

CLOSING SPACE: DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS SUPPORT UNDER FIRE

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After seeing its reach increase for decades, international support for democracy and human rights faces a serious challenge: more and more governments are erecting legal and logistical barriers to democracy and rights programs, publicly vilifying international aid groups and their local partners, and harassing such groups or expelling them altogether. Despite the significant implications of the pushback, the roots and full scope of the phenomenon remain poorly understood and responses to it are often weak.

Key Themes

- **Pushback is global.** The phenomenon no longer emanates from only a few countries and is not only directed at a narrow part of the democracy aid community. Dozens of governments around the world, democratic as well as authoritarian, are lashing out at a wide spectrum of democracy programs and groups.
- **The trend is lasting.** Restrictive measures against international support for democracy and rights are not temporary setbacks. Pushback results from fundamental changes in international politics that are likely to persist for the foreseeable future.
- **The response is inadequate.** International reactions to the pushback phenomenon include diplomatic pressure, attempts to strengthen the international normative framework of freedom of association, and new adaptive programming. But competing interests, diverging donor perspectives, and a lack of coordination have weakened responses.

Strengthening Responses to Pushback

- **Deepen understanding of the problem.** Organizations engaged in democracy support should invest the necessary institutional resources to assess the full scale of the pushback problem and develop clear policy responses. Coordination on responses needs to be strengthened and extended to a wider set of aid actors.
- **Account for demonstration effects.** Given the pattern of copycat actions by hostile actors, aid-providing governments must shape responses based on a full consideration of the wider effects that their stance in any one country can have.
- **Explore new aid methods in more depth.** Aid providers need to go further in investigating how innovative methods—such as support for protective technologies and new forms of distancing—can make aid more effective in less hospitable political environments.
- **Improve NGO-law diplomacy.** Efforts to pressure governments not to adopt restrictive NGO laws have surged as an area of diplomatic engagement. Aid providers should seek to capture learning from these experiences, disseminate best practices, and strengthen such efforts.
- **Bolster international frameworks and advocacy efforts.** Concerned governments and international NGOs should continue their efforts to fortify standards for civil society protection at the United Nations, within regional organizations, and in the post-2015 development agenda.

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