

Ecuador's Three-Front Assault on Civil Society

How Law, Streets, and Media Are Strangling Democracy



Co-funded by
the European Union

Civic-space conditions in Ecuador are rapidly deteriorating, and it isn't a single flashpoint. It's a coordinated, three-front squeeze on civil society: the law is being weaponised, the streets militarised, and the media controlled – three sieges that reinforce one another and close in at once.

On 22 October 2025, the Vuka Coalition and CIVICUS brought together Ecuadorian activists, human rights defenders and journalists to map how this pressure works in practice. The solidarity call examined how the very pillars meant to protect society are being turned against it. Three strategic insights stood out:

- **The legal siege is deliberate and coordinated.** Civil society organisations face greater uncertainty and state control. Six laws in two years have created multi-layered assault on civic freedoms.
- **The media siege is strategic.** All the repression by the Ecuadorian army against its own population happens with limited international media coverage. Major international outlets have provided minimal reporting on what's occurring even as one of Latin America's strongest indigenous movements faces its worst crackdown in years – the worst of three national strikes measured by injury levels, violence levels, and cruelty.
- **The international response is compromised.** According to multiple accounts, the UN Resident Coordinator and European ambassadors joined a government convoy shortly after a protester was killed. While motives are contested, the episode sat uneasily alongside limited international responses to the scale of injuries reported.

This report distils what frontline actors are living, documenting and urgently asking from the international community.

Understanding September 2025

On 13 September 2025, President Daniel Noboa eliminated Ecuador's decades-old diesel subsidy by executive decree, raising prices from \$1.80 to \$2.80 per gallon – a 55% increase. Transport unions, farmers, and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) immediately called a national strike beginning 18 September.

The government responded by declaring states of emergency – first in seven provinces, later extended to twelve – suspending assembly rights and deploying the armed forces. As the CIVICUS Monitor notes, this fits a recurring resort to emergency and security measures that broaden executive discretion and threaten core civic freedoms, in parallel with a legislative package (Intelligence, Protected Areas, Social Transparency) that increases oversight over CSOs and facilitates surveillance. Officials frame the response as necessary to maintain order and protect “humanitarian” movements; rights monitors and media have documented excessive force, injuries and arbitrary detentions during the strike period.

By late October, the Alliance for Human Rights documented 385 human rights violation reports, 206 detentions, 2 confirmed deaths (with a third person dying in protest context but family hasn't authorised publication), and 163 people injured in just two days (13-14 October) in Imbabura province alone.

Civil society organisations characterise the response as strategic rather than reactive: Create crisis. Position indigenous movements as enemies. Justify repression. Build political capital around “restoring order.” Critics argue that chaos provides cover for what they see as the real objective – a constituent assembly to capture the Constitutional Court, one of the few remaining institutions with some independence.

The pattern is familiar. This was the third fuel subsidy crisis in seven years to spark mass mobilisation – 2019, 2022, and now 2025. Each time, the script was nearly identical: government imposes measures without consultation, indigenous communities lead protests, state responds with violence rather than negotiation, international bodies make recommendations, recommendations get ignored.





The Three-Front Assault

The September crackdown didn't emerge from nowhere. It sits atop a legal architecture built over two years specifically to enable it – and alongside a media apparatus designed to justify it. The solidarity call mapped how repression works when it's coordinated across three fronts simultaneously.

FRONT ONE – The Legal Siege

- **What's happening:** The new Organic Law on Social Transparency forces re-registration within 180 days and hands broad powers to a new superintendency. Paired with an Intelligence Law enabling opaque surveillance and four other laws passed in two years, it creates a multi-layered legal stranglehold.
- **Why it matters:** Discretion without clear criteria – risk tiers with no transparent scoring or appeal – lets authorities decide who operates. It's a paperwork chokehold designed to be manageable for large organisations but impossible for smaller, rural, and indigenous groups doing sensitive work in vulnerable territories.
- **Signs on the ground:** Bank accounts frozen based on secret intelligence reports organisations are never allowed to see. No due process, no notification, no defence. Shifting requirements push organisations into bureaucratic limbo.
- **Effect:** Self-censorship and withdrawal from contested areas. Donors spooked by regulatory risk. The call isn't for less transparency – most organisations already practice rigorous accountability – but for clarity, dialogue, and proportionality. Transparency without criminalisation.

FRONT TWO – The Streets Under Siege

- **What's happening:** Authorities closed community radios in strike zones. Public transport to protest sites was quietly cut. States of emergency were normalised despite Constitutional Court rulings.
- **Why it matters:** The state's response wasn't crowd control, it was dispersal and deterrence by any means necessary. The message: don't protest, it's too costly. This wasn't about maintaining order. This was about making resistance physically impossible.
- **Signs on the ground:** 55 journalists attacked; equipment confiscated; tear gas fired directly at members of the press; ambiguity over detention powers deterred participation. Reports indicate that on 28 September 2025 in Imbabura, security forces used lethal force against peaceful Indigenous protesters, killing Efraín Fúeres, injuring at least 124 and detaining 101 arbitrarily, with at least 12 reportedly missing ([CIVICUS, 28 Sept 2025](#)).
- **Effect:** People thinking twice before going to the streets – exactly the deterrent effect intended. The Constitutional Court's rulings are ignored. Military deployment continues regardless.

FRONT THREE – The Media Under Siege

- **What's happening:** Community radios – often the only independent information source in rural and indigenous areas – have been closed in strike zones. State propaganda platforms flood discourse. Traditional media replicates official narrative or faces consequences.
- **Why it matters:** When the press doesn't just report what happens but defines the reality citizens are living in, and when that press is controlled or silenced, truth itself becomes contested. The framing is relentless: order versus chaos, responsible government versus destructive protesters, the nation versus its enemies.
- **Signs on the ground:** Without evidence, state outlets and compliant media link CONAIE to illicit economies, call protesters "enemies of the city," exaggerate every minor incident into existential threat.
- **Effect:** International media siege compounds domestic control. Violence on this scale has received limited international media attention, with major outlets providing minimal coverage despite well-documented violence. Self-censorship across the media landscape compounds the problem. Breaking this media blockade is essential. Visibility creates accountability. Limited coverage enables escalation.

Ecuador's Three-Front Assault on Civil Society

How Law, Streets, and Media Are Strangling Democracy



Co-funded by
the European Union

What Resistance Looks Like Now

As civil society representatives emphasised during the call, what's at stake isn't just the administrative functioning of civil society organisations; it is the health of democratic life itself. The evidence is overwhelming: documented deaths, hundreds of injuries and detentions, community radios closed, six laws strangling civic space.

This is the coordinated system that Belén Páez from Fundación Pachamama, Carolina Loza León, and Vivian Idrovo from the Alliance for Human Rights mapped in the solidarity call.

Belén described the legal architecture – six laws in two years creating a stranglehold where bank accounts freeze based on secret reports, where bureaucratic complexity is designed to make smaller, rural, and indigenous organisations disappear.



Carolina, covering the protests as an independent journalist, documented how that legal framework enables physical repression – 55 journalists attacked, community radios shut down, a state narrative that recasts indigenous communities as enemies without evidence.

Vivian turned testimony into irrefutable record: every figure validated, every name confirmed, every violation documented with the rigour that makes denial impossible.



But documentation without visibility is just a chronicle of harm. Silence doesn't merely fail to report repression; it enables it. According to multiple accounts, the UN Resident Coordinator and European ambassadors accompanied a government convoy hours after the army killed a protester – an action they framed as showing concern for affected communities – whilst over 160 injuries in 48 hours drew comparatively limited international response. For civil society observers, the message was clear: there is no cost for this violence.

Civil society groups fear Ecuador may become a model testing whether coordinated legal, physical, and media repression works. Right now, it's working. If it succeeds, the model replicates across the region. If it fails because international solidarity raises costs high enough to make repression more expensive than dialogue, it becomes less attractive elsewhere.

Civil society has done its part. What's missing is the international attention and diplomatic pressure that create real costs for repression. The roadmap that follows shows how to provide it – not symbolic gestures, but sustained pressure that makes continuation of repression more costly than dialogue.

Ecuador's Three-Front Assault on Civil Society

How Law, Streets, and Media Are Strangling Democracy



Co-funded by
the European Union

The Roadmap Forward:

Coordinating Meaningful Solidarity

Based on the solidarity call, this roadmap outlines concrete actions for international collaboration, continued over a longer period of time to protect civic freedoms and human rights in Ecuador.

1

Break the Media Siege

International silence enables violence. **Pressure media to cover Ecuador with urgency applied elsewhere.** Build sustained communications infrastructure, not one-off coverage.

2

Support the IACHR Hearing (17 November 2025)

Fundación Pachamama's Inter-American Commission hearing brings Ecuadorian state representatives who must respond. **Attend virtually. Arrange media coverage.**

3

Apply Diplomatic Pressure

Organisations in donor countries should ask their foreign ministries: what is your position on Ecuador? Parliamentary groups can question governments publicly, **creating political costs for silence.**

4

Fund Urgent Victim Support

163 victims in Imbabura alone need medicines, prosthetics, and psychological care. The state won't provide it. **Direct funds to organisations already doing this work** – CONAIE's Inocencio Tucumbi association and legal defence networks.

5

Scale Legal Defence

206 detained face terrorism charges with inadequate representation. **International legal aid organisations should partner with Ecuadorian defenders.** Fund coordination bodies that match lawyers with cases and track proceedings.

6

Push for Cautelary Measures

Measures filed for Imbabura victims haven't been processed by the Inter-American Commission. **International human rights organisations should contact the Commission directly and demand action through public statements.**

7

Monitor the Constituent Assembly

The electoral system has no credibility. **Deploy comprehensive international observation early** – not just election day, but the entire campaign period, voter registration, and media coverage.

8

Amplify Documentation

Human rights documentation – every figure validated, every name confirmed – needs amplification. **Translate reports. Create infographics. Place op-eds. Brief journalists.**

9

Prevent the International Cooperation Law

A sixth law is reportedly being prepared to restrict organisations' ability to receive funds. **Monitor legislative activity.** When it appears, international outcry must follow from donor governments and UN rapporteurs.

10

Build Regional Networks

Civil society groups worry Ecuador could serve as a laboratory for regional tactics. Connect Ecuadorian organisations with networks in Nicaragua, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Honduras. When crisis hits, the network should already exist.

The tools exist. The evidence exists. What's needed now is will.

This report synthesises the 22 October 2025 solidarity call convened by Vuka Coalition and CIVICUS. All statistics from verified sources. Analysis represents synthesis of frontline perspectives.