## “21st century activism is complex, persistent and all-pervasive. Governments will have no choice but to reinvent themselves.” Lysa John, Secretary General – CIVICUS

The nature of civic space has changed significantly since the start of the pandemic. The [CIVICUS Monitor](https://monitor.civicus.org/), which systematically tracks the status of civic freedoms across countries, has shown that even in established democracies, governments have used the pandemic to disproportionately curtail fundamental freedoms. 87pc of world’s population, which is nearly 9 of 10 people, now live in countries where civic freedoms are under attack; and over a quarter of the world’s population – 4 of 10 people – live in countries where civic space is completely closed. That is, contexts where they can be routinely attacked, arrested, or even killed by state or non-state actors for simply exercising their universally recognised right to expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Across 2020, we have seen an exponential rise in two trends that seriously threaten the work and lives of both activists and active citizens: one, the devastating mis-use of technology to increase censorship, surveillance and targeted misinformation or propaganda against civil society, particularly journalists and HRDs; and two, the impunity with which state and non-state actors are able to attack and intimidate civil society and active citizens who speak out against governments and organize for their rights. The CIVICUS Monitor has also made a special note of the rise in attacks on women and peaceful protestors in the past year.

In this day and age,every country must put in place the infrastructure and investment needed for a strong, well-networked and fully empowered civil society. We need stronger national and international laws that protect civil society and civic freedoms, and we need greater public engagement to demand and ensure the effective implementation of these laws. People of all ages and affiliations should have the means and resources to actively understand, influence and engage with public policies. In addition to this, we need to foster dialogue & initiative across all sections of society, and demonstrate an inclusive approach to leadership that celebrates a creative & collaborative engagement with diversity and dissent.

This not only requires us to rethink mechanisms for civic participation and people-centered accountability at the level of global and multilateral institutions, but it also requires a radical change in the way national and local institutions operate. The use of force to shut down a peaceful protest or rights-based movement is genuinely counter-productive. Our research shows that across the world, highly localized protests – such as a social media tax or fuel price increase – have quickly escalated into a larger and even trans-national mobilizations around systemic issues related to social, economic or climate justice. The ability to understand how day-to-day aggravations are linked to deep-rooted, systemic failures is more prevalent and cannot be reversed.

CIVICUS publishes an annual [State Of Civil Society](https://civicus.org/state-of-civil-society-report-2021/) report which is in its 10th edition this year. These reports have helped us analyse trends in civic action and social movements across the past decade. One indication that I find most inspiring in this regard is that social movements are more diverse, more connected and more mainstreamed than ever before. Technology has made access to opportunities for cross-border, multi-sector and inter-generational civic action more possible. The old playbook of leadership that thrives on fear, hierarchy and control is hopelessly insufficient today. 21st century activism is complex, persistent and all-pervasive. Governments and business will have no choice but to reinvent themselves to be more open, accountable, people-centered in the coming years.

### Lysa John is based in South Africa and can be reached through her Twitter handle, @lysajohn.