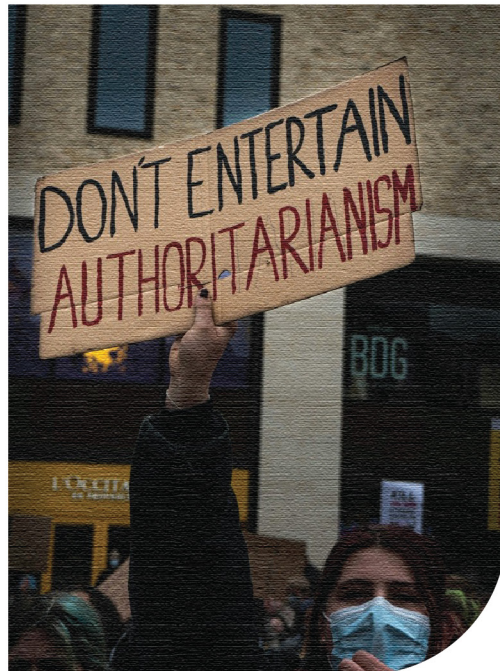
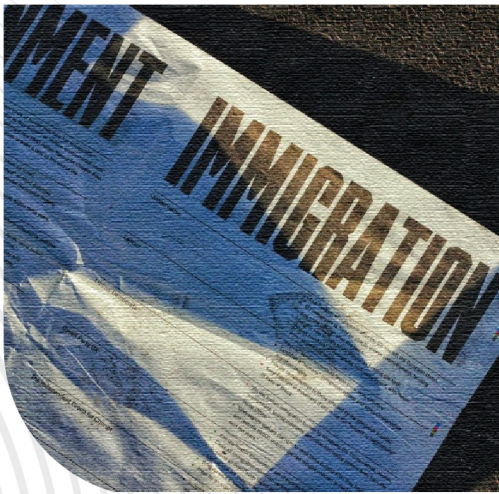




WORLD ANTI EXTREMISM
NETWORK
BUILDING A FREE WORLD



UNCENSORED WATCH

Defending Freedom, Challenging Extremism and Authoritarianism

Issue 16 | April 2026

UNCENSORED WATCH

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*Defending Freedom, Challenging Extremism and
Authoritarianism*

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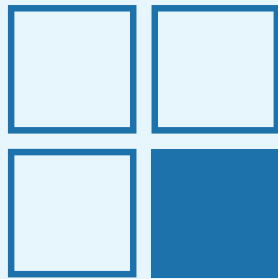
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SECTION-1

Welcome to Uncensored Watch - A Project of
World Anti-Extremism Network

Welcome to Uncensored Watch - A Project of World Anti-Extremism Network

Hello, Dear Readers, and welcome to the April edition of Uncensored Watch!

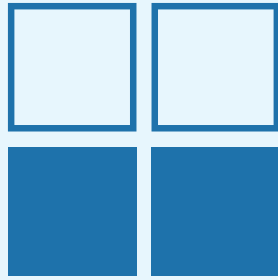
This April, we bring you stories on expanding digital censorship, concerns over judicial independence in politically sensitive cases, the impact of extremist violence on civilian protection in eastern DR Congo and Pakistan, and increasing restrictions on civic space and peaceful activism across different contexts.

Additionally, we highlight two research papers from the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025: one explores non-violent digital resistance to authoritarianism in Pakistan, while the other examines Sufi waqfs as institutions of peacebuilding in Algeria.

We hope this edition offers clarity, perspective, and a deeper understanding of the issues shaping our world.

Enjoy Reading!

The Uncensored Watch Team



SECTION-2

Global Crisis in Focus

India: New Draft Rules Raising Concerns Over Online Censorship Expansion

The Indian government is under renewed scrutiny following the introduction of draft amendments to its digital governance framework, which critics say could significantly deepen online censorship and erode user rights. [Human Rights Watch](#) has urged authorities to withdraw the proposed changes, warning that they would expand executive control over online content while weakening safeguards for privacy and free expression. At the heart of the proposal is a controversial expansion of regulatory scope. The draft rules would categorize ordinary social media users, particularly those engaging with news and current affairs, as equivalent to digital publishers. This would require individuals to adhere to the same “Code of Ethics” as formal media entities and establish structured grievance redress systems. Observers caution that imposing such obligations on everyday users could deter public participation in political discourse and foster widespread self-censorship.

These proposals build on a pattern of regulatory tightening in recent years. Since 2021, the government has repeatedly [revised the rules](#), each time broadening its authority over digital platforms and content moderation. While officials frame these changes as efforts to curb misinformation and harmful speech, rights organizations argue that they have often been used to silence dissent and restrict criticism of those in power. Existing legal provisions already grant the government significant powers to restrict online content. Under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, authorities can order platforms to block material deemed unlawful. However, these orders are frequently issued without public disclosure, leaving users unaware of the reasons behind content removal and without avenues for appeal. Reports from major platforms indicate a sharp rise in takedown requests, many targeting political criticism, satire, and opposition voices.

In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court introduced procedural safeguards to limit arbitrary censorship, including requirements for written justification, user notification, and independent review. Yet, rather than reinforcing these protections, subsequent policy changes appear to have circumvented them. For example, in 2023, the government sought to [set up a fact-checking mechanism](#) that would determine whether content about the state was false or misleading. This move raised serious concerns about the concentration of authority over defining truth. The measure was later halted when the [Supreme Court suspended its implementation](#), citing risks to freedom of expression. Additional amendments have further consolidated state influence. A centralized digital portal now facilitates content takedown requests from multiple government bodies, streamlining the process but reducing transparency and oversight. More recently, the deadline for platforms to remove allegedly unlawful content was cut from 36 hours to just 3 hours, increasing pressure on companies to act swiftly, often at the expense of careful review.

The latest draft rules go even further by requiring intermediaries to comply not only with formal legal orders but also with a broad array of executive-issued directives, including advisories, guidelines, and codes of practice. Compliance with these instruments would become necessary to retain legal protections under the law, effectively expanding the government's ability to shape online discourse without legislative scrutiny. The proposals also introduce an executive-led "Inter-Departmental Committee" with the authority to evaluate flagged content and recommend actions ranging from corrections or apologies to removal. Critics warn that this body could function as a centralized censorship mechanism, lacking independence and adequate procedural safeguards.

Human Rights Watch emphasizes that these developments place digital platforms in a precarious position. Faced with the threat of losing legal immunity or market access, companies may choose to over-comply with government demands, leading to the suppression of lawful and legitimate expression.

Taken together, these developments suggest a gradual consolidation of control over India's digital space, with expanding executive powers and increasing regulatory pressure on both platforms and users. This shift raises serious human rights concerns, particularly around freedom of expression, access to information, and due process in content regulation. While states may seek to address harmful online content, doing so without strong transparency, independent oversight, and judicial safeguards risks narrowing civic space and weakening the foundations of open democratic discourse.



Photo by Walter O on Unsplash

ADF-Linked Extremist Violence Leaves Dozens Dead in Eastern DR Congo

Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has once again been hit by deadly violence attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a rebel group aligned with ISIL, after an attack in Ituri province left [at least 43 civilians dead](#). The assault targeted Bafwako village in Mambasa territory, where armed attackers also burned dozens of homes and caused widespread destruction, according to military officials. Local authorities said the violence unfolded in a highly brutal manner, with residents reportedly killed inside their homes, some attacked with machetes, while others died in fires set during the raid. At least two people were abducted, and search operations are still underway, raising fears that the final toll could increase. The Congolese army has attributed the attack to the ADF, a long-standing armed group originally formed from Ugandan insurgents that later pledged allegiance to ISIL. Despite repeated joint military operations by Congolese and Ugandan forces since 2021, the group continues to carry out attacks across remote parts of Ituri and neighbouring North Kivu.

Officials say the ADF tends to avoid direct battlefield confrontation and instead [targets isolated civilian communities](#), a pattern that has repeatedly resulted in mass killings and abductions. Security forces describe these tactics as attempts to spread fear and destabilise local populations while evading military pressure. The latest attack comes amid a wider escalation of armed conflict in eastern Congo, where multiple rebel groups operate simultaneously, including the Rwanda-backed M23 movement, which has taken control of key urban centres in recent years. The overlapping presence of these armed actors has made civilian protection increasingly difficult in the region. Independent monitoring organisations have previously reported that the ADF is responsible for a significant proportion of violence against civilians in eastern Congo, underscoring its sustained capacity to inflict harm despite ongoing counterinsurgency efforts.



Photo by Shashi Yadav on Unsplash

This attack reflects the continuing impact of armed extremist violence on civilian populations in eastern DR Congo, where non-state armed groups operate with limited restraint. The targeting of homes and non-combatants raises serious concerns under international humanitarian law, particularly the protection of civilians in conflict zones. It also underscores the need for more effective protection strategies beyond military operations, including community-level security and accountability mechanisms to prevent recurring atrocities.

Burkina Faso: Traore's Rejection of Democracy Deepens Authoritarian Concerns

Burkina Faso's military ruler, Captain Ibrahim Traore, has [openly dismissed democracy](#) as unsuitable for his country, signaling a deeper shift away from constitutional rule. In a televised interview, he argued that democratic systems imposed from outside have brought instability rather than progress, pointing to Libya as an example of a state where attempts at democratic transition ended in violence. His remarks come only months after his government [dissolved political parties](#) across the country, further tightening military control over public life. Since taking power in a coup in 2022, Traore had initially pledged to return the country to civilian rule through elections, but later withdrew that promise, saying voting could not take place until national security improved.

Under military rule, several democratic institutions have gradually been dismantled. Political activity had already been suspended, and the national electoral commission was later abolished after authorities claimed it placed an unnecessary financial burden on the state. Critics say these steps have steadily weakened the country's remaining democratic framework. Concerns have also grown over pressure on independent voices. Journalists, opposition figures, lawyers, and prosecutors who questioned the military government have reportedly faced intimidation, with some forcibly sent to conflict zones under military mobilisation measures before later being released. Rights observers warn that such actions are creating a climate of fear around political dissent.

Traore's government came to power promising stronger action against [armed groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIL](#) that continue to operate across large parts of Burkina Faso. Yet insecurity has continued to worsen, and attacks by both armed groups and pro-government forces have left thousands dead while forcing large numbers of civilians from their homes. Burkina Faso has also moved politically closer to neighbouring military-led governments in Mali and Niger. The three countries have distanced themselves from regional institutions and strengthened security ties outside traditional partnerships, reflecting a broader political realignment in the Sahel. Traore's rejection of democracy reflects more than political rhetoric; it signals a deeper erosion of civic freedoms in Burkina Faso. When security is used to justify silencing opposition and dismantling institutions, the space for public accountability begins to disappear. In the long term, stability built without rights and participation can leave societies even more fragile.



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Nigeria: Courts Sentence Hundreds Over Alleged Militant Ties

Nigerian courts have convicted nearly 400 individuals for alleged ties to armed Islamist groups following a series of large-scale trials. Those sentenced received prison terms ranging from five years to life, after being accused of involvement with Boko Haram or its splinter faction, Islamic State West Africa Province. The charges included direct participation in attacks as well as providing financial, logistical, or material support.

The trials took place amid mounting pressure on authorities in Nigeria to address worsening insecurity. The country continues to face multiple threats, including insurgent violence, separatist movements, and widespread kidnapping-for-ransom networks. Since launching its insurgency in 2009, [Boko Haram has been responsible for tens of thousands of deaths](#) and the displacement of millions, particularly in the country's northeast. According to officials, more than 500 suspects were brought before the Federal High Court in Abuja. Of these, 386 were convicted, while a small number were acquitted or discharged, and over 100 cases were postponed. Some defendants reportedly admitted guilt, including involvement in activities such as supplying [food, livestock, or information to armed groups](#).



Photo by Emmanuel Ikwegbu on Unsplash

The mass trials come at a time of heightened international concern over security conditions in Nigeria. The United States Government recently advised its citizens to avoid traveling to the country due to rising violence. Meanwhile, external military actions have also drawn attention, including reported [airstrikes targeting militant groups in northern regions](#). Authorities in Nigeria have rejected claims that violence is driven by religious persecution, stating that victims include people of all faiths and backgrounds. Nonetheless, the scale of the trials and convictions highlights the government's intensified efforts to counter insurgency and restore stability.

Holding individuals accountable for involvement in armed groups is a legitimate and necessary step for any state facing serious security threats. In a context where violent insurgencies have caused widespread loss of life and displacement, prosecutions can play an important role in justice and public safety. At the same time, these efforts must fully respect due process and fair trial guarantees, including individual assessment of evidence, access to legal defence, and transparent proceedings. Upholding these standards is essential not only to protect human rights, but also to ensure that counterterrorism measures are credible, lawful, and effective in the long term.

United States: Concerns Over Judicial Independence After Dismissal of Immigration Judges in Deportation Cases

In the United States, two immigration judges have been dismissed by the Department of Justice after ruling against government efforts to deport pro-Palestinian university students. The removals were part of a [broader dismissal of six judges](#), including Roopal Patel and Nina Froes, who had handled cases involving students such as Rümeyşa Öztürk and Mohsen Mahdawi. The cases in question were linked to pro-Palestinian activism during campus protests related to the Gaza conflict. In their rulings, the judges found that the government had not met the necessary legal grounds for deportation and either halted or rejected the proceedings. Roopal Patel said she did not view her dismissal as connected to any single decision, but suggested it reflected a wider effort to alter the immigration judiciary. It was noted that judges with prior experience representing immigrants appeared to be increasingly affected by recent administrative changes in staffing.

Both [Patel and Froes were designated in 2024](#) and had backgrounds in immigration defence work. Reports have suggested that judges with similar professional histories may now be under greater scrutiny within the system. In one case, Patel terminated deportation proceedings after concluding that the government had not provided sufficient evidence. Froes also blocked the removal of a student activist during related immigration hearings. Patel described increasing pressure on immigration judges to resolve cases more quickly despite the serious consequences involved. [The Department of Justice](#) stated that immigration judges are regularly evaluated on conduct, impartiality, performance, and adherence to legal standards, and that action may be taken if bias is identified in order to maintain the integrity of the system. However, concerns have been raised that removing judges with experience in immigrant defence could reduce expertise within immigration courts. Critics warn this may increase the likelihood of errors and weaken fairness in deportation proceedings, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Patel also cautioned that a combination of faster case timelines and fewer experienced judges could narrow space for due process and increase the risk of flawed decisions in immigration rulings.

This case raises serious concerns about judicial independence in immigration proceedings, particularly where decisions intersect with politically sensitive issues. The dismissal of judges after rulings that go against government deportation efforts can create perceptions that legal institutions are being shaped by political priorities rather than impartial application of law. In systems where immigration decisions carry severe human consequences, any weakening of judicial independence risks undermining due process and fairness. Over time, such patterns can contribute to the erosion of trust in legal institutions and raise broader concerns about the politicisation of the justice system, where courts are seen as less insulated from executive influence than they should be.



Photo by ALEJANDRO POHLENZ on Unsplash

Russia: Heavy Prison Sentences for Young Anti-War Activists Spark Rights Concerns

Russian authorities have sentenced six young activists linked to the youth democratic movement *Vesna (Spring)* to lengthy prison terms following convictions that rights groups say are politically motivated. The case has drawn strong criticism from Amnesty International, which has called for their immediate and unconditional release. According to Amnesty International's Eastern Europe and Central Asia Director [Marie Struthers](#), the verdict reflects a justice system being used to punish dissent rather than uphold fairness. She said the charges against the activists were widely seen as unsubstantiated and based on weak evidence, arguing that the case should not have proceeded to conviction. Instead, she described the outcome as a punishment for peaceful political expression and anti-war activism, particularly opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine.

The activists were accused of involvement in an "extremist community" and other offences, including spreading so-called false information about the Russian armed forces, showing disrespect toward national military commemorations, calling for actions seen as threatening state security, and inciting mass unrest. These allegations were largely linked to their social media activity and public statements critical of the war. On 8 April 2026, the St. Petersburg City Court issued sentences ranging from more than six years to twelve years in prison. The harshest sentence, 12 years, was given to Anna Arkhipova, while others received between 6 and 11 years. In addition to prison terms, the court imposed restrictions after release, including bans on public participation and online expression.

The [six activists had been detained in June 2023](#) in different cities across Russia before being transferred to Moscow and held in pre-trial detention. One of the defendants, Valentin Khoroshenin, admitted guilt and testified against the others. At least 15 additional individuals linked to *Vesna* are reportedly outside Russia and are currently on wanted lists. Amnesty International has identified several of the convicted activists as prisoners of conscience, stating they are being punished solely for exercising their rights to free expression and peaceful activism. The organization has urged Russian authorities to overturn the convictions, release all defendants, and stop using criminal laws to silence political opposition.

This case highlights growing concerns over shrinking civic space and the criminalisation of peaceful dissent in Russia. The use of broad security and extremism charges against anti-war activists raises serious questions about freedom of expression, fair trial standards, and proportionality in sentencing. When political speech and activism are treated as criminal offences, it undermines fundamental human rights protections and weakens trust in the independence of the judiciary. The severity of the sentences also reflects a broader environment where opposition voices face significant legal and personal risks for expressing dissenting views.



Photo by Ye Jinghan on Unsplash

Kazakhstan: Criminal Case Against Feminist Activist Raises Concerns Over Retaliation Against LGBT Rights Work

Following an incident in Astana, Kazakh authorities have brought criminal battery charges against feminist activist Zhanar Sekerbayeva, in a case that rights groups say is being used to penalize her LGBT rights advocacy. [Human Rights Watch reports](#) that the case appears to be linked to her long-standing activism rather than the café altercation itself, and has called for all charges to be dropped. The charges followed a November 2025 café incident in Astana where a group reportedly confronted Sekerbayeva and other feminist and queer activists. The group allegedly harassed them with [insults, filmed them without permission](#), and acted aggressively. Both Sekerbayeva and another activist, Temirlan Baimash, later filed complaints with police, alongside one of the individuals involved in the confrontation.

However, human rights groups say the subsequent police investigation has focused disproportionately on Sekerbayeva's alleged role, while largely ignoring complaints made by her side. They argue that authorities have failed to take action against those accused of initiating the disruption, raising concerns about selective investigation and fairness. Sekerbayeva, a co-founder of the feminist initiative Feminita and a well-known LGBT rights advocate, has previously faced harassment, threats, and detentions linked to her peaceful activism. She has argued that the current case is politically motivated and intended as retaliation for her work



promoting equality and non-discrimination. Her co-activist Baimash has also reported that police dismissed complaints from those targeted in the café incident and instead treated him in a hostile manner during questioning.

The broader environment for LGBT activism in Kazakhstan has become increasingly restrictive. A new law banning so-called “propaganda” of [non-traditional sexual orientation](#) was adopted in late 2025 and came into force in 2026. Rights groups say this legislation has contributed to rising risks for activists, increasing vulnerability to harassment, surveillance, and legal action. Human rights groups say Kazakhstan is obliged under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to protect core rights, freedom of expression, association, fair process, and equality.

This incident highlights serious human rights concerns around the protection of human rights defenders, equality before the law, and freedom of expression. The criminal charges against a prominent LGBT rights activist, combined with allegations of a biased investigation, suggest possible selective enforcement of the law. When state institutions fail to properly investigate violence against activists while pursuing charges against them, it undermines due process and creates a chilling effect on peaceful advocacy. In the broader context of restrictive legislation targeting LGBT expression, this case highlights growing risks to civic space and non-discrimination protections in Kazakhstan.

Thailand: Defamation Cases Against Journalists Raise Press Freedom Concerns

Two journalists face criminal defamation cases after reporting on alleged corruption involving labour trafficking and bribery, filed by a Thai minister, raising concerns about growing pressure on media freedom in the country. On 27 February 2026, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Suchart Chomklin brought a case against Hathairat Phaholtap, editor-in-chief of the Isaan Record, over social media posts referencing an [investigative report](#) published by the outlet. The report had alleged that political figures were linked to the exploitation of Thai berry pickers sent to Finland and had received payments from recruitment intermediaries. Another editor later faced a second defamation complaint, accused of amplifying Hathairat's posts. Both cases are based on criminal defamation laws and seek millions in compensation.

The minister argues that the posts could be interpreted as referring to him personally. However, the journalists maintain that their reporting was based on broader allegations of corruption and labour abuse that are matters of public concern. Rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, say the legal action appears retaliatory and fits into a wider pattern of using defamation laws to target journalists. They warn that such cases can discourage reporting on sensitive issues involving powerful figures and restrict public access to information. Earlier developments in the same broader case include a complaint filed by the minister with a [corruption court against senior officials](#), linked to alleged misconduct in investigations into labour recruitment schemes between 2020 and 2023. Anti-corruption authorities are still reviewing aspects of the case involving state officials and brokerage companies.

On April 1, Thailand's National Human Rights Commission warned that lawsuits increasingly being used to suppress public participation, known as SLAPP cases, are threatening journalists, activists, and others reporting in the public interest, and urged the government to introduce dedicated anti-SLAPP legislation, pointing to defamation cases against Isaan Record journalists as an example. While Thailand previously endorsed international recommendations during its 2021 UN human rights review to strengthen free expression and address abusive litigation, rights groups say these commitments have not been meaningfully implemented. They add that activists and whistleblowers continue to face retaliation from both state and private actors, with limited legal protection, weakening oversight of corruption and misconduct. [Human rights advocates argue](#) that such legal actions are often used to deter scrutiny of powerful institutions, undermining constitutional and international guarantees of free expression, while calls continue for stronger safeguards ahead of Thailand's upcoming UN review.

This news reflects growing concern over legal pressure on journalists reporting on corruption. From a human rights perspective, it undermines freedom of expression and media independence. Stronger anti-SLAPP laws and clearer safeguards for investigative reporting are needed to protect journalists and ensure accountability.



Photo by Markus Winkler on Unsplash

Terrorism in KP: Police Wounded in Suspected TTP-Linked Attack in Lakki Marwat

Five police personnel, including an assistant sub-inspector, were injured when an IED exploded in [Shahbazkhel area of Lakki Marwat](#) in April. The blast occurred along the Bannu–Dera Ismail Khan stretch of the Peshawar–Karachi highway while a police patrol was on duty. Police attributed the attack to militants the state describes as [“Fitna-al-Khawarij](#), a label used for banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). An IED attached to a roadside motorcycle detonated as the patrol passed, damaging the vehicle and triggering a loud blast heard across the area. The injured officers were shifted to a district hospital, while security forces cordoned off the area and launched a search operation. Senior police officials, along with CTD and bomb disposal teams, inspected the site, collected evidence, and ordered intensified efforts to trace the attackers.

The incident is part of a rise in attacks on security forces across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Data from the [Centre for Research and Security Studies’ 2025 report](#) shows a sharp escalation in violence in the province, with fatalities rising from 1,620 in 2024 to 2,331 in 2025. This case reflects the growing threat posed by extremist and terrorist violence in the region, which continues to endanger both security personnel and civilians. From a human rights lens, such attacks directly undermine the right to life and safety and highlight the need for stronger protection mechanisms in affected areas. At the same time, addressing extremism requires not only security responses but also long-term prevention strategies that reduce radicalisation and strengthen community resilience.



Photo by Matt Hearne on Unsplash

Uganda: Rights Groups Challenge Externalised US Deportations Over Due Process and Human Rights Concern

The transfer of a group of [deportees from the United States to Uganda](#) has triggered legal action in the country, as professional legal bodies seek to halt what they describe as an unlawful system of cross-border removals carried out under a “third-country” arrangement linked to the Trump administration. The Uganda Law Society and the East Africa Law Society argue that the practice undermines basic legal protections and treats affected individuals in a degrading manner. At the centre of their challenge is a broader concern that migration enforcement is increasingly being shifted beyond national borders. According to the groups, this approach allows states to relocate individuals to countries with which they have no meaningful connection, a practice they characterise as “transnational repression.” Reports indicate that the individuals in question were flown into Uganda via a private aircraft and arrived at Entebbe International Airport, with no public disclosure of their identities or legal status.

Rather than isolated transfers, critics say the arrangement reflects an expanding system of third-country deportations under US immigration policy. Several African states have reportedly been involved in similar agreements. In some cases, these arrangements have included financial

components, though the overall scale and structure of such incentives remain unclear. Ugandan authorities have previously described the arrangement as temporary and outlined limited categories of individuals excluded from transfer, such as unaccompanied minors and people with criminal records. However, legal groups argue that essential information about how the system operates, including safeguards and oversight mechanisms, has not been made public. Concerns surrounding the policy are also linked to conditions in destination countries. Uganda has faced repeated international scrutiny over allegations involving restrictions on civic space, detention practices, and reports of serious abuses. At the same time, it hosts a large population of refugees, which adds pressure to existing protection systems and raises questions about capacity and safeguards for additional arrivals.

Legal experts further warn that such practices may gradually normalise the movement of individuals into jurisdictions where legal protections are uneven or difficult to enforce. They point to ongoing concerns about whether procedural fairness is adequately maintained when deportations occur through intergovernmental arrangements rather than transparent judicial processes. The policy has also been contested within the United States, where courts have examined whether removals to third countries meet [constitutional standards of due process](#). While US authorities defend the practice as legally permissible and based on diplomatic assurances from receiving states, critics argue that these assurances are difficult to independently verify. Ugandan legal organisations are now seeking judicial intervention, cautioning that continued reliance on such arrangements could expand externalised deportation systems without sufficient legal oversight, transparency, or accountability.

This shows a growing trend of states outsourcing migration enforcement in ways that reduce transparency and weaken accountability. While immigration control is a state prerogative, transferring individuals to third countries without clear safeguards raises serious concerns about due process and protection standards. It can also place people in uncertain legal and humanitarian conditions with limited avenues for redress. Overall, it underscores the need for stronger oversight to ensure migration policies remain aligned with basic human rights obligations.



Russia: Memorial Ban Signals Deepening Authoritarian Crackdown on Civil Society

Russian authorities have officially branded the prominent rights organisation [Memorial as an “extremist” group](#), effectively outlawing its activities and exposing anyone associated with it to severe legal penalties. The ruling, issued by the Supreme Court in April 2026, marks a significant escalation in efforts to restrict independent human rights work in the country. Memorial, long regarded as one of Russia’s most respected civil society organisations, has played a central role in documenting political repression, both from the Soviet era and in contemporary Russia. Its work has included tracking political prisoners and recording abuses of power, efforts that earned it international recognition, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

The legal proceedings leading to the ban were widely criticised for lacking transparency. The case was heard behind closed doors, with documents classified and defence lawyers reportedly excluded from participating. Russian authorities justified the decision by accusing the organisation of undermining state authority and promoting narratives deemed hostile to national interests. They also objected to Memorial’s classification of certain detainees as political prisoners. Under Russia’s laws, involvement in an organisation labelled “extremist” can lead to lengthy [prison sentences](#), while even symbolic association, such as displaying logos, can result in detention or prosecution. Individuals suspected of links to such groups may also face financial restrictions, including frozen bank accounts.

This move builds on earlier actions against Memorial and similar organisations. In recent years, authorities have dismantled key branches of the group, declared members as [“foreign agents”](#) and expanded the use of restrictive legislation to curb civil society. Other international and domestic human rights organisations have also been banned or forced to cease operations under similar measures. Critics, including United Nations experts, have described the decision as part of a broader strategy to silence dissent and limit access to independent information. They warn that such actions are designed to create fear and restrict the ability of organisations to monitor abuses or provide legal support.

The designation of Memorial as “extremist” reflects a wider pattern of shrinking civic space, where independent voices are increasingly treated as threats rather than contributors to public life. When documenting human rights abuses becomes criminalised, it not only silences organisations but also isolates victims who rely on them for visibility and support. Over time, this environment risks normalising repression and weakening the foundations of accountability and justice.

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Bahrain: Death in Custody Raises Serious Allegations of Torture, Enforced Disappearance, and Impunity

A 32-year-old Bahraini man, Sayed Mohamed Almosawi, who was forcibly disappeared on March 19, 2026, later died while in state custody, with his body showing visible signs consistent with severe physical abuse, according to [Human Rights Watch](#) and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD). Authorities later confirmed that he had been detained by the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), but did not initially disclose his whereabouts. Medical experts who reviewed photographic evidence of his body concluded that the injuries were consistent with repeated blunt force trauma over time, including targeted injuries to multiple parts of the body. The assessment reportedly ruled out accidental injury and natural causes such as cardiac arrest, instead indicating patterns commonly associated with torture in controlled detention settings.

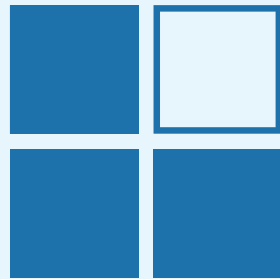
Almosawi had previously been a political prisoner and was last seen in the early hours of March 19, shortly before communication with him was abruptly cut off. His whereabouts remained unknown for several days, raising serious concerns about enforced disappearance. Under international human rights law, the denial of information about a detainee's location and status by state authorities may constitute enforced disappearance, particularly when followed by death in custody. Authorities later claimed that he had been brought to a hospital after suffering a heart attack. However, witnesses who viewed the body reported extensive bruising, deep wounds, and widespread discoloration inconsistent with natural death. Questions were also raised about inconsistencies in the official timeline of death and the absence of clear medical evidence supporting resuscitation efforts.

Following his death, the Interior Ministry stated that he had been detained on allegations of espionage. Rights groups have emphasized that, even if such allegations were made, detainees are protected under international law from torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killing, and must be held with full legal safeguards and transparency. Human rights organizations argue that the case reflects serious violations, including possible enforced disappearance, torture, and unlawful death in custody. They have called for an immediate, independent, and transparent investigation with public disclosure of findings and accountability for those responsible. The case comes amid broader concerns about shrinking civic space in Bahrain, with documented [increases in arrests](#) and repression linked to peaceful expression and online activity. Rights groups warn that such patterns indicate an ongoing climate of impunity and weakened protection for fundamental rights.

This incident raises serious concerns under international human rights law, especially the absolute ban on torture, the right to life, and protections against enforced disappearance. The reported incommunicado detention, signs of severe physical abuse, and death while in custody point to deep gaps in accountability within detention practices. Without a genuinely independent investigation and enforcement of legal obligations, there is a real risk that such incidents will go unaddressed, allowing a sense of impunity to persist and further weakening trust in the justice system and human rights protections in Bahrain.



Photo by the blowup on Unsplash



SECTION-3

Multimedia Update: Voices Against Authoritarianism

Research Presented at the Toronto Democracy Forum

We are pleased to announce the publication of research presented at the Toronto Democracy Forum under WAEN's Call for Abstracts on "Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism." Scholars from South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Uyghur diaspora contributed original research examining how communities respond to authoritarianism and radicalism.

Below, we highlight two research papers from the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025: one explores non-violent digital resistance to authoritarianism in Pakistan, while the other examines Sufi waqfs as institutions of peacebuilding in Algeria.

Symbolic Dissent in the Digital Age: Multimodal Resistance to Authoritarianism in Pakistan by Waqasia Naeem

In a context where increasing state control in Pakistan, through media censorship, legal surveillance, and restrictions on dissent has narrowed traditional spaces for political expression, social networking sites have emerged as alternative arenas for civic engagement. In this paper, Dr. Waqasia Naeem explores how platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram are used by youth, activists, and journalists to resist authoritarianism through non-violent, creative digital practices.

Grounded in Digital Resistance Theory, the study examines how memes, hashtags, satire, and citizen journalism are used to challenge power structures and build counter-narratives, particularly during events such as political arrests, internet shutdowns, and digital crackdowns. It also highlights how platform features like anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification reshape how dissent is produced and circulated. The paper further notes the growing influence of AI in shaping online discourse, underscoring the need for updated frameworks to understand civic resistance in rapidly evolving digital environments.

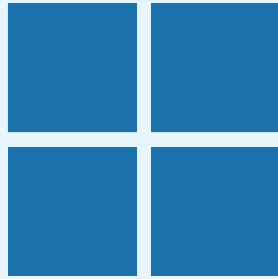
To explore more about this paper, read our latest publication on the [website](#) by Dr. Waqasia Naeem, Associate Professor, Minhaj University Lahore, presented at the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025.

Sufi Waqf as Non-Violent Structure of Resistance and Peacebuilding: The Case of Sufi Communities in Algeria by Mustapha Radji

Can deeply rooted spiritual institutions serve as quiet yet powerful forces of resistance? In this paper, Mustapha Radji examines how Sufi waqfs, particularly within the Alawiyya Sufi order in Algeria, have long functioned as stabilizing community institutions that mediate authority and social life. Beyond their spiritual role, these waqfs emerge as enduring mechanisms of non-violent resistance and peacebuilding across shifting political landscapes. Radji argues that with clearer legal frameworks and stronger protections, waqfs could play an even more significant role in countering both authoritarianism and violent extremism.

Grounded in historical evidence and policy insight, the paper offers a compelling case for recognizing indigenous civic institutions as vital actors in sustaining pluralism.

To learn more about how traditional institutions can foster non-violent civic engagement, read our latest publication on the [website](#) by Mustapha Radji, Professor of Sociology of Development, University of Mostaganem, presented at the Toronto Democracy Forum 2025.



SECTION-4

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