

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION
FREEDOM OF OPINION
FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY
RIGHT TO NON-DISCRIMINATION
RIGHT TO VOTE

**Upholding the Right to
Defend Human Rights
During Democratic Elections**

**Official Statement
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Protection International (PI) is an international non-profit organisation that supports human rights defenders (HRDs) in developing their security and protection management strategies. Our ethos is centred around HRDs and their right to defend human rights. Specifically in this case, the right to freedom of expression, the right to vote, the right to free and fair elections within a democratic society and for the upholding of the rule of law and the will of the people. Presidential and legislative elections will take place in several countries in 2022 and 2023, and PI is concerned about the disregard for human rights and incidences of harassment against people who promote and protect human rights during elections. PI condemns any form of violence, including acts of intimidation, attacks and extra-judicial killings around the globe, particularly in countries where Protection International operates.

Upcoming elections in some of the countries where Protection International works: **Colombia's** presidential elections on 29 May (and second round on 19 June 2022); the **Democratic Republic of Congo's** National Assembly elections in July 2022 and presidential elections between September and December in 2023; **Kenya's** general elections (for the President, National Assembly and Senate) on 9 August 2022; **Brazil's** general elections on 2 October 2022; **Thailand's** legislative elections in March 2023; **Guatemala's** general elections (President and Congress) on 25 June 2023; **Indonesia's** general elections in April 2024; **Tanzania's** elections in October 2025.

As people who promote and protect human rights and their civil society organisations (CSOs) mobilise to ensure the realisation of transparent democratic processes in their countries, many have experienced threats and intimidation by political and economic power holders.¹ International standards recognise the key role of human rights defenders and their organisations in the participation of public affairs for upholding the rule of law and the realisation of human rights.² ***"Despite this recognised centrality, civil society actors are commonly subjected to targeted persecution to prevent them from engaging in election-related activities"***, said Alice Nah, President of Protection International's Board of Directors. ***"Defenders can act as civic educators, observers and monitors verifying votes and decrying corrupt practices during elections"***, she emphasised.

The people and organisations who defend human rights are at high risk of being targeted with defamation campaigns, harassment and intimidation, office break-ins, arrests and detentions, criminalisation, [increased monitoring and surveillance both offline and online](#), and physical assaults and attacks both by state and non-state actors. Just recently in the Philippines, [HRDs were targeted with harassment and attacks](#) before, during and after the 9 May presidential elections. As Colombia braces for the first round of presidential elections on 29 May 2022, [several defenders and social leaders have been attacked and killed](#) amidst a highly polarised political campaign.

We have also seen election violence and [criminalisation of defenders](#) in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the run-up to the 2017-2018 elections. We watched in horror as post-election violence in Kenya in 2007-2008 resulted to over [1,300 people killed and around 6,000 people internally displaced](#). Protection International both condemns and actively works against any form of violence, and calls on states to act proactively to ensure that the right to defend human rights is not violated.

During election periods, the protection of political speech, public debate, journalistic activity and commentary on matters of public interest and human rights are particularly important. Therefore, the threshold to justify interference with freedom of expression during election periods should be set even higher. Members of society who are working to defend human rights play an important role in upholding the rule of law and keeping democracies alive and healthy. They are the ones mobilising for monitoring electoral processes so that they are transparent and fair, so that all citizens be able to cast their votes and so that each and every vote be counted.

Threats, repression and violence against those promoting and defending human rights send a powerful message to the rest of society, especially during high-stakes elections. Voters who witness violations of freedom of opinion and expression may not feel confident in their ability to participate independently and freely in the elections, thus empowering some politicians to subvert democratic processes. ***"In keeping with the genuine spirit of democracy, electoral contests should allow social tensions and conflicts to be addressed by peaceful means. Protection International demands the respect of their right to defend human rights for those activists who contribute to making democracies more vibrant"***, declared Mae Ocampo, Executive Director of Protection International.

1 To learn more about Protection International's [#StayWithDefenders during COVID-19 campaign](#), visit our website or [read our op-ed series](#) which discusses the impact of the pandemic on HRDs.

2 UNGA Resolution 53/144 (Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms) of 8 March 1999.

Recommendations for upholding the right to defend human rights

To government and state authorities:

- Clearly and publicly declare support to HRDs and CSOs, highlighting the key role they play in fair elections and express a zero tolerance stance for violence against them during elections and otherwise.
- Prioritise transparency and accountability by taking swift and preventive action to ensure the protection of HRDs and CSOs against threats and attacks. Any attacks that occur should be properly documented, exposed and responded to in a timely and effective manner to avoid impunity. Preventive action is needed so that extra judicial killings, intimidation and arbitrary detention of HRDs and journalists, particularly those involved in election monitoring, do not take place. Preventive action should be gender-sensitive and take into account the specific attacks women HRDs may be subject to.

To diplomatic missions of key international stakeholders (namely the United Nations, the European Union, the U.S., among others):

- Clearly and publicly declare support to HRDs and CSOs, highlighting the key role they play in fair elections and express a zero tolerance stance for violence against them during elections and otherwise.
- Provide effective protection support to HRDs and CSOs before, during and after electoral processes, including through financial, security-related, diplomatic or other means.
- Encourage States to ensure full transparency in electoral processes by inviting international observation missions and to welcome observation by non-partisan human rights groups.
- Follow up with States to ensure that they remain accountable for violations of the right to defend human rights.

To human rights defenders:

- Activate national and international support networks to raise the political costs of aggressions and attacks. Reach out to a local [Protection International office](#) in order to learn more about networks that might be operating in the country.
- Ensure that CSOs review the office/organisational security plans to properly consider the risks of operating during an election season.
- Keep a record of any possible security incidents to identify potential patterns and document changes. Discuss them with colleagues and fellow HRDs, provide information to your network. For more information on preventative protection, reference the [New Protection Manual for HRDs](#) (available in six languages).
- Ensure that election-related violence against HRDs be properly documented in order to advocate for states' improved protection of the right to defend human rights and democratic values.



Contact Information

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