#) and using excessive force against protesters while carrying out arrests. IFEX member ARTICLE 19 [highlights](#) Algeria’s strict control over protests, while Egypt and Jordan have arbitrarily detained protesters and journalists and made arrests on trumped-up charges. Although the latter two States have declared support for Gaza, with Jordan providing humanitarian aid and assistance, ARTICLE 19 have attributed the crackdowns to government fears that citizens will engage in human rights and pro-democracy protests at home.



These tactics are being amplified through the brutal use of force and restrictions in North America and Europe. Germany's increasingly authoritarian efforts have included [stigmatising](#) support to Palestinians as antisemitism or "pro-terrorism"; [arresting and detaining](#) protesters; and heavy-handed [police presence](#). In France, demonstrations in support of Palestine were [banned](#) under concerns of "disturbances to the public order", while in the US, activists, protesters and journalists expressing solidarity with Palestine have been [met](#) with intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention, criminal charges, and excessive use of force by police. The rise of [campus protests globally](#) calling for universities to divest from corporations linked to Israel and its attacks against Palestinians have been met with varied responses, including the [deployment](#) of excessive force, forcible [removal](#) of encampments, [arrest](#) of journalists, [rescinding](#) of visas, increased [surveillance](#), and [pressure for students to self-censor](#).

These efforts are reinforced by the development of restrictive legislation and policies. The US government's proposed [Antisemitism Awareness Act](#) is [pending approval](#) by the Senate after being passed by the House, despite the risk it poses for suppressing criticism of Israel, Palestinian rights activism, and organising efforts and the work of civil society organisations (CSOs). Enforcement of antiquated [anti-mask laws](#) are also being discussed, sparking concerns around the right to privacy. In the UK, the government's new [Defending Democracy Policing Protocol](#) limits how and where people can [protest](#), while the recent [redefinition](#) of 'extremism' empowers authorities in the UK to broaden their scope of targeting, which could include protests in support of Palestine and Palestinian organisations. These legal restrictions are not limited to the offline space; IFEX member the Gulf Centre for Human Rights highlights how Jordan's [Cybercrime Law of 2023](#) has been [levied](#) against those using social media to express opposition to Israel's human rights violations, publish solidarity posts with Palestine, and collectively organise protests.

This pattern has systemic ramifications for democracy and civic space. The fact that States held up as democratic examples are suppressing foundational rights in the manner of authoritarian regimes risks undermining their status and credibility for holding other States accountable for violations, while legitimising these tactics globally. This is reinforced by tech companies, whose inadequate social media platform policies and practices, and political alignment with North America and Europe, only exacerbate the issue.

Controlling the narrative on social media

Censorship of credible and legitimate information and content on Palestine through platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and X, has created a vacuum for the proliferation of harmful content. IFEX member Human Rights Watch (HRW) [documents](#) users reporting Palestine-related content removal, shadow-banning, and restricted online engagement on Facebook and Instagram. Flaws in Meta's policies, inconsistency in their application, deference to government requests to remove content, and automated content moderation are some of the practices that have silenced Palestinian voices. This amplifies misinformation and disinformation around Gaza; IFEX member Index on Censorship highlights how X's algorithm [obscured](#) fact-based information – instead, pushing harmful and often false content from paying users that, in turn, can get higher click rates and escalate rhetoric fuelling hate speech. IFEX member 7amleh's ["Violence Indicator"](#) recorded over a million [instances](#) of hate speech in a little over a month after Gaza, with most cases found on X due to insufficient moderation mechanisms to prevent hate speech and incitement to violence. This bolsters a discriminatory and one-sided narrative, leading to an increasingly difficult free expression environment that forces censorship, if not self-censorship.

Additionally, 7amleh's new [report](#) emphasises that the lack of oversight, regulatory frameworks, and transparency around the emerging use of AI has led to the exacerbation of biases against Palestinians, content creation that amplifies harmful narratives and media, and AI-enhanced content moderation disproportionately targeting content on Palestine. The more frequently applied, the more bias is ingrained in AI through increasingly common patterns in data sets, which exacerbates trends in online discrimination, hate, harassment, misinformation, disinformation, and more.

Tech companies increasingly control the digital space as social media platforms have become vital for sharing information and emergency resources, collective organising, and documenting evidence of grave human rights violations. Consequently, their policies and practices have reinforced North American and Eurocentric biases and political priorities that exacerbate legacies of colonialism and structural discrimination. Use of AI foreshadows how narratives of present and future acts of State-sanctioned violence and aggression, conflicts, elections and other significant social, political, and geopolitical events may be shaped globally. It risks setting a precedent wherein companies, with complicit States, can control how free

expression and information is exercised, large-scale human rights violations are being documented, and whose narratives to prioritise.

Responses from civil society

CSOs have continued to hold States and companies accountable for addressing these escalating challenges. IFEX and other civil society partners have [urged](#) Member States of the Media Freedom Coalition to protect journalists in Gaza and investigate the killings, calling attention to their lack of action as damaging for their credibility and commitments to promote media freedom globally. Among the IFEX network, the European Federation of Journalists issued a [statement](#) after a journalist was assaulted and detained by German police during a protest crackdown; Reporters Without Borders [condemned](#) the excessive response by US authorities against journalists, including student media; ARTICLE 19 [urged](#) France, Germany, the UK, and other European governments to uphold the rights to free expression and assembly to protect democracy; and HRW have [called](#) for Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan to stop restricting protests.

Meanwhile, 7amleh and other CSOs published a statement [calling](#) for Meta to retract a proposed revision of its hate speech policy to include the term “Zionist”, which could lead to treating the term as a proxy for Jewish and/or Israeli, thereby cracking down on Palestinian voices and expressions of solidarity while simultaneously dismissing anti-Zionist Jewish identities and experiences. 7amleh’s [statement](#) responding to the US’ proposed TikTok ban highlights how removing a platform amplifying Palestinian content, at a time when false and harmful rhetoric is being disseminated on Meta and X’s platforms, attacks Palestinian digital rights.

By drawing attention and calling for accountability, civil society pushes back against growing censorship, protecting democracy and promoting an open civic space at a time when States are failing in their human rights obligations and are increasingly complicit in Israel’s atrocities against Palestinians.

Conclusion

The ongoing repression and censorship of solidarity with Palestine is in distinct contrast to reactions to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Many States, primarily North American and European, [called](#) for protecting media freedom, provided [support](#) to civil society and media, and [condemned](#) the killing of journalists in Ukraine, while social media platforms [amplified](#) Ukrainian voices, pushed content documenting the violations being perpetrated by Russia, and provided opportunities for users to showcase solidarity.

Conversely, some States, notably in North America and Europe, have used repressive tactics reinforced by censorship practices on social media to target and silence Palestinians and their supporters. They risk permitting human rights violations to be committed with impunity, emboldening repressive regimes, and setting a dangerous precedent for curtailing free expression and information through restrictive legislation; attacks on journalists, activists, and protesters; and complicity with social media platforms. This erodes their credibility in holding repressive States accountable and contributes to colonial legacies, structural discrimination, and inequality by deciding who gets to exercise their rights to free expression and who doesn’t. Normalising the blatant failure to protect human rights by States with democratic reputations could lead to a global shift away from protecting and promoting democracy and an open civic space.

We ask the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression’s report to the UN General Assembly make recommendations for States to:

1. Uphold the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as protected under Articles 19 and 21, respectively, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by ceasing the suppression of peaceful protests and the use of overly restrictive or discriminatory legislation, and to pursue accountability measures, including independent and transparent investigations, to address violations committed against journalists, activists, protesters and others exercising their rights in this context;

2. Hold social media platforms accountable for their responsibility to respect human rights, as stated in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and other applicable international and regional standards through proper regulation in line with these instruments, and if applicable, investigating and ensuring redress with due process through domestic judicial mechanisms for their complicity in contributing to grave human rights violations; and
3. Guarantee a broader enabling environment for journalists, activists, protesters, students, and CSOs to engage in expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people by ensuring they are not subject to censorship, threats, arrests, attacks, harassment, persecution, criminalisation, or other forms of penalisation for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, privacy, and others.

