

2023-2025 “Super Election” Cycle and the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association worldwide

The “super election” cycle witnessed widespread and increased restrictions and repression of civic freedoms and political participation, often, within a broader strategy to restrict civic space and stifle democratic debate.

Relation between the rights to FoAA and elections

The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (FoAA) are fundamental to democratic participation and credible elections. These rights enable citizens to organize, advocate, and engage politically. Legal restrictions during elections must meet strict criteria of necessity and proportionality. Governments should ensure FoAA protections throughout the electoral cycle and avoid using emergency powers to suppress democratic engagement.

Civil society organizations promote electoral integrity by supporting pluralistic public debates, promoting legal reforms, promoting voting rights, educating voters, monitoring elections, advocating for inclusion and preventing electoral violence by defuse tensions, promoting dialogue and non-violent engagement and countering mis/dis information and hate speech.

Peaceful protests amplify public voices, challenge repression, and influence political change. Assemblies during elections have historically led to legal reforms and broader political inclusion, particularly among youth and marginalized groups. Assemblies in elections have pushed against autocracy, encouraged the emergence of more democratic political parties and leaders, increased people representation, defended democratic freedoms and election integrity and brought social justice issues to the forefront.

Restrictions on FoAA during the ‘super elections’ cycle

Across regions, states weaponized laws and disinformation to restrict **civil society**. “Foreign agent” and anti-extremism laws were used to silence dissent and reduce oversight, intrusive controls, stigmatizing organizations, and limiting their work through vague definitions of ‘political activity’. Observers and NGOs faced bans, threats, and violence, eroding electoral transparency and public trust.

Opposition **political parties** endured excessive control over party procedures (registration, candidate approvals, membership verification), legal and financial barriers and severe repression (disqualifications, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture and ill treatment, and extrajudicial killings of candidates). Acts of repression against dissidents and lack of due process and protection instill an atmosphere of fear severely inhibiting public freedoms and political pluralism.

The 'super electoral' cycle saw widespread global protests before and after elections. In response, many governments curtailed the **right to assemble** through administrative restrictions, arbitrary arrests (in cases with torture), and excessive force. In some countries opposition parties' assemblies were intentionally disrupted, including through general bans. In some cases, government-aligned armed civilians were involved in suppressing protests, in other cases agents provocateurs were used to incite violence.

Women remain underrepresented due to financial, structural, and **gender-based barriers**, including online abuse. Gender quotas often lack enforcement. The **LGBTI community** faces increasing hostility, with laws restricting their expression and participation, and digital attacks rising during elections.

Elections in Repressive and Coercive Environments

In countries like Venezuela, Bangladesh, and Belarus, elections occurred under severe repression, repression reached the level of crimes against humanity. In Cuba, voters did not have a real choice. Total control over civic space undermined pluralism and violated international standards. Emergency powers, such as in El Salvador, further eroded electoral legitimacy

Prevention, De-escalation and Accountability

Authorities must prioritize peaceful engagement, legal protection for rights, and independent monitoring. Escalating repression fuels post-election violence and democratic breakdowns. Impunity for abuses weakens trust; accountability, justice, and reparations are essential for long-term stability.

Use of Digital Technologies

The use of Biometric voter registration raised concerns about voter suppression, data misuse, and political targeting. Surveillance technologies, like facial recognition and spyware, were used against activists and opposition, enabling discriminatory mass surveillance and political repression. to manipulate participation, monitor dissent, and intimidate opposition. Regulatory gaps threaten rights before, during, and after elections, calling for stricter human rights-based controls to ensure transparency, accountability, and protection from abuse.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The super election cycle revealed growing threats to FoAA and democratic space. New administrations often continued restrictive measures. To preserve democratic integrity:

- States must uphold FoAA across the electoral cycle and support inclusive participation.
- Emergency powers and military involvement should be limited.
- Digital surveillance must be regulated under human rights frameworks.
- Repressive laws must be repealed to protect civil society and political actors.
- Full-cycle accountability, including post-election justice, is essential.
- Political parties should respect voters and promote inclusivity.
- The international community must monitor trends, support grassroots actors, and combat the misuse of digital and crowd-control technologies.

1. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5944-impact-2023-2025-super-election-cycle-rights-freedom-peaceful>

2. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Toolkit-law-enforcement-Component-on-Digital-Technologies.pdf>