PEACEFUL PROTEST HANDBOOK



VUKA!
COALITION FOR CIVIC ACTION

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The updated handbook has also benefited from research published on peaceful protests by international, regional and national human rights organisations. With one exception footnotes and sources have not been included in this updated version of the handbook primarily to make the user's experience of the handbook easier.

1. INTRODUCTION

People have peacefully protested against increasing authoritarianism, populism, armed conflict, and humanitarian and climate crises in recent years. They have courageously gathered – in person or online – to highlight injustice, challenge power, and demand accountability. Yet around the world, peaceful protests are increasingly being restricted and repressed, in both democratic and authoritarian countries. In an era when civil society is being silenced, civic space is shrinking, and force is being misused, standing up for positive change has become more urgent and more dangerous. Nonetheless, people continue to peacefully protest to make their voices heard.

This handbook, updated in early 2026, builds on an earlier version aimed at raising awareness about the human rights engaged in peaceful protest, in particular the right of peaceful assembly. As authorities' responses in many contexts have shown, the reality for peaceful protestors is that international law is often not being adhered to or applied. Peaceful protests are treated as threats to public and even national security, leading to arbitrary arrests and the use of predictive or deterrent policing measures such as denial of authorization, stop and search, and surveillance. Governments have deployed the military to quell peaceful protests and used lethal and so called less-lethal force to disperse and crack down on them, resulting in killings and serious injuries. Repressive legislation has been introduced to control and suppress dissent.

When States are failing to uphold international law, knowing your human rights is more important than ever.

> This updated Protest Handbook Version 2 has completed the drafting stage and will now undergo regional stress-testing and contextual validation to produce a stress-tested, regionally adopted version. This is part of its strategy to deepen consultation with key stakeholders and those organising peaceful protests regional and locally to strengthen the content of the handbook and its usefulness at the regional and, where possible, local level or provide guidance for adaption at the local level. The aim is to avoid overgeneralisation at the global level and focus on making it useful in contexts where peaceful protest and human rights are being restricted and repressed.
>
> Subsequent text in green in this handbook relates to this stress-testing and includes some of the questions and issues Vuka welcomes you feedback on as you use this handbook.

1.1. HOW WILL THIS HANDBOOK HELP?

This handbook will help you know your rights under international law, recognise the risks involved in organising peaceful protests in your context, and identify the gap between your country's international obligations and its national laws.

It will help you:

- ✓ **Know your rights** – Through a Q&A section explaining how peaceful protest is protected under international law.
- ✓ **Plan and reduce risk** – By outlining key practical steps, common challenges, and important considerations when organising peaceful protests.
- ✓ **Navigate the legal framework** – By highlighting the relevant international and regional treaties, constitutional protections, and identifying gaps in national laws.

It is Vuka's aim for this handbook to be complementary; it is not comprehensive.

> Throughout there are examples from different regions and countries to illustrate the laws and practices used to restrict and supress peaceful protests.



1.2. WHO IS THIS HANDBOOK FOR?

This handbook is for organisers of peaceful protests, including civil society organisations and activists, human rights defenders (HRDs), trade unionists, journalists, and campaigners as well as ordinary citizens willing to take peaceful protest action or who are part of movements, coalitions, or collectives.

Any form of organisation for a peaceful protest is protected by the right of peaceful assembly, and this includes those doing the organising: whether liaising with the authorities, publicising the protest, sharing information, communicating with participants, assigning roles to others, preparing content and so on.

1.3. HOW TO USE THE HANDBOOK?

Dip into any part of the handbook as needed. Use it to prepare in advance. Follow up with more detailed resources that are signposted throughout. Adapt it to your local context to support organising at your local level.

2. Q&A: WHAT DOES INTERNATIONAL LAW PROTECT?

Peaceful protest is protected by human rights, in particular the right of peaceful assembly. When people organise or take part in peaceful protests they are exercising several other distinct yet mutually reinforcing human rights. These include freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of association, the right to privacy, the right not to be arbitrarily arrested or detained, and the right to life. These are protected by international human rights law and enshrined in international and regional treaties ratified by most countries.



This section answers what international human rights law and standards protect for everyone taking part in peaceful protests.[1]

> During the regional stress testing please provide feedback on how useful it is, and in this format, to set out the international law and standards so people know their rights.

1 The answers in this section are primarily based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), a legally-binding treaty ratified by 175 States, which protects the right of peaceful assembly under Article 21. This section also draws on the UN's authoritative interpretation of this right General Comment 37 by the treaty body, the Human Rights Committee, responsible for monitoring implementation of the ICCPR, and international standards and principles on for example the use of force and firearms. Where relevant this section refers to the interrelationship between the right to peaceful assembly and other human rights.

Do you need permission to hold a peaceful protest?

No, permission is not required to exercise the right of peaceful assembly. The right of peaceful assembly is a human right so must not be made conditional on authorisation.

However, some States have enacted laws requiring organisers to obtain permission in advance, which is one of the most common ways States restrict the right of peaceful assembly. Such laws may violate their international obligations or be unconstitutional.

> *In 2015, the Thai authorities enacted the Public Assembly Act of 2015, which requires organizers of peaceful public assemblies to give authorities prior notification and provides criminal and administrative penalties for infringement.*
>
> *Article 47 of the 2010 Constitution of the Republic of Angola establishes that all citizens are free to gather publicly and demonstrate peacefully without the need for authorization, only notification to the authorities. However, the law of May 1991 (older than the constitution) establishes that assemblies and demonstrations require authorization. There is currently a contradiction between the Constitution of the Republic (2010) and the Law on the Right to Demonstration (1991).*

Do you need to notify the authorities?

You may be required to notify the authorities so they can help facilitate the peaceful assembly and protect the rights of others, and such notification systems are used by many States. This may include providing information about the date, place, time, focus, and content of the protest.

However, a mandatory requirement is itself a restriction and must be established in law and be necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory. Notification procedures must not discriminate against any groups or persons (e.g. LGBTQI+, migrants and asylum-seekers, persons with disabilities) to target or restrict peaceful assemblies. They should also be transparent, timely, and not unduly bureaucratic.

Not notifying does not make an assembly unlawful. It does not justify banning the assembly from taking place, the dispersal of the peaceful assembly, or the punishment of participants.

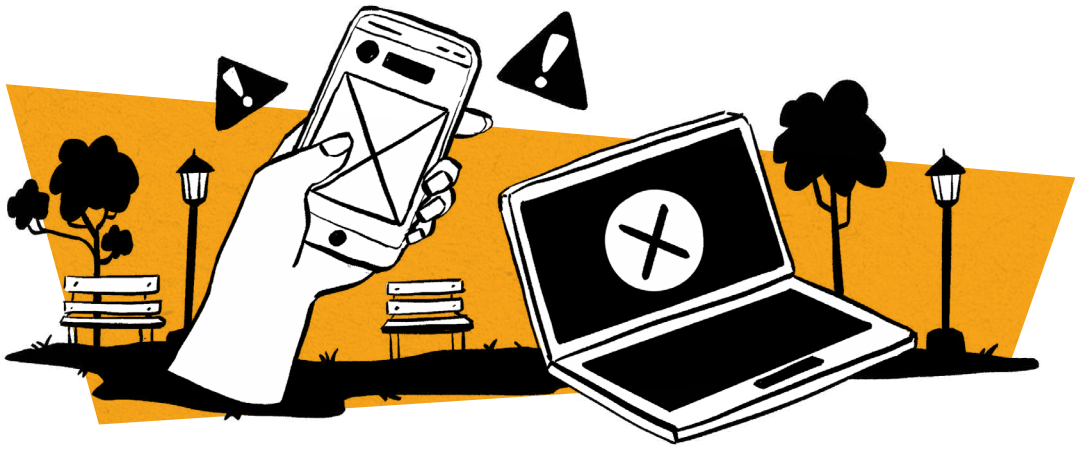
Notification must not be required for spontaneous assemblies for which there is insufficient time to provide notice.

> *Authorisation versus notification? The distinction between authorisation and notification has become blurred in practise. What a State says is notification maybe de-facto permission/ authorisation.*
>
> *In Europe, in Belgium, Luxembourg, Sweden and Switzerland, protest organizers are required to apply for authorization to hold a demonstration. While rejections may be low the requirement undermines the right.*

What are the authorities required to do when an assembly is planned or taking place?

Authorities have a positive duty to facilitate peaceful assemblies without discrimination. This includes enabling access to public spaces, safeguarding participants and protecting them from violence (including by counter-protestors), and keeping the public safe.

Online this means facilitating an open, safe, secure, accessible and inclusive digital environment. Authorities must not interfere or hinder assembly, including online through connectivity, Internet or social media shutdowns. States have a duty to safeguard participation in peaceful assemblies from violence online, including online hate speech and incitement to violence.



> *The Iranian authorities imposed a near-total shutdown of internet and phone lines during largescale anti-government protests in early 2026, severely limiting access to communication and information amid and about the brutal crackdown.*

Can the right of peaceful assembly be restricted?

Yes, but only under strict conditions. Restrictions are only allowed if they are set out in law, pursue a legitimate aim (e.g. national security, public safety, public order, the rights and freedoms of others), and comply with the principles of necessity, proportionality, and non-discrimination. The prohibition of a specific peaceful assembly must be a last resort, and considered only if no other measure can achieve the legitimate objective.

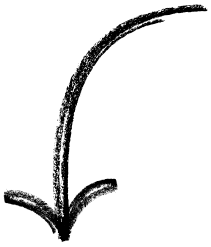
Blanket bans are disproportionate and must not be imposed.

> *Blanket bans are often imposed in and around elections including bans on protests, internet shutdowns or bans on social media sites. Azerbaijan, Comoros, India, Mauritania, Mozambique, Pakistan, and Venezuela shut down the internet around their respective elections in 2024.*

What counts as peaceful?

Almost everything - if people gather in a place online or offline to express something it is a peaceful assembly: marches, sit-ins, vigils, rallies, digital petitions, social media campaigns, flash mobs— even if they are loud, disruptive, or unpopular. Pushing and shoving or disruption of vehicles or pedestrians' movement or daily activities do not amount to 'violence'.

Collective civil disobedience or direct action campaigns can be covered by article 21, provided that they are non-violent.



READ MORE

Amnesty International's Civil Disobedience Toolkit

In Focus: Non-violent civil disobedience

Non-violent civil disobedience activism is increasingly being undertaken by groups to raise awareness about the climate crisis, corruption and authoritarianism, for example.

International human rights standards recognise that, regardless of the infringement of a country's law, acts of civil disobedience may constitute a form of assembly and, when carried out in a non-violent manner, fall under the scope of the rights to freedom of conscience, expression and peaceful assembly. Acts of non-violent civil disobedience must always be in compliance with the principles of non-violence, anti-hatred and non-discrimination.

What counts as violence?

Violence typically entails the use by participants of physical force against others that is likely to result in injury or death, or serious damage to property. Isolated acts of violence by some participants should not be attributed to others, to the organisers, or to the assembly.

Where violence is widespread by participants in an assembly, participation is no longer protected (under Article 21 of the ICCPR).

Violence against participants in a peaceful assembly by the authorities, or by agents provocateurs, by members of the public, or by participants in counter-demonstrations does not render the assembly non-peaceful.

The right of those taking part to peacefully assemble must be respected, protected and facilitated even when others engage in acts of violence.

When does a peaceful assembly become unlawful?

When it is no longer peaceful. See the question above.

Can the police disperse a peaceful assembly?

Only in exceptional cases. If the assembly is no longer peaceful, or if there is clear evidence of an imminent threat of serious violence that cannot be reasonably addressed by more proportionate measures, such as targeted arrests.

Conditions for dispersal must be set out in law, ordered by an authorised official, and the use of force by police should be avoided.

When can the police use force or firearms?

Law enforcement should de-escalate situations that might result in violence. They are obliged to exhaust non-violent means and to give prior warning if it becomes absolutely necessary to use force, unless doing either would be manifestly ineffective. Any use of force must comply with the fundamental principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, precaution and non-discrimination and those using force must be accountable for each use of force.

If the use of force is unavoidable it must be proportionate. Participants should be warned of the intention to use force, and the force must be directed, in so much is possible, against those individuals engaged in violent behaviour.

Firearms can almost never be used. Firearms are not appropriate for policing peaceful assemblies. They should never be used to disperse an assembly.

Under no circumstances should law enforcement officials violate the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment in the context of peaceful assembly, even when a protest is no longer peaceful.

> *Since October 2019, Lebanese security forces and riot police have recklessly fired live ammunition, tear gas canisters, metal pellets and rubber bullets directly at largely peaceful protesters from close range, resulting in at least three deaths and injuring hundreds of others.*
>
> *Hong Kong police responded to the 2019 and 2020 protests with unnecessary and excessive use of force including the dangerous use of rubber bullets and bean bag rounds; beating protesters who were not resisting; aggressive tactics to obstruct journalists at protest sites; and misuse of pepper spray and tear gas, as well as evidence of torture and other ill-treatment in detention.*
>
> *During 2022 and 2023, Sri Lankan law enforcement authorities responded to unprecedented protests in Sri Lanka with unlawful use of tear gas and water cannon and the misuse of batons.*

Are there restrictions on wearing masks or face coverings at a peaceful assembly?

No. Participants may wear masks or cover their face as part of the expressive nature or element of a peaceful assembly, or to protect their privacy against surveillance, or to counter reprisals or being targeted by the authorities or others during or after the peaceful assembly. The anonymity of participants should be allowed unless their conduct presents reasonable grounds for arrest.

However, some States have introduced restrictions on masks and face coverings in national laws.

> *On 17 October 2025, new amendments to Georgia's Administrative and Criminal Codes entered into force, introducing harsher penalties including on covering one's face which is now up to 15 days of administrative detention, or 20 days for organizers (whereas a previous amendment in December the penalty was a fine of 2,000 lari (about US$720).*

> *Egypt has one of the most direct laws regarding this. Under Law No 107 of 2013 (often called the "Protest Law"). Article 6 explicitly prohibits: "Participants in public meetings, processions, or protests…to wear masks or coverings to hide facial features with the intention of committing any illegal acts." In practice "intention" is being interpreted very broadly by security forces. Protestors caught wearing masks or balaclavas often face immediate arrest and can be sentenced to up to one year in prison and heavy fines.*

> In some countries, wearing face masks to protect against surveillance and facial recognition technologies has become more of a risk as the authorities have promoted the narrative that if you are covering your face you are 'guilty'. This is leading to protestors not covering their faces. Do you want to see more examples – general or specific – that highlight these types of 'trade-offs' in the handbook, under for example the relevant international law Q&As to show the realities of peaceful protesting?

Can flags, uniforms, chants, signs and banners be restricted?

No, in general, the waving of flags and the use of signs, banners and chants should not be restricted. They should be regarded as a legitimate form of expression. Unless, in exceptional cases, where such symbols are directly and predominantly associated with national, racial, religious, or gender/sexuality hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, appropriate restrictions should apply. Some countries prohibited the wearing of camouflage by civilians.

Can a peaceful assembly be restricted based on the content or message?

No, unless they are used for war propaganda, or advocacy of national, racial, religious, or gender/sexuality hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

And, as far as possible, action should be taken in such cases against the individual perpetrators, rather than against the assembly as a whole.

The approach of the authorities to peaceful assemblies and any restrictions imposed must be content neutral.

> *Hungary: In March 2025, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a law that significantly restricts freedom of assembly by prohibiting public events deemed to "promote or display" LGBTQ+ themes. The legislation, passed with a two-thirds majority by the Fidesz-KDNP government, connects to a 2021 "child protection" law to ban Pride marches and other LGBTQI-related assemblies.*

Can you monitor a peaceful assembly?

Yes, the right of peaceful assembly also protects the rights of those monitoring peaceful assemblies. The monitoring of an assembly must be facilitated in the same way as the entire assembly. The role of journalists, human rights defenders, election monitors and others involved in monitoring or reporting on assemblies is of particular importance for the full enjoyment of the right of peaceful assembly.

In focus: Monitoring Peaceful and Digital Assemblies

Monitoring peaceful assemblies - whether in-person protests or online campaigns—is essential for documenting human rights violations and contributing to accountability.

Do No Harm When Monitoring:

- **Informed Consent:** Ask permission before photographing, recording, or documenting participants. Ensure they understand how the information will be used.
- **Right to Privacy & Confidentiality:** Protect identities; avoid publishing names, images, or personal details that could put participants at risk.
- **Security:** Use secure devices, encrypted communication, and anonymized data storage.
- **Digital Safety:** Respect participants' online privacy; avoid tracking, exposing, or sharing identifiable digital footprints without consent.

READ MORE

Guide for Collecting Evidence of Torture, Equipment Used, and Injuries during Protest and Detention *(available in different languages)*

Handbook on Monitoring Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Guide on digital-mediated assemblies and how to monitor them

Can a peaceful assembly take place on private property?

Yes, peaceful assemblies in private spaces, on private property, are part of the right of peaceful assembly. Whether restrictions can be placed on such assemblies depends on whether the space is usually open to the public and whether the owners approve. Increasingly places that look like or should be public spaces are privately owned.



What should organisers know about counter-assemblies?

Participants and organisers of counter assemblies that are peaceful have the same protections under the right of peaceful assembly. Counter assemblies expressing opposition to another peaceful assembly should be facilitated in the same way by the authorities and police.

Can authorities stop an assembly because of opposition from others?

No. The police must take a content-neutral approach to peaceful assemblies.

READ MORE

REPORTS & INFO ON THE STATE OF PEACEFUL PROTEST

DefendDefenders' The Right to Peaceful Protest in Africa in 2025

Amnesty International's Protect the Protest



3. PRACTICAL STEPS FOR ORGANISERS

This section highlights key considerations when organising a peaceful protest.

> What risks and ways to address them are missing or you would want more guidance on to be useful and relevant at the regional and local level? How to make more operational?

3.1. PLANNING AND RISK ASSESSMENT

As part of the planning of a peaceful protest, conducting a risk assessment helps organisers anticipate risks, threats and challenges that could affect participants or the peaceful nature of the assembly, and identify practical measures on how to mitigate them. It can also support inclusive and diverse participation by identifying barriers to participation that affects certain groups.

Organisers should follow a riskassessment process adapted to your current local context.

Identify risks:

- **Physical safety & risks** (police tactics, use of force, counterprotest confrontation):
  - Police responses, including crowd control techniques, use of less-lethal force such as tear gas and water cannon, likelihood of use of lethal firearms, use of new powers to disperse or detain participants.
  - Wellbeing considerations, including access to water, medical or emergency support, and safeguarding for children or vulnerable participants.
  - Clear messaging to participants before, during, and after events, including guidance for sudden escalation, dispersal orders, arrests, and emergency exit routes.

- **Legal & regulatory risks** (arrest, new offences, permit conditions):
  - Guidance on participants' rights if stopped or questioned, arrested and detained.
- **Digital/security risks** (surveillance, drones, facial recognition, doxxing):
  - **Facial recognition and surveillance tools** are deployed by police without adequate legal safeguards.
  - Digital harassment and doxxing of organisers and participants are common.
  - Organisers should plan secure communication channels and digital hygiene protocols.
- **Political/strategic risks (misrepresentation in the media, strategic legislative change).**

Evaluate likelihood & impact: Assess both probability and severity (e.g. likelihood of arrests and severe legal penalties or imprisonment).

Develop mitigation strategies: Practical measures for each risk: legal observers, trained marshals, communications plan, deescalation training.

Assign responsibilities: Clearly designate roles such as safety marshals, legal & emergency support contact(s), media/digital coordinators, wellbeing leads.

Review & update: As laws, police powers and practices evolve, reassess risks regularly.

> Do you use a risk analysis or a risk assessment when planning a peaceful protest? How have you found it helpful? Does this section provide useful guidance?

3.2. SAFETY & INCLUSION

> This section is complex and relies on experiences from around the world which may be different for the same groups of persons. How to make more operational? What risks and responses to those risks are missing?

Youth
In many countries young people are peacefully protesting for social and economic reforms, against corruption, for their human rights but are often faced with police brutality and repression.

> *Young people across Kenya, particularly Gen Z, organised demonstrations opposing proposed tax increases and calling for government accountability between June 2024 and July 2025. The protests were amplified by social media although the government used tech-facilitated violence to suppress them.*

Women, LGBTQI+ persons, and Gender

- Are there laws, policies, or policing practices that disproportionately affect LGBTQI+ persons, especially trans and gender-diverse people?
- Is there a heightened risk of sexual harassment, targeted violence, doxxing (publishing personal data online without the individual's consent), or targeted violence towards participants of peaceful assembly online or offline? If yes, by which actors (authorities, other groups?)
- What gender-sensitive safety training or advice readily available for participants to manage risks?

In Tunisia, during demonstrations in 2021 demanding social and economic reforms, women and LGBTQI+ people were targeted online by groups on Facebook that published personal data about people, such as their mobile number, personal address, family details. One woman in Tunisia received 200 calls in one day.

READ MORE

Advice on staying safe at events, marches and protests for LGBTQ+ young people

Our Rights, Our Safety: Resources for Women Human Rights Defenders

List of Resources for Women Human Rights Defenders

Pocket Guide for Female Protestors in MENA

People with disabilities

- What barriers will people with disabilities likely face to participation? Are sign language interpreters or accessible format available? Are captions available?
- Could they face targeted harassment in person or online? If yes, from whom?
- Is there a way that they can report harassment to the organisers?

READ MORE

Accessible Organizing: Tips for Protest Organizers and Disabled Protesters

Practical Tips for Disabled Protestors



Older persons

Many older protestors and activists face specific risks such as mobility issues, higher vulnerability to crowd control measures, tear gas and water cannons due to health and mobility, and digital exclusion.

> In Belarus, older people, including those in their late 80s, expressed their dissent with the government from the outset of mass protests in August 2020. They organised their own marches called Wisdom Marches. The authorities cracked down on these and arrested hundreds of older people, kept them in very cold conditions, and detained some of them for weeks.

> How could the box on arrest and detention be usefully developed? What else would you want to know to prepare for the possibility of being arrested or detained?

Arrest and detention

While arrest and detention procedures differ between countries, all individuals have human rights, though the way these rights are respected and upheld by States varies.

Before peacefully gathering online or offline:

- ☑ Share emergency contacts and relevant legal support hotlines.
- ☑ Encourage participants to save key numbers in their phones and write them discreetly on their forearm, covered by a sleeve.
- ☑ Provide basic guidance on rights and what to do if stopped, searched, arrested and detained.

3.3. DIGITAL SECURITY AND SAFETY

Technologies can enable protest organising and digital activism and the current landscape for peaceful protests shows a significant rise in digital forms of protest, particularly among young people. Many peaceful protestors are facing criminalisation for online protest activities such as allegedly "insulting authorities", misinformation-related charges, and other online speech offenses. Others are subjected to surveillance or targeted arrests linked to their digital protesting and protest organising.

Phones

Phones and smart phones are useful tools for organising, communicating, monitoring and documenting protests. However, devices can be searched or confiscated, communications and location data monitored, and mobile phone extraction tools (MPE) can access your contacts, messages, photos and other data.



Reduce risks

- **Encryption & VPN**: use end-to-end encryption services or platforms e.g. Signal or Whatsapp for messaging and use a credible VPN on your device but check first your local laws as in some countries using encrypted tools may be banned (e.g. Cuba, Libya, Iran) or using a VPN is illegal in (e.g. Iran, Iraq and Egypt).
- **Disable biometric unlock**: remove fingerprint or face unlock and replace with a strong password.
- **Keep the operating system updated** to reduce security vulnerabilities and, in general, regularly power down your telephone.
- **Fully back up all device content:** including contacts, text messaging, and media and make sure to back up all messaging apps.
- **Cloud apps**: consider switching off/logging out of any cloud apps and removing them from your phone.
- **Consider switching off your location services** on your phone and using airplane mode.
- **Basic/burner phone:** preferably for physical gatherings take an old phone or a basic burner phone with only essential/emergency contacts on and remove anything else.
- **Know your legal rights** regarding stop-and-search and device access in your jurisdiction.

Device confiscation and data extraction



Personal devices such as mobile phones or laptops can be confiscated by the authorities or opened during a stop and search or arrest before, during or after a peaceful protest, particularly if you have been identified and targeted as a protest organiser or leader.

"Scraping" is the grabbing all the data from a social media platform, including content you post and data about what you like and share (your behaviour online). You can't stop data scraping completely but you can make it harder.

Reduce risks

- **Leave personal devices at homes** and get separate device (cheap ones instead) with no or little data on them, reset them regularly, and use a temporary sim number.
- **Regularly fully power off your mobile** and other devices as this helps put some devices into a more secure state when logging on again.
- **Log out of all online apps** and accounts and do not store sensitive data or contacts on your phone.
- **Limit what you share on social media** sites to make it harder for data scraping to extract personal data.
- **Regularly clear cookies** and tighten privacy settings on your personal devices.
- **Set up Find my phone feature** so users can locate or remotely wipe their devices if ever confiscated or lost.

Facial Recognition Technology and other technologies



Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) and other biometric technologies are increasingly being used by the authorities to monitor and identify individuals at public gatherings by matching images against databases. These systems have demonstrated algorithmic bias, with higher error rates for people of colour, women and marginalised communities.

The use of FRT undermine expectations of anonymity in public spaces and may deter people participating in peaceful protests as individuals risk being identified, profiled or even wrongly persecuted.

Reduce risks

- **Be aware** of facial recognition, drones and IMSI catchers (mobile phone interception devices) operating at gatherings.
- **Check national laws** on face coverings at public gatherings before attending
- **Wear a face mask & sunglasses** to make it more difficult for FRT to identify you, pending the national laws on face coverings.
- **Blur faces** and any identifying details before sharing images publicly.

> Governments in West Asia and North Africa are pouring millions into opaque AI systems like drones, biometric surveillance, and predictive policing under the guise of "technological development," national security, and providing better public services. At public gatherings and faces in the crowed are automatically logged, tracked and flagged leading to a climate of pervasive digital control.

Spyware

Pegasus is the name of a highly intrusive and malicious spyware that can covertly infect mobile phones (iOS and Android) and give operators access to your messages, contacts, location, camera and microphone. It has been used by States around the world to unlawfully surveil activists, journalists, and human rights defenders. Other spyware has also been documented including: Predator, FinFisher, and Graphite.

Reduce risks

- **Download apps only from trusted sources,** whether for mobile or other devices.
- **Don't jailbreak your device** i.e. bypass the manufacture imposed restrictions to gain access to the root operating system as this leaves your phone vulnerable.
- **Don't leave your phone unattended**.

Internet and social media shutdowns

Internet shutdowns are used by States as one measure to curb protest and specific apps or social media platforms such as Signal, WhatsApp, and Facebook may be blocked.

Shutdowns restrict the ability of organisers to communicate and publicise protests as well as mobilize people to participate and can prevent and block online assemblies. Shutdowns also increase the risk of surveillance as organisers may rely on less secure forms of communication and hinder the real-time publicising of the protest and police responses.

Reduce risks

- **Use a VPN or proxy server:** Install (ahead of time) and use a reputable VPN or use a proxy server if you encounter local or regional IP blocking to help access websites or use encrypted apps.
- **Avoid relying on a single messaging platform** for coordination and communicating.
- **Plan ahead:** download offline maps, communicate meeting points and emergency contacts.

READ MORE

KEY CIVIL SOCIETY RESOURCES

Access Now

Security-in-a-box

Defender Safe

Privacy International

3.4. PREPARATION CHECKLIST

> What key steps/checks/considerations as an organiser of peaceful protests online or offline do you prepare for? What would be useful to include here as part of the lifecycle of a protest, and the potential implications and impact depending on the response of the authorities?

Before

- ☑ Share emergency contacts and relevant legal support hotlines.
- ☑ Encourage participants to save key numbers in their phones and write them discreetly on their forearm, covered by a sleeve.
- ☑ Provide basic guidance on rights and what to do if stopped, searched, arrested and detained, where relevant.

During

- ☑ Take Photo ID (where appropriate, safe and available)
- ☑ Bring a Fully charged mobile phone and portable charger
- ☑ Have Emergency contact information at hand
- ☑ Don’t forget Necessary medication and relevant medical details
- ☑ Wear Weather-appropriate clothing, clothing to protect from the sun, pepper spray and tear gas.
- ☑ Bring Water and basic personal supplies
- ☑ Protect your eyes: bring shatter-resistant eye wear or swimming googles to protest your eyes from the tear gas.

After

- ☑ Review social media posts in which you are tagged for images you appear in and remove any tags that could leader to your arrest or targeted harassment.
- ☑ Legal follow-up
- ☑ Evidence and documentation preservation
- ☑ Strategic debriefing
- ☑ Well-being and after care

READ MORE

PEACEFUL PROTEST GUIDES

CIVCUS Freedom of Peaceful Assembly (FoPA) Protest Guide….coming soon

4. INTERNATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL LAW AND COMPLAINT MECHANISMS



When a State ratifies international and regional human rights treaties, it accepts legally binding obligations to uphold specific rights and protections. Yet national laws and the way they are implemented are often in breach of these commitments, creating gaps between what the State has agreed to internationally and what peaceful protesters experience in practice. Identifying and understanding these gaps is important when preparing for peaceful protests.

This section identifies relevant international and regional treaties, applicable constitutional provisions, and gaps in national laws, and includes links to complaint mechanisms, which have specific criteria for submission.

> The international law and standards were covered in the Q&A format so is it useful to indicate the international and regional treaties here? Accessing complaint mechanisms is often undertaken by CSOs so does including them here add value?

4.1. INTERNATIONAL

Agreements

The right of peaceful assembly is enshrined in these international treaties:

- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) - Article 21:** This guarantees the right of peaceful assembly, which a State can limit only when the limitations are set out in law and necessary to protect the public and their rights and freedoms.
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) - Article 15:** Recognizes the rights of the child to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.
- **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) - Article 5(d)(ix):** Guarantees the right of freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Check: If your country has ratified these treaties using the UN's Dashboard.

Complaints

- **Complaints to Treaty Bodies**: An individual can submit a complaint against their State to a UN treaty body – the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of each international treaty – if they are a victim of a human rights violation, provided certain conditions are met and domestic remedies must have been exhausted. Find out more here.

LOOK OUT

FOR COMPLAINTS AND INQUIRES ON THEIR WEBSITE PAGES:

The ICCPR treaty body is the **Human Rights Committee**.

The CRC treaty body is the **Committee on the Rights of the Child**.

The ICERD treaty body is the **Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**.

- **Communications to UN Special Procedures:** An individual can also submit a complaint to one of the relevant UN special procedures – independent UN experts appointed by the UN's Human Rights Council – who have mandates to monitor and report on specific issues or countries. Individuals can submit information to the special procedures which they can act on based on criteria. Find out more here.

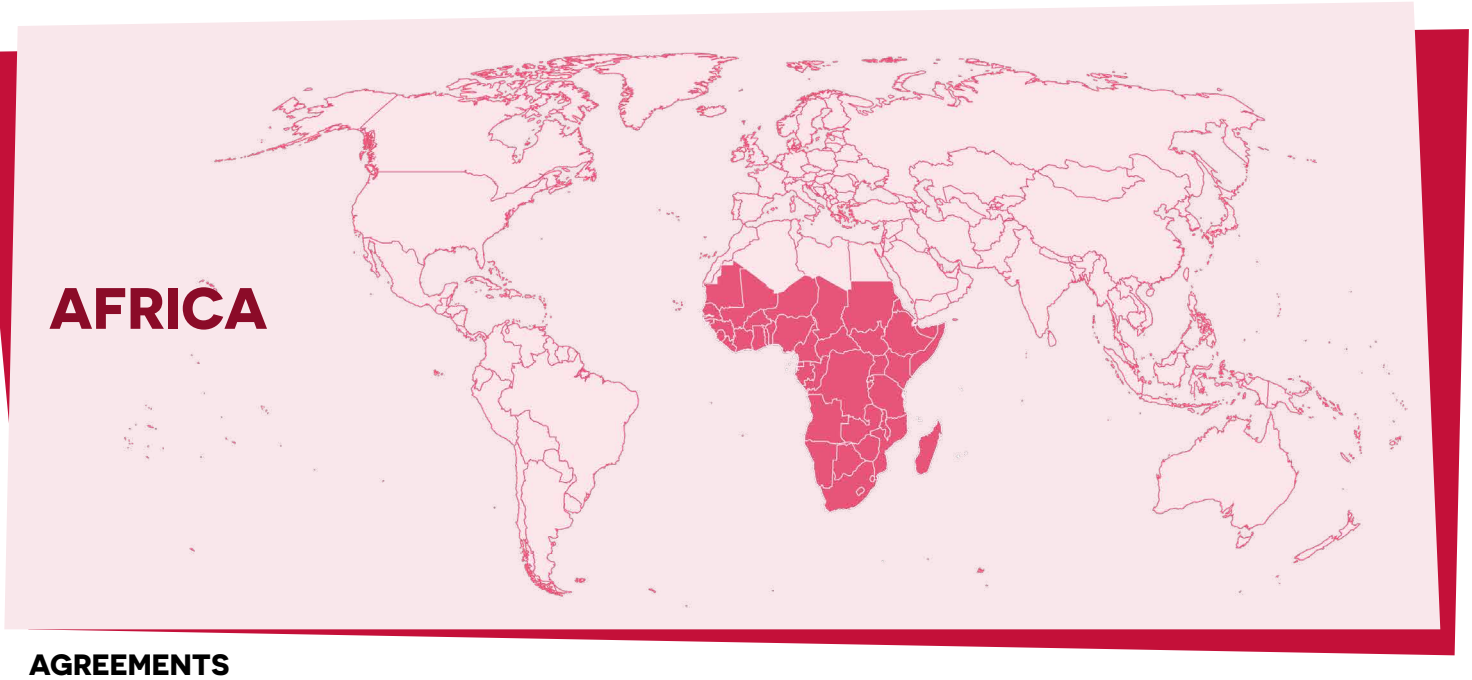
LOOK OUT

FOR RELEVANT MANDATES AND HOW TO SUBMIT INFORMATION

Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression

4.2. REGIONAL



AGREEMENTS

- **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) - Article 11:** Guarantees the right of assemble freely with others. Its **Protocol** establishes an African Court on Human and People's Rights (see complaints below).

- **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child – Article 8:** Every child shall have the right to free association and freedom of peaceful assembly in conformity with the law.

- **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) – Article 1(j):** Declares that freedom of association and the right of meet and organise peaceful demonstration be a constitutional principle guaranteed by Member States.

COMPLAINTS

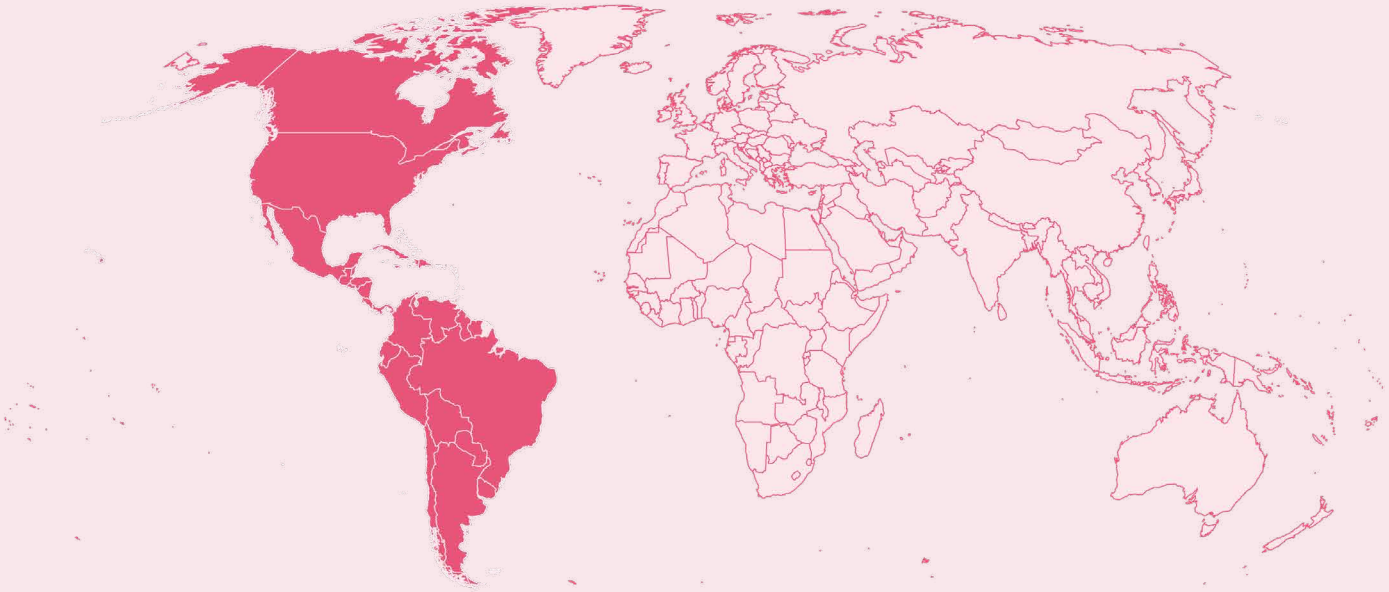
- The African Commission on Human and People's Rights under its mandate can investigate human rights violations and make recommendations to States. Individuals and NGOs can submit a communication (complaint) against a States about a human rights violation to the Commission. For more information read here.

- Cases may be brought by the African Commission, States, and individuals/NGOs to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. Find out more information on how to submit a complaint here.

- African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) receives communications (complaints) from individuals, groups or NGOs and issues recommendations to States. Find out more information on how to submit a complaint here.

- ECOWAS Court of Justice has jurisdiction over human rights violations by ECOWAS Member States and its supplementary Protocol establishes the legal basis for individuals to submit complaints without having to exhaust domestic remedies.

AMERICAS



AGREEMENTS

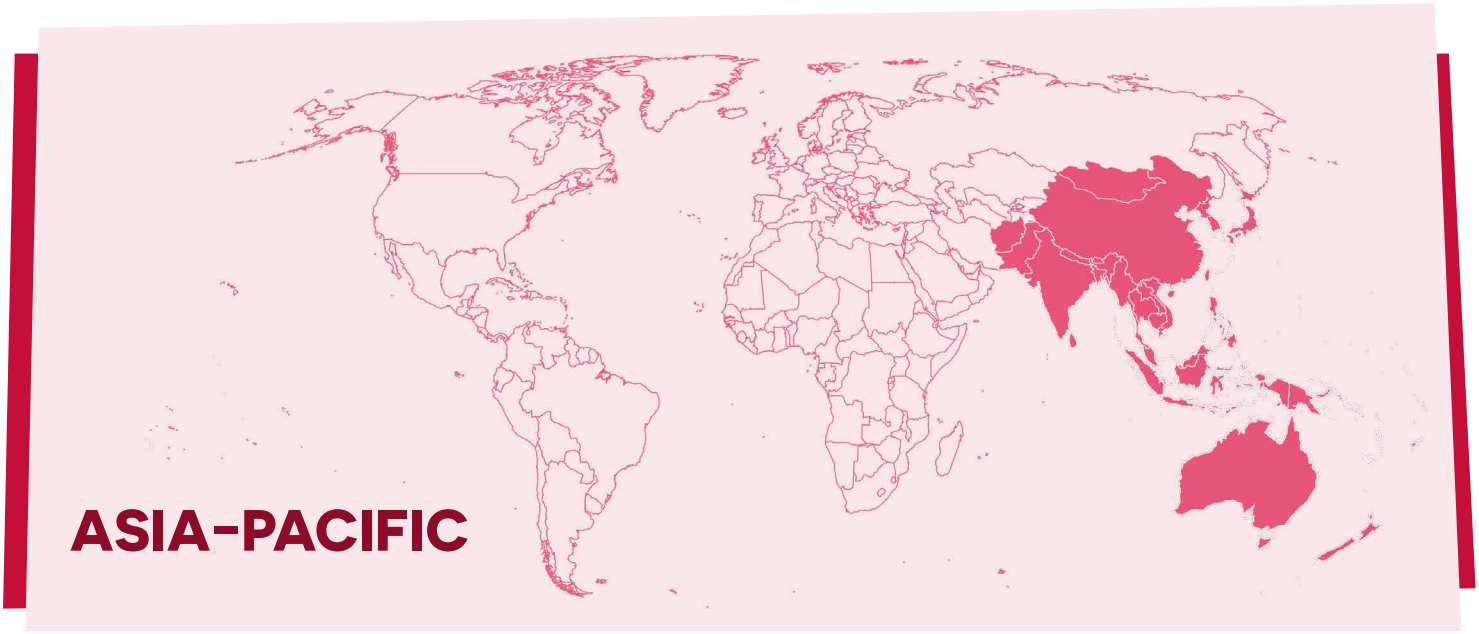
- American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR) - **Article 15:** Protects the right of peaceful assembly in the Americas.

A **2019 report** by the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights showed protest to be legally protected on many grounds.

COMPLAINTS

- The Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) monitors human rights in the Americas region and receives complaints (petitions) from individuals, groups, and civil society organisations (NGOs). Generally, domestic remedies must be exhausted first. Find more information here on the criteria for submitting a complaint. The IAHRC can make recommendations to States to remedy the case.

- The Inter-American Court of Human Rights is a judicial body that interprets the American Convention on Human Rights and other inter-American treaties. A complaint must be first filed with the IAHRC (above).



ASIA-PACIFIC

AGREEMENTS

- ASEAN Human Rights Declaration - **Article 24:** This is declaration (*not legally-binding*) recognizes the right of freedom of peaceful assembly in Southeast Asia.

COMPLAINTS

There is at present no formal complaint mechanism available in the Asia-Pacific region for human rights violations.



EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

AGREEMENTS

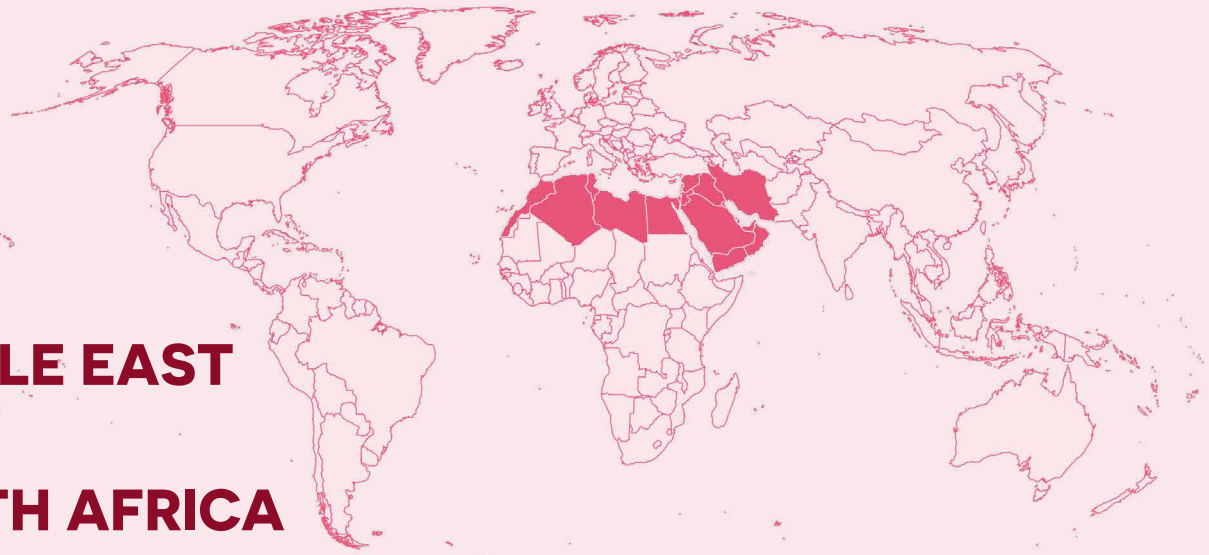
- European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) - **Article 11:** Guarantees the right of freedom of peaceful assembly and association in Europe.

- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union - **Article 12:** Protects the right of freedom of assembly and association at the EU level.

COMPLAINTS

- European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR): any individual, group or NGO claiming that is a member State of the Council of Europe can apply to the ECtHR provided they have tried legal remedies in their own country or if domestic remedies are ineffective or unreasonably delayed. Find out more information here on how to file case and check the online checklist for admissibility.

- Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU): individuals or organisations can bring a case before the CJEU if they are directly affected by violations of EU law and national remedies have been exhausted or unavailable. Guidance on submitting cases can be found here.



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

AGREEMENTS

- Arab Charter on Human Rights - Article 24(6): Guarantees the right of freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association.

COMPLAINTS

- Arab Human Rights Committee (AHRC): individuals, groups or NGOs from States that have ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights can submit complaints.

4.3. CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

Many countries around the world guarantee peaceful assembly in their Constitutions. Governments often regard Constitutions as the primary legal source in their country, so it is important to be aware of what rights and freedoms are included and what they recognise or guarantee, or not.

FIND OUT What does your Constitution say about freedom of peaceful assembly?

CONSULT & CHECK What does your constitution says about other, relevant rights and freedoms?

For example:

- What does your Constitution say on freedom of opinion, expression or speech?
- What does your Constitution say about the right to a fair trial?
- Does the Constitution prohibit torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment?
- Does the Constitution enshrine the right to participate in public affairs?

The Constitute Project *houses the world's constitutions so you can* ***search for your country****. You can search specifically for the provisions on right of peaceful assembly by going to:*

Topic> (scroll down to) Constitutional Topic Pages> Rights and Duties> Civil and Political Rights> ***Freedom of Assembly*** *and this will pull up 193 countries and the relevant article and text.*

Also, by consulting your constitution you will be able to check discrepancies between existing or proposed domestic laws and what is stated in the constitution.

> *Malaysia: In a win for peaceful assembly, in July 2025, Malaysia's Federal Court ruled that the legal requirement to give police five days' notice before holding an assembly (under the Peaceful Assembly Act) was unconstitutional because it penalised organisers for failing to notify authorities.*

4.4. NATIONAL LAWS AND PRACTICES

FIND OUT What are the laws and practices most commonly impacting on peaceful assembly in your country?

Across the globe restrictions on the right of peaceful assembly include:

- banning or restricting the use of face coverings/masks.
- criminalising protesters.
- using foreign agent or foreign influence laws to restrict civil society participation and funding
- using counter-terrorism laws to wrongfully label civil society actors and activists as "terrorists", "sympathizers of terrorist groups", or "associated" with terrorism or "violent extremism".
- misusing the Financial Action Task Force regulations to introduce laws targeting civil society organizations under the pretext of compliance with recommendation 8 concerning money laundering and terrorism financing.
- expanding restrictions during elections – 2024/25 was an election super cycle -
- misusing bans on hate speech to impose undue restrictions on legitimate protest, offline and online.
- using critical infrastructure protection legislation to criminalise protests concerning or involving 'critical infrastructure' leading to heaving fines or imprisonment.

> Foreign-agent laws: The increase in adoption of Russian-style foreign agent laws particularly has become an effective tool in shrinking civic space. In Russia, they have been designed to stigmatise and silence critical NGOs. The Russian law has inspired other countries to adopt such laws, evidenced by the similarity in the legislation, such as in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In November 2024, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Russian law violated the rights to freedom of expression and privacy of NGOs and individuals.
>
> Consult: Civicus has documented the global spread of foreign agents laws
>
> In South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Codes, a colonial-era law, is commonly used to prohibit the assembly of four or more people in an area to prevent unrest or disturbance to public tranquillity and has often been invoked to restrict peaceful protests and public gatherings.

In many countries national laws do not comply with the State's international human rights obligations. This gap is useful to know: a State's compliance with its international legal commitments. The UN and international and national NGOs country reports are helpful to find out such information.

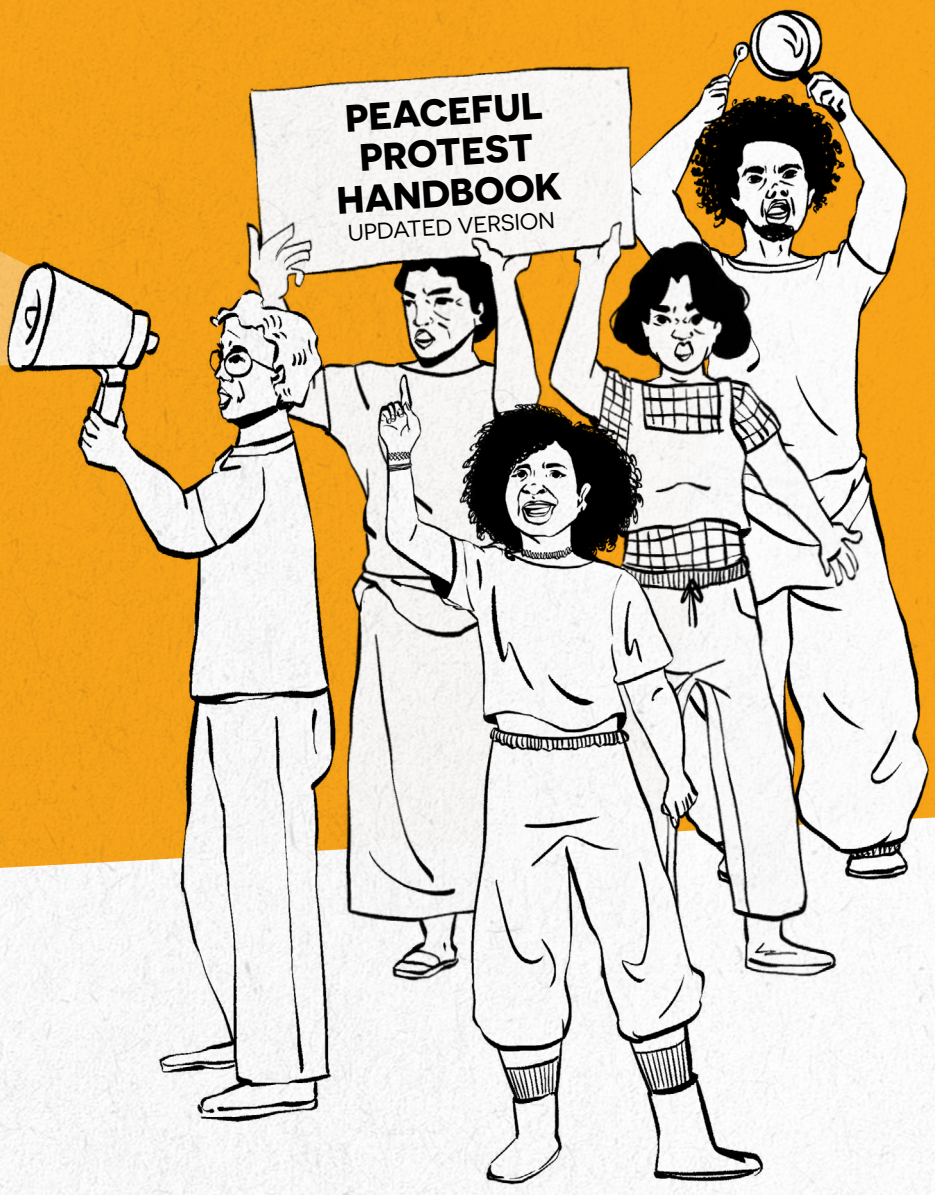
CHECK the legal framework for the right of peaceful assembly in your country.
Be sure to check when the information was last updated in this database as it may not reflect the latest legislation and/or amendments.

CHECK the OHCHR Universal Human Rights Index to find analysis on relevant national laws in your country.

5.
CONCLUSION

Peaceful protest is a powerful tool for people advocating for social justice worldwide. We hope this handbook will help situate your protest geographically and legally and help you plan the best approach that is safe and strategic for you and the communities you represent.





VUKA!

COALITION FOR CIVIC ACTION

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READ ABOUT VUKA

FIND OUT HOW TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE REGIONAL STRESS TEST

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