

| YDN Policy Research Report

# Youth Democratic Participation, Democratic Backsliding and the Limits of Multilateral Support







# Youth Democratic Participation, Democratic Backsliding and the Limits of Multilateral Support

An Assessment of Multilateral Support Mechanisms for  
Youth Civic Actors in Restrictive Environments

*This report is prepared in the framework of the YDN Fellowship at the Permanent Secretariat of Community of Democracies. It draws on semi-structured interviews with youth civic actors, desk research across multiple independent monitoring organisations, and policy review of relevant multilateral frameworks. The findings and recommendations are independent and do not represent the position of any member state, the Community of Democracies or the US State Department.*

Special Acknowledgement



## General Information

---

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TITLE            | <i>Youth Democratic Participation, Democratic Backsliding and the Limits of Multilateral Support: An Assessment of Multilateral Support Mechanisms for Youth Civic Actors in Restrictive Environments</i> |
| AUTHOR           | <i>Safayet Zamil Nowshan</i>                                                                                                                                                                              |
| DATE             | <i>7 July 2026</i>                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| PUBLISHER        | <i>Youth Democracy Network, Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies, Warsaw, Poland</i>                                                                                                     |
| RESEARCH PARTNER | <i>Partnership for Integrity (P4I) — contributed primary field research including semi-structured interviews for the Serbia and Myanmar case studies</i>                                                  |
| FUNDING          | <i>This research was made possible through the generous support of the United States Department of State</i>                                                                                              |
| COPYRIGHT        | <i>© 2026 Youth Democracy Network, Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies.<br/>All rights reserved.</i>                                                                                    |
| CONTACT          | <i>Safayet Zamil Nowshan<br/>zamilszn@gmail.com<br/><br/>Youth Democracy Network<br/>YDN@community-democracies.org</i>                                                                                    |



# Table of Contents

|                                                                                     |                                                                                            |           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
|    | <b>Executive Summary</b>                                                                   | <b>05</b> |
|    | <b>Core Findings</b>                                                                       | <b>06</b> |
|    | <b>1. Context and Scope</b>                                                                | <b>07</b> |
|    | <b>2. Analytical Framework</b>                                                             | <b>08</b> |
|                                                                                     | 2.1 Defining Democratic Backsliding                                                        | 08        |
|                                                                                     | 2.2 Youth Democratic Participation: Definition, Forms, and Enabling Conditions             | 09        |
|                                                                                     | 2.3 The Multilateral Framework: Commitments and Structural Limitations                     | 09        |
|                                                                                     | 2.4 The Symbolic-Substantive Framework                                                     | 10        |
|                                                                                     | 2.5 Methodology: Research Design and Case Selection Rationale                              | 11        |
|    | <b>3. Case Studies</b>                                                                     | <b>12</b> |
|                                                                                     | 3.1 Democratic Context and Youth Civic Mobilisation                                        | 12        |
|                                                                                     | 3.2 Multilateral Engagement and Available Mechanisms                                       | 13        |
|                                                                                     | 3.3 Democratic Context and Youth Resistance                                                | 14        |
|                                                                                     | 3.4 Multilateral Engagement and Available Mechanisms                                       | 15        |
|                                                                                     | 3.5 Democratic Context and Generational Exclusion                                          | 16        |
|                                                                                     | 3.6 Multilateral Engagement and Security-Democracy Trade-offs                              | 16        |
|                                                                                     | 3.7 Democratic Context and Youth-Led Transition                                            | 17        |
|                                                                                     | 3.8 The Protection Gap for Unaffiliated Civic Actors                                       | 17        |
|                                                                                     | 3.9 Democratic Context and the Consent Problem                                             | 18        |
|                                                                                     | 3.10 Youth Civic Space and Multilateral Engagement                                         | 18        |
|  | <b>4. Cross-Case Analysis</b>                                                              | <b>20</b> |
|                                                                                     | 4.1 The Systematic Subordination of Democratic Governance to Strategic Interests           | 20        |
|                                                                                     | 4.2 The Exclusion of Non-Institutionalised Actors from Multilateral Mechanisms             | 20        |
|                                                                                     | 4.3 The Gap Between Documentation Capacity and Protective Response                         | 21        |
|                                                                                     | 4.4 The Asymmetric Resourcing Environment and the Authoritarian Financing Counteroffensive | 22        |
|  | <b>5. Recommendations</b>                                                                  | <b>23</b> |
|  | <b>6. Conclusion</b>                                                                       | <b>26</b> |
|  | <b>References</b>                                                                          | <b>27</b> |
|  | <b>Author Details</b>                                                                      | <b>28</b> |



## ➤ Executive Summary

Across the world, young people are organising: sharing political views online, building civic coalitions, monitoring elections, leading protest movements, and occupying the spaces where formal institutions have failed to protect democracy. According to the *V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026*<sup>1</sup>, 74 per cent of the world's population now lives under some form of autocratic governance, and the democratic gains of the past five decades have been largely reversed. Young people are simultaneously the most active force of civic resistance and the most exposed to its consequences — surveilled, detained, legally excluded, and denied the economic conditions for sustained engagement. Paradoxically, while international democracy assistance has contracted, authoritarian and illiberal governments have substantially increased domestic and transnational financing to consolidate control, neutralise opposition, and build parallel civic structures free from democratic accountability. The institutions mandated to protect youth civic space were built for a different political era. This report examines the structural gap between their formal commitments and what young civic actors experience in practice.



Proclamation of July revolution | Prothom Alo

The argument advanced here is structural: the mechanisms through which multilateral institutions operationalise their values were designed for conditions of democratic consolidation, not democratic crisis. Five case studies spanning four continents and five distinct regime configurations — Serbia, Myanmar, Uganda, Bangladesh, and El Salvador — produce four consistent analytical findings about how the multilateral system engages with youth democratic participation under conditions of backsliding. Despite their significant differences in region, political history, and form of democratic deterioration, the same institutional failures recur across all five contexts.

<sup>1</sup> V-Dem Institute. (2026). *Democracy report 2026: Unraveling the democratic era?* University of Gothenburg. <https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>

## ➤ Core Findings

---

01

The multilateral architecture was designed for democratic consolidation, not democratic crisis. Its access criteria, response timelines, and funding structures systematically exclude the young civic actors most exposed to risk. This is a design problem, not a resource problem.

02

Geopolitical and strategic interests consistently override democratic governance concerns. Security partnerships, trade relationships, and regional stability calculations structurally take precedence over conditionality enforcement in every case examined. Simultaneously, authoritarian regimes exploit this dynamic by channelling alternative, conditions-free financing to favoured actors, creating an asymmetric environment that multilateral institutions are structurally ill-equipped to counterbalance.

03

Most multilateral engagement with youth civic actors is symbolic rather than substantive — providing access to institutional platforms without producing protection, resource flows, or measurable policy change. The most effective practical support consistently comes from decentralised, informal, and peer-to-peer mechanisms rather than formal multilateral bodies.

04

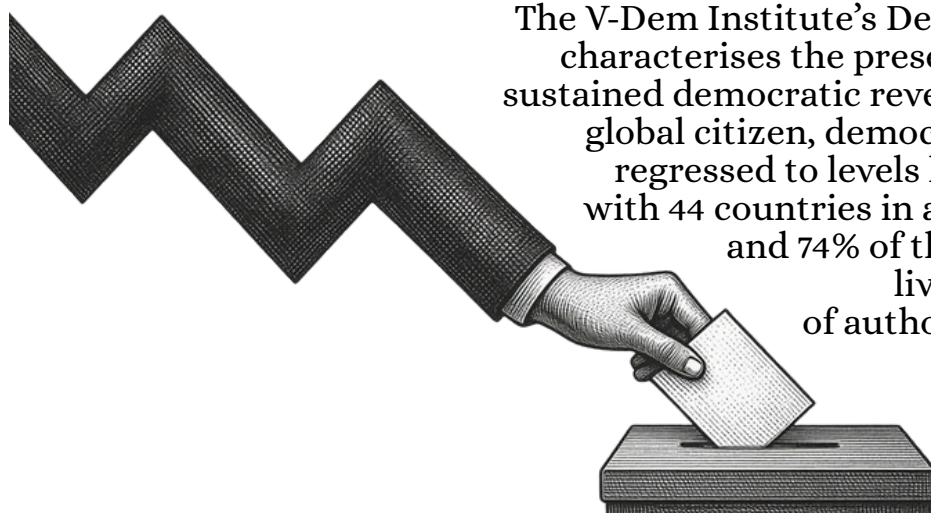
The most consequential youth movements of recent years deliberately avoided formal registration as a survival strategy against state targeting. Because every formal multilateral mechanism requires institutional registration as a threshold condition for engagement, these movements are structurally invisible to the very institutions designed to support them.

This report advances five recommendations addressed to governments and multilateral institutions. They are grounded in the evidence of the five case studies, actionable within existing institutional mandates, and focused on structural reform rather than incremental adjustment. The fifth and most foundational recommendation calls on governments to confer genuine binding authority on multilateral bodies — without which all other recommendations remain constrained by the same geopolitical calculus this report documents



## ➤ 1. Context and Scope

---



The V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026 characterises the present moment as one of sustained democratic reversal<sup>2</sup>. For the average global citizen, democratic conditions have regressed to levels last observed in 1978, with 44 countries in active autocratisation and 74% of the world's population living under some form of authoritarian governance.

Crucially, the predominant mode of decline is not the military coup or the overnight seizure of power. It is the gradual, legally mediated erosion of courts, electoral systems, media independence, and civic space by elected governments that retain democracy's outward institutional form while emptying it of substance

This structural shift in how authoritarianism operates has been compounded by two converging trends that define the current policy environment. First, the traditional ecosystem of international democracy assistance has experienced significant contraction across multiple donor countries, reducing the financial and institutional infrastructure available to civil society organisations and youth civic actors in restrictive environments. Second – and analytically more significant – authoritarian and illiberal governments have simultaneously expanded their own financing architectures, both domestically and transnationally. These governments fund parallel civic organisations, state-aligned youth bodies, and cross-border networks of ideological support that operate entirely outside democratic conditionality frameworks. The result is a structural asymmetry in which internationally supported civil society is weakened at precisely the moment that state-aligned, authoritarian-financed alternatives are being strengthened. This dynamic is not peripheral to the analysis that follows; it is central to understanding why the multilateral system's structural limitations have become so consequential in the present period.

The question this report addresses is not whether multilateral institutions should support youth democratic participation – that commitment is established in their founding instruments, from the UN Charter to Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. The question is whether the system as currently designed and resourced can deliver on that commitment under present conditions, and what structural changes would be required to make it so. The five case studies presented in the following sections provide the evidential foundation for answering that question.

---

<sup>2</sup>United Nations Security Council. (2015). Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015))

## ➤ 2. Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Defining Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding, as applied throughout this report, refers to the incremental erosion of democratic institutions by elected governments through legal and administrative instruments rather than through overtly coercive seizure of power. Nancy Bermeo's (2016) foundational taxonomy identifies executive aggrandisement

as the dominant contemporary form:<sup>4</sup> the concentration of power in the executive branch through legal manipulation of courts, parliaments, and electoral rules. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) situate this within a broader 'third wave of autocratisation' — a genuinely new political phenomenon distinguished by its gradualism, its exploitation of legal instruments, and its strategic use of democratic norms to undermine democratic substance.<sup>5</sup>



In practice, contemporary backsliding takes many forms that are individually defensible as ordinary governance: installing loyalists in judicial appointments; deploying commercial surveillance software against civil society actors; enacting cybercrime legislation under which online criticism of officials constitutes a criminal offence; weaponising NGO registration requirements to restrict independent organisations; shutting down digital infrastructure during elections or protests; and constructing nominally independent opposition parties and media outlets designed to simulate pluralism without providing it. International IDEA's 2025 analysis of backsliding in Asia identifies five recurring methods: packing and instrumentalising the judiciary, tilting the electoral playing field, weakening political opposition, expanding executive power, and shrinking civic space<sup>6</sup>. All five are identifiable in at least three of this report's five case study countries. Critically, because there is rarely a single dramatic triggering event, multilateral institutions designed to respond to acute crises tend to respond with documentation rather than protective action, and with responses that arrive long after the moment of acute need has passed.

<sup>[4]</sup>Bermeo, N. (2016). *On democratic backsliding*. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>

<sup>[5]</sup>Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here. *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>

<sup>[6]</sup>International IDEA. (2025). *Designing resilient institutions: Countering democratic backsliding in Asia*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/designing-resilient-institutions-countering-democratic-backsliding-asia>



## 2.2 Youth Democratic Participation: Definition, Forms, and Enabling Conditions

Youth democratic participation, as understood in this report, encompasses the full range of civic action through which young people — broadly defined as individuals aged 15 to 35 — engage in shaping democratic governance. In practice, this includes sharing political views online, forming civic associations and student unions, monitoring elections, leading and sustaining protest movements, lobbying parliaments, and building encrypted solidarity networks in restrictive environments. Drawing on Cornwall and Gaventa's (2001) participation typology<sup>[7]</sup>, this report distinguishes between invited participation — where young people are granted access to institutional spaces on terms set by established actors — and claimed participation, where young people create their own spaces of civic action outside or against institutional frameworks. The five cases below demonstrate that the most politically consequential youth participation under conditions of backsliding is consistently of the second type: claimed, informal, and non-institutionalised.

In authoritarian contexts, youth participation carries compounding costs that participation frameworks designed for stable democracies do not adequately account for. Economic marginalisation is the first: in environments where public employment, university access, and social services are instrumentalised as tools of political control, the cost of civic dissent is material as well as reputational. Digital repression is the second: commercial spyware, network shutdowns, coordinated disinformation, and platform manipulation have transformed digital civic space from a resource for organising into an arena of state and para-state surveillance. Physical risk is the third: arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and in several of the cases examined here, lethal force. Authoritarian financing compounds all three: governments increasingly fund state-aligned youth organisations, issue scholarships conditional on political loyalty, and sponsor disinformation networks that delegitimise independent youth civic actors. These dynamics constitute the operating environment in which young people must navigate any engagement with formal or international institutions.

Notwithstanding these constraints, the evidence across all five cases demonstrates that young civic actors possess significant organising capacity and an ability to mobilise at scale that established civil society organisations frequently cannot replicate. The limitation documented here is not insufficient commitment or capacity on the part of youth actors. It is the absence of access to the resources, legal protection, and institutional recognition that would allow their participation to produce durable democratic outcomes.



<sup>[7]</sup>Cornwall, A., & Gaventa, J. (2001). From users and choosers to makers and shapers. *IDS Bulletin*, 32(2), 50–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2001.mp32002006.x>

## *2.3 The Multilateral Framework: Commitments and Structural Limitations*

The multilateral system's formal commitment to youth democratic participation is extensive. At the United Nations, Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security established five pillars for action, participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement, reaffirmed by Resolutions 2419 (2018), 2535 (2020), and 2807 (2025).<sup>[8]</sup> The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1, 2024) includes binding commitments under Actions 36 and 37 to strengthen meaningful youth participation at national and international levels.<sup>[9]</sup> The OHCHR's 2020 Guidance Note on Protecting and Promoting Civic Space and the Human Rights Council's Resolution 59/L.5 (2025) on freedom of peaceful assembly<sup>[10]</sup> establish formal standards directly applicable to the conditions documented in the case studies below. At the regional level, the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, the African Union's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007), the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy (2001), the OAS Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by all five countries in this report, establish applicable binding and non-binding standards.

What this report examines is the gap between these formal commitments and their operational reality. The UN Secretary-General's biennial Youth, Peace and Security reports (2020, 2022, 2024) document from within the system that commitments have not been converted into protection or sustained investment at the scale required.<sup>[11]</sup> Three structural challenges explain this gap. First, these mechanisms were designed for conditions in which the principal task was encouraging democratic participation, not protecting civic actors from state repression; their access criteria, funding architectures, and timelines presuppose institutional environments that do not exist in the contexts they are now called upon to address. Second, geopolitical and strategic interests within multilateral decision-making consistently override democratic governance considerations, a pattern documented across all five case studies in this report. Third, the multilateral system faces a structural counterpart: authoritarian governments have not reduced their investment in civic space — they have redirected it, funding state-aligned organisations, co-opting civil society, and building parallel institutional architectures that serve consolidation rather than accountability. The net effect is that the democratic civic ecosystem that multilateral institutions depend upon as implementing partners has been structurally weakened, while the authoritarian ecosystem it competes with has been systematically strengthened.

## *2.4 The Symbolic-Substantive Framework*

This report evaluates multilateral engagement through a Symbolic-Substantive Framework with one analytical test: does engagement change outcomes for the people it addresses? Symbolic engagement confers visibility — conference platforms, consultation roles, advisory seats — without producing protection, resource flows, or policy change. Substantive engagement produces demonstrable differences: resources reaching excluded actors, protective intervention

---

<sup>[8]</sup>United Nations General Assembly. (2024). Pact for the future (A/RES/79/1). <https://undocs.org/A/RES/79/1>

<sup>[9]</sup>OHCHR. (2020). UN guidance note on protecting and promoting civic space. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space>

<sup>[10]</sup>Human Rights Council. (2025). Resolution 59/L.5 on freedom of peaceful assembly (A/HRC/RES/59/L.5). <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/59/L.5>

<sup>[11]</sup>United Nations Secretary-General. (2024). Youth, peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/207). <https://undocs.org/S/2024/207>



reducing real-world risk, or policy decisions altered as a direct result of youth civic input. The proliferation of youth advisory panels, observer seats, and consultation processes across the multilateral system represents invited participation that can expand indefinitely without producing substantive change, provided that agenda-setting, decision-making, and resource allocation remain with institutional actors rather than with the youth actors nominally being served.

## *2.5 Methodology: Research Design and Case Selection Rationale*

This report examines whether existing multilateral mechanisms produce substantive outcomes for youth civic actors operating in restrictive environments. It does not assess the overall state of democracy in the selected countries, nor evaluate the full range of multilateral institutional activity. The scope is bounded by one question: does the system as currently designed deliver on its formal commitments to youth democratic participation under conditions of backsliding?

The research is grounded in a qualitative multi-site case study design following a most-different systems logic (Yin, 2018)<sup>[13]</sup>. When the same structural failures appear across cases that are maximally different in region, regime type, and form of democratic deterioration, those failures indicate a systemic property of the multilateral architecture rather than the circumstances of any individual case. Three primary methods inform the analysis: semi-structured interviews with youth civic actors conducted under conditions of confidentiality; desk research drawing on V-Dem, Freedom House, CIVICUS Monitor, OHCHR documentation, and UN Special Rapporteur reports; and policy review of the relevant multilateral frameworks to assess where formal commitments fall short in practice.

Case selection followed a purposive sampling strategy (Maxwell, 1996) governed by three criteria. First, maximum variation in form of democratic deterioration: the five cases represent five qualitatively distinct configurations — legalistic institutional simulation (Serbia), military seizure of power and civil war (Myanmar), gerontocratic incumbency insulated by strategic value (Uganda), youth-led transition followed by institutional fragility (Bangladesh), and executive aggrandisement under popular consent (El Salvador) — covering the principal forms of contemporary backsliding identified in the comparative politics literature (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Second, geographic and institutional diversity across four continents and four distinct regional multilateral frameworks, enabling comparative assessment of multilateral performance across different institutional contexts. Third, data sufficiency: each case is supported by primary interview data, verified composite documentation, or a triangulated body of secondary evidence from independent monitoring organisations sufficient to ground analytical claims.

The selection criterion was analytical scope relative to the research question, not the severity of democratic deterioration.

---

<sup>[12]</sup> Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

## ➤ 3. Case Studies

The five cases presented in this section follow the structured analytical template described in Section 2.5. Each examines the democratic environment, the profile of youth civic actors operating within it, the nature of engagement with multilateral bodies, and the gaps between what multilateral support offered and what the situation required. A cross-case synthesis follows in Section 4. The Secretary-General's biennial reports on Youth, Peace and Security (2020, 2022, 2024) confirm from within the UN system that formal commitments have not been converted into protection or sustained investment; the 2024 report further documents a decline in Security Council references to young people since 2021, indicating reduced institutional attention at precisely the moment of greatest need.<sup>[13]</sup>

01

### Student Uprising Against Corruption Serbia 2024–2025

#### 3.1 Democratic Context and Youth Civic Mobilisation

V-Dem classifies Serbia as an electoral autocracy, with its Liberal Democracy Index in sustained decline since 2012. The governing Serbian Progressive Party has constructed an architecture of simulated pluralism through nominally independent media, opposition parties, and electoral monitoring bodies that satisfies the formal criteria of democratic evaluation while concentrating actual power. Standard multilateral monitoring instruments, which assess whether democratic structures formally exist rather than whether they function independently, consistently produce misleading assessments of the Serbian political environment. The civil society researcher interviewed for this case study (referred to as Alex) describes this dynamic as a deliberate strategy: the government invests significant resources in performing democratic compliance precisely because it understands that multilateral systems evaluate form rather than substance.

The collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad in November 2024, widely attributed to systemic construction corruption, catalysed a sustained student protest movement that closed over forty universities and brought approximately 150,000 people into the streets. State response was calibrated to suppress mobilisation while limiting international visibility: over 900 activists were arrested; commercial spyware (including NoviSpy and Pegasus, documented by Amnesty International)<sup>[14]</sup> was deployed against protest participants during police detention; and civil society offices were raided following the withdrawal of international funding, with officials deploying the same foreign-interference framing that had been used internationally to justify aid cuts. This rhetorical borrowing is analytically significant: it demonstrates how authoritarian governments exploit international political narratives to legitimise domestic civic space restrictions. Simultaneously, pro-government media and government-aligned youth organisations financed by public resources and insulated from international scrutiny actively promoted counter-narratives delegitimising protest participants.

<sup>[13]</sup> United Nations Secretary-General. (2024). Youth, peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/207). <https://undocs.org/S/2024/207>

<sup>[14]</sup> Amnesty International. (2024). Serbia: Spyware deployed against activists. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/serbia-activists-targeted-with-spyware-and-phone-extractions-in-chilling-crackdown/>

### 3.2 Multilateral Engagement and Available Mechanisms

Alex characterises his organisation's engagement with EU and UN bodies as substantive in exchange but inconsequential in outcome. Briefings are provided, valued by interlocutors, and incorporated into official reports; European Parliament resolutions and OSCE/ODIHR observation reports document the dysfunction described. None has been linked to a modification of Serbia's accession trajectory. The EU's concern over Serbia's potential reorientation toward Russian or Chinese strategic influence has produced a consistent geopolitical discount on conditionality enforcement: documented democratic regression does not result in suspension of accession progress because maintaining Belgrade's Euro-Atlantic alignment is treated as a higher-order strategic priority. Serbia thus receives the political legitimacy of EU partnership without the behavioural constraints that partnership is formally designed to impose.

Available multilateral mechanisms include the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and accession conditionality framework, OSCE/ODIHR election observation, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, and the European Parliament's monitoring mechanisms. These mechanisms have produced extensive and credible documentation. None has been activated to produce binding consequences for Serbia's accession trajectory.



*Statements of concern are not tied to anything that costs our government something. That disconnect is exactly why they are dismissed.*

— Alex (pseudonym), civil society researcher, primary interview, June 2026



Serbian protesters honour victims of train station roof collapse | TRT World



## 02

## Youth Resistance Under Military Rule

### Myanmar, 2021 - 2026

### 3.3 Democratic Context and Youth Resistance

Myanmar represents an extreme case of democratic reversal — not incremental backsliding but outright institutional destruction through military coup. The February 2021 coup nullified the NLD's election result and triggered a civil war that has left over 5,000 civilians dead, more than 26,000 arrested, and over 2 million people internally displaced.<sup>[15]</sup> Youth led the early resistance through the Civil Disobedience Movement, which at its peak briefly united Bamar pro-democracy actors and ethnic nationality communities around a shared demand for federal democracy. As military repression escalated to lethal force, CDM organisers transitioned to underground and exile structures. The youth-led research organisation interviewed for this study (referred to as Kristen) operates on the Thai-Myanmar border, providing election analysis, disinformation monitoring, and diaspora documentation entirely on a voluntary basis, because no accessible international funding pathway exists for the work it does. Significantly, the SAC junta has expanded its own financing of state-aligned youth bodies within Myanmar, offering economic incentives — scholarships, civil service access, business licences — to co-opt young people who might otherwise join the resistance movement.



Myanmar Is Mired in Conflict and Chaos a Year After a Coup | The New York Times

<sup>[15]</sup> Freedom House. (2026). Freedom in the world 2026. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>



### 3.4 Multilateral Engagement and Available Mechanisms

Established civil society organisations dominate donor relationships and multilateral forums; bodies selecting civil society partners through standard processes reach organisations with institutional navigation capacity rather than those doing the most effective analytical or documentation work. Security Council action has been blocked by Chinese and Russian veto threats for five years. Three successive UN Special Envoys have reported fundamental access constraints.

The UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), successive Special Envoys, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, the Human Rights Council's independent mechanism, and ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (2021) collectively represent the most extensive multilateral documentation effort directed at any country in this report. Their collective failure to produce binding protective outcomes is the clearest available illustration of the documentation-enforcement gap. The geopolitical interests sustaining Security Council inaction are reinforced by economic relationships: Chinese infrastructure investment under the Belt and Road Initiative and pipeline infrastructure connecting Yunnan Province to the Bay of Bengal give Beijing structural incentives to prevent binding responses that might destabilise the SAC's grip on power.



*Resources are wasted on expensive one-off conferences. The same organisations are invited most of the time. Local youth-led work is invisible to the system.*

— Kristen (pseudonym), youth-led organisation, Thai-Myanmar border, primary interview, June 2026



Myanmar Civil War | Britannica

## 03

## Generational Opposition Under Four-Decade Incumbency Uganda, 2021

### 3.5 Democratic Context and Generational Exclusion

Uganda's population is over 75% under 35; its president has held power since 1986. The government manages youth political ambition through control of university enrolment and civil service access, while constraining genuine opposition through the NGO Registration Act, the Computer Misuse Act, and an Anti-Terrorism Act routinely applied against protest participation. The 2021 elections produced significant popular energy behind Robert Kyagulanyi's (Bobi Wine's) explicitly generational candidacy, followed by documented killings of opposition supporters, a nationwide internet shutdown on election day, and prosecution of youth activists under anti-terrorism statutes. No meaningful multilateral response followed. The government simultaneously finances a network of NRM-aligned youth organisations and youth wings, funded through public resources and operating outside international scrutiny, that serve as vehicles for political mobilisation while crowding out independent youth civil society.

### 3.6 Multilateral Engagement and Security-Democracy Trade-offs

The AU's African Charter on Democracy, Commonwealth democracy mechanisms, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, and EU and US bilateral human rights instruments all formally apply. Uganda's contributions to AU peacekeeping in Somalia and its hosting of over 1.5 million refugees have generated strategic credit with international partners that provides consistent insulation from conditionality activation. CIVICUS Monitor has rated Uganda's civic space as 'repressed' continuously since 2019.<sup>[16]</sup> The mechanisms that document this and the mechanisms capable of responding to it proceed on institutionally separate tracks with no reliable point of connection.



Uganda goes to the polls amid heavy security and internet blackout | OPB

<sup>[16]</sup> CIVICUS Monitor. (2025). *Tracking civic space 2025*. <https://monitor.civicus.org>



## 04

## The July Uprising and It's Aftermath Bangladesh, 2024

### 3.7 Democratic Context and Youth-Led Transition

Student protests against a reinstated public employment quota escalated in July 2024, following the Hasina government's lethal response, into a mass uprising that ended fifteen years of Awami League rule. OHCHR confirmed at least 650 people killed between 16 July and 11 August 2024; health ministry figures exceeded 1,000.<sup>[17]</sup> Over 11,000 people were arrested. Students Against Discrimination, which organised the movement, deliberately avoided formal registration because the Awami League had a documented history of using registration requirements to target and dissolve civil society organisations. During the peak weeks of state violence, major bilateral donors issued calls for restraint without attributing responsibility; no emergency Human Rights Council session was convened. The OHCHR's fact-finding report was published in February 2025 — six months after the transition had already concluded through popular force. The post-transition period compounded these failures: the Yunus interim government faced constitutional rebuilding and transitional justice without the institutional support these processes required, as planned international programming was withdrawn or delayed before deployment.

### 3.8 The Protection Gap for Unaffiliated Civic Actors

The composite account presented here — referred to as X — is constructed from verified, publicly documented patterns confirmed by OHCHR, Human Rights Watch, Fortify Rights, and Odhikar. X was a 22-year-old economics student who was detained without a warrant by plainclothes security personnel, held for nine days in an undisclosed facility, and released without charge. Bangladeshi law requires court production within 24 hours of arrest; his detention of nine days constitutes an enforced disappearance under the applicable legal standard. His family contacted an international human rights organisation during his detention and received no confirmed reply. He has not filed a formal complaint because no protection mechanism can assure him that doing so would not expose him to renewed targeting. The Bangladesh Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances had received over 1,800 formal complaints by mid-2025, a figure that likely understates the true scale given the documented reluctance of affected individuals to engage with formal accountability processes.<sup>[18]</sup> X represents the largest category of July 2024 detainees — the unaffiliated ordinary citizen — for whom no multilateral protection mechanism was designed, activated, or available.

<sup>[17]</sup> OHCHR. (2025, February). Fact-finding mission on Bangladesh. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/fact-finding-mission-bangladesh>

<sup>[18]</sup> Bangladesh Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. (2025, June). Second interim report. Government of Bangladesh

### 3.9 Democratic Context and the Consent Problem

El Salvador presents the most analytically challenging form of democratic backsliding examined in this report: institutional dismantling carried out with genuine popular consent. President Nayib Bukele won re-election in February 2024 with 84.7 per cent of the vote. International IDEA rates El Salvador as experiencing the fastest rate of democratic backsliding of any country in Latin America. Bukele's model — labelled 'millennial authoritarianism' in the comparative politics literature — combines executive aggrandisement with social media populism, tangible security improvements, and anti-corruption branding that provides institutional erosion with democratic cover. Using his 2021 legislative supermajority, he fired all five judges of the Constitutional Chamber and replaced the Attorney General within days. The new court reinterpreted the constitution to permit his re-election, which had been explicitly prohibited. Presidential term limits were abolished by a legislative vote of 57 to 3 in August 2025. The legislature was simultaneously reduced from 84 to 60 seats to reinforce his supermajority. A State of Emergency declared in March 2022 and continuously renewed has resulted in over 91,500 arrests; at least 500 deaths in state custody have been documented by the IACHR.<sup>[19]</sup> Freedom House rates El Salvador as having declined more than any other country in the Americas over the past decade.

### 3.10 Youth Civic Space and Multilateral Engagement

The civic space consequences for young Salvadorans are concrete and documented. The Platform for the Right to Defend Rights recorded 533 attacks against human rights defenders and journalists in 2024 — a 135 per cent increase on the previous year.<sup>[20]</sup> Civil society organisations have documented 327 enforced disappearances under the State of Emergency, disproportionately affecting young men from low-income communities. At least 43 journalists were forced into exile in 2025. A Foreign Agents Law, passed in 2025 after international pressure blocked an earlier version in 2021, imposes registration, oversight, and taxation requirements on organisations receiving international funding, creating severe operational constraints for independent youth and human rights groups. The government simultaneously expanded financing for state-aligned civic organisations that operate within the government's communicative framework, creating an ecosystem in which financially constrained independent civil society competes with well-resourced government-aligned alternatives.

<sup>[19]</sup> Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. (2024). *Report on human rights in El Salvador under the state of emergency*. OAS. <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2024/informe-sv-en.pdf>

<sup>[20]</sup> Platform for the Right to Defend Rights. (2025). *Annual report: Attacks against human rights defenders in El Salvador 2024*. Cristosal.

The arrest of Ruth Eleonora López on 18 May 2025 illustrates the pattern at the individual level. López, a lawyer and head of the Anti-Corruption and Justice Unit at Cristosal, had formally submitted more than fifteen corruption cases against government officials for investigation. Charged first with embezzlement, then with illicit enrichment fifteen days later, she was held incommunicado for more than 40 hours before her location was disclosed to her family or legal counsel (Amnesty International, 2025). As of the date of this report, she remains in pretrial detention under judicial secrecy. The UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers expressed concern (Satterthwaite, 2025), Amnesty International declared her a prisoner of conscience (Amnesty International, 2025), and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued a precautionary measure (IACHR, 2025). None produced her release.

El Salvador introduces a multilateral dimension that is qualitatively different from the other four cases: a documented instance of effective multilateral pressure followed by its deliberate dismantling through bilateral relationship restructuring. In 2021, coordinated pressure from the United States, the European Union, and the German Embassy successfully halted Bukele's first Foreign Agents Law (Human Rights Watch, 2021). By 2025, the same law was enacted because the geopolitical relationship had structurally inverted: the United States entered a contract with El Salvador to imprison US deportees at CECOT, converting the principal source of democratic pressure into a strategic partner with financial interests in the government's continuity. The IACHR published a comprehensive report calling for the State of Emergency to end; El Salvador has not complied (IACHR, 2024). The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has issued precautionary measures that have not been implemented (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2025). El Salvador's report to the UN Committee Against Torture is more than three years overdue (UN Committee Against Torture, 2025). The case demonstrates both the potential and the structural limits of multilateral pressure: it can work when bilateral interests align with democratic governance commitments, and it fails as soon as a more highly valued bilateral interest supersedes them.



Judge orders El Salvador human rights lawyer jailed pending trial | AP News



## ➤ 4. Cross-Case Analysis

---

Five cases from five countries across four continents generate four consistent structural findings. Their diversity makes the convergence analytically significant: these are not context-specific failures but systemic properties of how the multilateral architecture is designed and how it is constrained by the political interests of the states that fund and govern it.

### *4.1 The Systematic Subordination of Democratic Governance to Strategic Interests*

In every case examined, a more highly valued strategic interest took precedence over democratic governance concerns at the moment of acute need. In Serbia, concern over the country's potential reorientation toward Russian or Chinese strategic influence has produced a geopolitical discount on EU accession conditionality: documented regression in the Commission's own annual reports does not result in suspension of accession progress. In Uganda, troop contributions to AU peacekeeping and the hosting of over 1.5 million refugees have generated strategic credit that insulates the government from conditionality activation. In Bangladesh, the institutional momentum of existing development partnerships produced muted, non-attributive responses during peak state violence. In Myanmar, Chinese and Russian positions at the Security Council have blocked binding action for five years. In El Salvador, a bilateral detention agreement converted Washington from the principal source of democratic pressure into a strategic partner, removing multilateral leverage at the moment the Foreign Agents Law was re-enacted.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Annual Review of European Democracy Support documents the aggregate pattern: EU conditionality actions have been far outnumbered by cases in which the Union extended new cooperation and funding to regressing governments.<sup>[21]</sup> This pattern is not the product of individual institutional failures or insufficient commitment to democratic values. It is the predictable output of an international system in which strategic partnerships are institutionally more stable and more binding than democratic governance commitments. Critically, this dynamic is exploited by authoritarian governments that actively cultivate alternative patron relationships — with China, Russia, or Gulf states — precisely to reduce their exposure to democratic conditionality. The structural remedy requires changes to incentive architectures, not exhortations to existing actors.

### *4.2 The Exclusion of Non-Institutionalised Actors from Multilateral Mechanisms*

Students Against Discrimination in Bangladesh, the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar, and the student blockade movement in Serbia each deliberately avoided formal organisational registration as a survival strategy against state targeting. Formal structures create specific and well-understood vulnerabilities: offices can be raided, bank accounts frozen, and identified leaders arrested. In El Salvador, the criminalisation of protest under the State of Emergency and the introduction of the Foreign Agents Law have pushed the most independent civic voices toward informal and pseudonymous organising for the same reason.

---

<sup>[21]</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2024). European democracy support annual review 2024. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/research/2024/10/european-democracy-support-annual-review-2024>

Every formal multilateral engagement mechanism requires, as a threshold condition, either a registered organisational applicant or an identifiable named individual with existing international connections. The organisational innovations that make these movements politically effective and operationally resilient — their deliberate avoidance of formal institutionalisation — are simultaneously the qualities that render them invisible to the mechanisms supposedly designed to support them. The same dynamic is reinforced by authoritarian financing: government-aligned, formally registered youth organisations can access multilateral platforms from which genuinely independent movements are excluded. As Kristen describes, ‘the same organisations are supported and invited most of the time’ — not because they are the most effective civic actors, but because they have the institutional capacity to navigate the systems that gatekeep access.

### *4.3 The Gap Between Documentation Capacity and Protective Response*

The multilateral human rights documentation infrastructure is extensive and, within its own operational parameters, effective: V-Dem’s 531 indicators across 202 countries, the OHCHR’s fact-finding report on Bangladesh based on 250 interviews, the IIMM’s evidence base on Myanmar atrocities, Freedom House’s country-by-country assessments, the UN Special Rapporteur reports on Uganda, and CIVICUS Monitor’s global civic space ratings. The problem is not the quality or quantity of documentation. The problem is its decoupling from enforcement.

The OHCHR report on Bangladesh arrived six months after the political transition it documented had already concluded through popular force. The IIMM’s evidence base on Myanmar exists without any enforcement mechanism capable of deploying it. European Parliament resolutions on Serbia have produced no measurable change in accession conditionality. Alex’s organisation provides regular briefings to the EU mission in Belgrade; the briefings are incorporated into formal reports and have produced no change in Serbia’s accession trajectory. This pattern is consistent across all five cases. The explanation is not insufficient documentation; it is that the same geopolitical calculations that override conditionality in bilateral relationships also constrain what member states will support in multilateral enforcement mechanisms. Documentation without enforcement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for accountability. The multilateral system has invested heavily in the necessary condition while leaving the sufficient condition — political will to act on what is documented — structurally unaddressed.

### *4.4 The Asymmetric Resourcing Environment and the Authoritarian Financing Counteroffensive*

International democracy assistance has experienced significant contraction across multiple donor states, reducing the financial base available to civil society organisations and youth civic actors in restrictive environments. The contraction of Western official development assistance — across the United States, several European governments, and other traditional donors — has reduced the resource ecosystem that multilateral institutions relied upon as implementing partners.<sup>[22]</sup> This contraction is consequential, but framing it as the primary crisis misses a more fundamental structural shift.

---

<sup>[22]</sup> Global Democracy Coalition. (2025). *When aid fades*. Global Democracy Coalition. <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/when-aid-fades>

The more analytically significant development is the expansion, in the same period, of authoritarian financing architectures. Authoritarian and illiberal governments have substantially increased their own domestic and transnational financing to consolidate civic space control: funding state-aligned youth organisations and youth wings; offering conditional scholarships, employment, and business licences that co-opt potential opposition; sponsoring disinformation campaigns through digital ecosystem manipulation; and building cross-border networks of ideological support that are entirely free from democratic conditionality. Russia's documented transnational support for far-right and illiberal movements across Europe, Chinese state financing of Confucius Institutes and media operations in Southeast Asia and Africa, and Gulf state funding of religious and civic networks in South Asia all represent forms of authoritarian-aligned civic space financing that operates in direct competition with internationally supported independent civil society. In the countries examined in this report: the SAC in Myanmar finances state-aligned civic bodies and incentivises youth loyalty through economic access; the Museveni government in Uganda maintains an NRM youth network funded through public resources; Bukele's government in El Salvador finances government-aligned social media operations and civic organisations that actively delegitimise independent civil society. The net effect of simultaneous Western resource contraction and authoritarian resource expansion is a structural asymmetry: the democratic civic ecosystem is weakened precisely as the authoritarian civic ecosystem is strengthened.

Carothers, Kleinfeld, and Youngs (2025) argue that this moment requires not a restoration of the previous model but a fundamental reinvention of democracy support: greater prioritisation of coalition- and alliance-building, local resourcing, and alternative forms of civic organisation.<sup>[23]</sup> This is analytically correct, but the reinvention must also grapple with the authoritarian counteroffensive dimension. New models of democracy support that fail to account for the parallel expansion of authoritarian financing will remain structurally disadvantaged regardless of their design improvements.



Multilateral System | United Nations

<sup>[23]</sup> Carothers, T., Kleinfeld, R., & Youngs, R. (2025). *What future for international democracy support?* Carnegie Endowment. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/what-future-international-democracy-support>



## ➤ 5. Recommendations

Five recommendations follow from the evidence above, addressed to governments and multilateral institutions. They are limited in number to maintain clear lines of institutional accountability. Each is grounded in specific case study evidence and actionable within existing mandates. The fifth recommendation is foundational: without genuine transfer of binding authority to multilateral bodies, the other four recommendations will remain constrained by the same geopolitical calculus that this report documents.

### ***I. Enforce Democratic Conditionality Already Established in Existing Partnerships***

Governments must enforce the conditionality provisions already embedded in accession frameworks, development partnerships, and bilateral agreements, rather than treating documented democratic regression as a condition to be recorded in reports without consequences. The EU's financial conditionality mechanisms have demonstrated that this is operationally feasible: they froze over €137 billion for Poland and €22 billion for Hungary over rule-of-law concerns without permanently rupturing those relationships. The same architecture must extend to candidate countries and development partners. Specifically, governments should establish measurable, publicly reported civic space benchmarks within partnership frameworks, with predetermined and graduated consequences — including redirection of funding to independent civil society — when benchmarks are demonstrably not met.

*Evidence base: Section 4.1; Serbia and Uganda cases; Carnegie Endowment Annual Review 2024 (fn. 16).*

### ***II. Create Dedicated Pooled Funding Windows for Non-Institutionalised, Rapid-Response Youth Support***

The most effective practical support documented in this report came not from formal multilateral programmes but from decentralised, rapid-response, peer-to-peer mechanisms. Governments and multilateral institutions must therefore pivot a defined share of democracy assistance toward pooled, flexible funding windows that are purpose-built for the contexts this report documents: windows that can disburse resources within days rather than months; that do not require formal organisational registration, legal incorporation, or pre-existing international contacts as conditions of access; that provide non-bureaucratic micro-resourcing tailored to the operational scale of informal youth networks; and that incorporate protective safety nets, including emergency digital security support and rapid legal assistance, as built-in components rather than afterthoughts. The design rationale is structural: because effective youth movements under authoritarian pressure deliberately avoid the institutionalisation that standard multilateral funding requires, any mechanism conditioned on registration systematically excludes the actors it most needs to reach. Governments should also counterbalance authoritarian financing dynamics by ensuring that these mechanisms can reach civic actors who are actively competing against well-resourced state-aligned alternatives.

*Evidence base: Section 4.2 and 4.4; Myanmar, Bangladesh, and El Salvador cases.*

### III. Reform Multilateral Access Criteria to Recognise Non-Institutionalised Youth Movements

The threshold condition of formal registration embedded in most multilateral engagement and funding mechanisms is incompatible with how effective youth democratic movements now operate in restrictive environments. Governments should direct UN bodies, regional organisations, and development agencies to establish simplified recognition pathways for unregistered and informally organised youth movements, incorporating identity protection consistent with humanitarian sector practice for engagement with informal actors in conflict-affected settings. Eligibility criteria should be redesigned around civic function, demonstrated accountability, and documented community support rather than legal registration status. This reform is particularly urgent given that authoritarian governments are increasingly using registration requirements as instruments of civic space restriction — a trend documented in Bangladesh, El Salvador, and Uganda.

*Evidence base: Section 4.2; Bangladesh, Myanmar, Serbia, and El Salvador cases; OHCHR Guidance Note on Civic Space 2020 (fn. 8); HRC Resolution 59/L.5 2025 (fn. 9).*

### IV. Develop Pre-Authorised Transitional Support Protocols for the Post-Transition Period

The Bangladesh case demonstrates that the months immediately following a democratic transition constitute both the period of greatest institutional vulnerability and the period in which multilateral support has been most consistently absent or delayed. Governments and multilateral development institutions should establish standing, pre-authorised protocols for the post-transition window, deployable within weeks rather than subject to standard multi-year programme design cycles. These protocols should be co-designed with the civic movements that generated the transition rather than developed independently and offered to them as externally designed products. They should include provision for technical assistance on constitutional design, transitional justice architecture, and civic capacity-building at the moment it is most needed rather than after the institutional decisions that will define the transition have already been made.

*Evidence base: Section 3.7–3.9 (Bangladesh); Pact for the Future Actions 36–37 (A/RES/79/1, 2024) (fn. 7); OHCHR Fact-Finding Report on Bangladesh, February 2025 (fn. 13).*



After July: A fragile transition, a nation in waiting | The Daily Star

## V. Confer Genuine Binding Authority on Multilateral Bodies to Protect Democratic Space

The structural failures documented across all five cases share a common underlying cause: multilateral institutions possess formal mandates, documentation infrastructure, and stated commitments to protect democratic civic space, but are structurally prevented from acting on them when doing so would conflict with the bilateral interests of their member states. This is not a failure of institutional design in isolation; it is a failure of political will by the governments that control multilateral decision-making. Governments must address this directly by extending binding, majority-applicable decision-making authority to multilateral bodies in specified circumstances — particularly when a state's documented conduct triggers established civic space benchmarks — rather than requiring consensus among members with conflicting strategic interests. Regional organisations including the African Union, ASEAN, and the OAS should be actively supported by member governments to develop enforceable rather than advisory democratic governance mechanisms. Governments must also explicitly address the authoritarian financing counteroffensive: multilateral frameworks should include provisions that recognise and respond to state-directed parallel civic financing as itself a form of civic space restriction. Without a genuine transfer of decision-making authority from bilateral to multilateral processes, the international system will continue to produce documentation without consequence, and the structural asymmetry between authoritarian and democratic civic financing will continue to widen.

*Evidence base: Section 4.1; UNSCR 2250 (2015) Protection pillar (fn. 6); Pact for the Future Actions 36–37 (2024) (fn. 7); HRC Resolution 59/L.5 (2025) (fn. 9).*



Multilateral System | United Nations



## ➤ 6. Conclusion

The multilateral architecture for supporting youth democratic participation was developed during a period in which democracy was broadly advancing and the central task was consolidation and expansion. The conditions of 2026 are structurally different: a majority of the world's population lives under some form of authoritarian governance, the traditional ecosystem of international democracy assistance has contracted, and authoritarian governments have simultaneously expanded their own financing of civic space control. In this environment, multilateral institutions designed for democratic consolidation are being called upon to perform a fundamentally different function — democratic protection against active state repression — for which their access criteria, timelines, enforcement mechanisms, and funding architectures are not designed.

The five cases in this report — an EU candidate practising sophisticated institutional simulation, a state that has discarded the rules-based international order entirely, a decades-long incumbency insulated by strategic value, a country that completed a youth-led revolution that the international system was slow to recognise and slower to support, and a country where democratic erosion proceeds with the active consent of a majority of the population — demonstrate that these are not localised failures. They are systemic properties of an international architecture whose design assumptions have been overtaken by political realities. The five recommendations set out in Section 5 do not require new treaties, new institutional structures, or new mandates. They require governments to act on the commitments already made: to enforce conditionality already embedded in their partnerships, to fund mechanisms that the evidence shows actually work, to open multilateral engagement to the civic actors who are driving democratic change, to be present for democratic transitions when support is needed rather than after the critical decisions have been made, and to confer on multilateral bodies the authority to act when bilateral strategic interests would otherwise prevent it.

The civic actors whose experience informs this report continue their work under the conditions this report describes. The civil society researcher in Serbia continues to provide briefings that are incorporated into official assessments without producing consequences for conditionality. The youth organisation on the Thai-Myanmar border operates without access to adequate funding, competing against state-aligned bodies that receive public resources without conditions. The student in Bangladesh has not filed a formal complaint, because no mechanism can assure him that doing so would not expose him to renewed risk. Each of these situations is an institutional choice, not an inevitability. Governments and multilateral institutions possess both the mandates and the capacity to change them. What has been absent is the political will to prioritise democratic governance over the bilateral interests that have consistently displaced it.



*The international community has perfected the art of naming atrocities. What it has not perfected is stopping them.*

— Yanghee Lee, former UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, 2021

## References

- Amnesty International. (2024). Serbia: Spyware deployed against activists and protesters. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/serbia-activists-targeted-with-spyware-and-phone-extractions-in-chilling-crackdown/>
- Bangladesh Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. (2025, June). Second interim report. Government of Bangladesh.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2024). European democracy support annual review 2024. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/research/2024/10/european-democracy-support-annual-review-2024>
- Carothers, T., Kleinfeld, R., & Youngs, R. (2025). What future for international democracy support? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/what-future-international-democracy-support>
- CIVICUS Monitor. (2025). Tracking civic space 2025. CIVICUS. <https://monitor.civicus.org>
- Cornwall, A., & Gaventa, J. (2001). From users and choosers to makers and shapers: Reinserting the poor in poverty reduction. *IDS Bulletin*, 32(2), 50–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2001.mp32002006.x>
- Freedom House. (2026). Freedom in the world 2026. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>
- Global Democracy Coalition. (2025). When aid fades: Impacts and pathways for the global democracy ecosystem. Global Democracy Coalition. <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/when-aid-fades>
- Human Rights Council. (2023). Resolution 53/13 on Civil Society Space (A/HRC/RES/53/13). <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/53/13>
- Human Rights Council. (2025). Resolution 59/L.5 on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (A/HRC/RES/59/L.5). <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/59/L.5>
- Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. (2024). Report on the situation of human rights in El Salvador under the state of emergency. Organization of American States. <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2024/informe-sv-en.pdf>
- International IDEA. (2025). Designing resilient institutions: Countering democratic backsliding in Asia. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/designing-resilient-institutions-countering-democratic-backsliding-asia>
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2020, September). Guidance note on protecting and promoting civic space. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space>
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2025, February). Report of the fact-finding mission on Bangladesh. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/fact-finding-mission-bangladesh>
- Platform for the Right to Defend Rights. (2025). Annual report on attacks against human rights defenders and journalists in El Salvador 2024. Cristosal.
- United Nations General Assembly. (2024, September 22). Pact for the future (A/RES/79/1). <https://undocs.org/A/RES/79/1>
- United Nations Secretary-General. (2024, March 1). Youth, peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/207). <https://undocs.org/S/2024/207>
- United Nations Security Council. (2015, December 9). Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security (S/RES/2250). [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015))
- V-Dem Institute. (2026). Democracy report 2026: Unraveling the democratic era? University of Gothenburg. <https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

## ➤ Author Details

**Safayet Zamil Nowshan** is a youth democracy practitioner and human rights advocate with extensive experience advancing youth participation, democratic governance, and civic engagement at the national and international levels. His civic leadership began at the age of 14 in Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh, where he led one of the country's largest child-led organisations before expanding his work to youth rights and democratic participation globally.

He has served in advisory roles with two United Nations entities: as a Youth Adviser to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and as a UN Youth Champion for Disarmament with the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). In 2024, he addressed the UN Summit of the Future, drawing on his firsthand experience of the youth-led movement that contributed to the end of fifteen years of Awami League rule in Bangladesh. That experience informs the field research and analytical perspective presented in this report.



*Safayet Zamil Nowshan*

Nowshan holds both a Bachelor of Social Science and a Master of Social Science in International Relations from the University of Chittagong. He is currently a Member and Resident Fellow of the Youth Democracy Network at the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies in Warsaw, Poland, where his work focuses on strengthening meaningful youth engagement in democratic governance and multilateral decision-making processes.



YDN Resident Fellows and YDN Manager with the Secretary General at the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies in Warsaw, Poland | 2026







*A nonpartisan network equipping emerging leaders across policy, civil society, and governance with tools, knowledge and connections.*

