

[HRC35 | Civil society reiterates importance of freedom of peaceful assembly and association](#)

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During her first-ever report to the Human Rights Council, the new Special Rapporteur on freedom of assembly and association, Annalisa Ciampi, held an interactive dialogue with the Council members and observers. In the margins of the session, she also engaged in consultations with civil society to hear about priorities and expectations.

Freedom of peaceful assembly and association: a critical right for civil society

Representatives of civil society organisations from around the world, including participants in ISHR's Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme (HRDAP), met with the Special Rapporteur on the margins of the Human Rights Council and expressed concern over closing space for freedom of assembly and association.

Participants from 10 countries around the globe, including Ecuador, Fiji, India, Nigeria and Russia, raised specific issues with the Special Rapporteur. Human rights defenders described how indigenous communities, particularly those opposing extractive industries, are prevented from exercising their right to freedom of assembly. Participants also explained how counter-terrorism laws and laws imposing restrictions on foreign funding continue to pose a threat to freedom of association. They highlighted a worrisome global narrative of civil society organisations as 'adversarial to State interests'.

'The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of assembly and association plays a distinct role in preventing the rollback of the space available to civil society,' said Helen Nolan, Training and advocacy support manager and Special Procedures focal point at ISHR.

'Where these basic freedoms are protected, human rights defenders can do their work effectively to advance important issues – sustainability, inclusion, democracy', Nolan said.

Special Rapporteur Annalisa Ciampi steps into her role

In her [statement](#) to the 35th session of the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur stated that 'the beneficiaries [of the mandate] are, must, and should be the people... NGOs, religious associations, political parties, trade unions, social movements, professional associations.'

Special Rapporteur Ciampi noted that, while there are a few limitations of these rights permitted by international law, 'the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, together with the freedom of expression, rest at the core of any functioning democratic system'.

The European Union, Tunisia, Malaysia, Mexico, Albania and the United States of America were amongst the States welcoming the new Special Rapporteur.

However, several States did not acknowledge the new mandate holder, or expressed concern over civil society coming in conflict with domestic laws. Russia suggested that civil society should not be critical, but rather 'unbiased, objective, and factual.' Russia, China, Venezuela, and South Africa all expressed concern over foreign influences 'distorting the messages' of civil society organisations.

The Special Rapporteur also highlighted the importance of peaceful assemblies; of association rights applying in the context of political parties and elections; and indicated an interest in following up on freedom of association in multilateral forums.

Responding to States' requests about how to support, she was clear: 'Please, do answer my Communications. Do answer my letters. Do engage with the mandate... and of course, respect and implement the standards that are already there'.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Special Rapporteur thanked all stakeholders - States concerned, other States and non-governmental groups - for their engagement. She, however, noted that the main source of shrinking civil society space is States themselves, and thus urged States to cease taking measures to restrict that space.

Civil society calls for Special Rapporteur to counter closing civil society space

The need for vocal support for the right to freedom of assembly and association was noted by civil society organisations and human rights defenders who stressed the importance of statements from mandate holders in pressuring governments to act in accordance with international law.

Special Rapporteur Ciampi declared that she would work with civil society during official visits and make statements condemning acts aimed at violating the right to peaceful assembly or association.

'ISHR welcomes Special Rapporteur Ciampi and looks forward to working with her to ensure that human rights defenders and other civil society actors are able to exercise their fundamental right to freedom of assembly and association,' said Helen Nolan.

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