

[Tackling the democratic recession](#)

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Worldwide we are simultaneously witnessing a democratic recession on the part of governments and an increasing appetite for democracy on the part of ordinary people. We must respond with an increased commitment to the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression, writes UN expert Maina Kiai.



By Maina Kiai, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association

(Nairobi, Kenya) - It is still too early to tell just how 2014 will be remembered from the perspective of assembly and association rights: The year of the protest; the year of the revolution; the year of shrinking space. But one thing is certain: It will be a year that we remember.

Hong Kong, Ukraine, Taiwan, Egypt, Thailand, Venezuela, Burkina Faso, Mexico and Cambodia and other countries saw massive protests, with at least three movements leading to the downfall of governments. Draconian laws affecting the assembly and association rights of LGBTI individuals went into effect in Nigeria and Uganda. Leading human rights defenders from Bahrain, Azerbaijan, China, Burundi, Ethiopia, Sudan, Malaysia, and elsewhere experienced a wave of harassment, threats and violence. The Hungarian prime minister famously said that he wanted to turn his country into an 'illiberal state'. And Egypt used mass trials to sentence over a 1,000 people to death for on charges related to events leading up to President Mohammed Morsi's ouster.

Our grandchildren and their children will read about the events of 2014 in school one day. It remains to be seen what they learn.

We are at a decisive moment in history, a period which Larry Diamond has described as being marked by a 'democratic recession'. Governments are growing more repressive. Space to exercise the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association is shrinking. This is not a phenomenon specifically linked to one country or region; it is a worldwide trend.

But the fact that we are in a democratic recession does not mean that ordinary people's appetite for democracy has receded. In fact, I believe that it has been growing.

People today are more connected, more informed of their rights, and probably more emboldened to seize those

rights than at any time in history. They have a vision for the world that they live in, and they want to take control of it. Assembly and association rights offer people the promise of this kind of control, and they offer it in a peaceful manner. The lure of this promise is what has inspired the courage, commitment and creativity of countless human rights defenders throughout the world today.

But this promise has also caused regression. The democratic recession is happening because some governments fear the prospect of an empowered, informed populace.

They react with repression, whether through the imprisonment of human rights defenders, the passage of restrictive laws or the suppression of peaceful protests. This type of repression is nothing new, but what disturbs me most is the language that its proponents use to rationalize it. There is a growing consensus among these States, it seems, that assembly and association rights are dangerous – that they cause chaos.

I would argue precisely the opposite: That the suppression of these rights is what is dangerous. Taking them away brings chaos. The elimination of space for peaceful civic engagement inevitably stunts the growth of any political system. It criminalizes legitimate dissent and pushes it underground, where it can mutate, fester and turn violent. It also leaves a power vacuum if and when a government is deposed.

It is not a coincidence that shrinking space for peaceful civil society has been accompanied by a rise in extremism and violence across the world. Islamic State militants have taken over large swaths of Iraq and Syria. Chaos reigns in the parts of eastern Ukraine that are gripped by a separatist movement. Libya is now essentially a failed state.

We must not buy into this rhetoric of fear. The rights to peaceful assembly and of association do not inherently encourage extremism, chaos, or violence. They are, in fact, the best antidotes we have against all of these ills.

This is the principle that should guide us in the coming year, and ultimately dissipate our fear. And this is the overarching lesson of 2014 that I hope my grandchildren, and theirs as well, will read about far into the future.

Maina Kiai is the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association. Follow him on Twitter at https://twitter.com/MainaKiai_UNSR.

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