

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The left side features a vertical band of light beige and off-white, separated from the rest of the image by a dark, vertical line. The right side is dominated by various shades of blue and teal, with horizontal brushstrokes and a sense of depth. The overall style is painterly and expressive.

THE STATE OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM **2025**

FREEMUSE
DEFENDING ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Freemuse operates within an international human rights and legal framework which upholds the principles of accountability, participation, equality, non-discrimination and cultural diversity. We document violations of artistic freedom and leverage evidence-based advocacy at international, regional and national levels for better protection of all people, including those at risk. We promote safe and enabling environments for artistic creativity and recognise the value that art and culture bring to society. Working with artists, art and cultural organisations, activists and partners in the global south and north, we campaign for and support individual artists with a focus on artists targeted for their gender, race or sexual orientation. We initiate, grow and support locally owned networks of artists and cultural workers so their voices can be heard and their capacity to monitor and defend artistic freedom is strengthened.

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All information was believed to be correct as of March 2025. Nevertheless, Freemuse cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of its use for other purposes or in other contexts.

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OVERVIEW:

"ART IS THE OPPOSITE OF WAR"

"I will look for beauty, poetry, and raw emotions through my absurd reality. Art is the opposite of war; I need to create while the world around me is being destroyed. It is as simple as that."

Nathalie Khayat, ceramicist, Lebanon¹

¹ Quoted from G. Harris, "Art is the opposite of war": amid a new wave of bombardment, Beirut's culture professionals remain defiant", *The Guardian*, 25 September 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/09/25/culture-professionals-describe-life-in-beirut-amid-a-new-wave-of-bombardment> (accessed 27 March 2025).

2024 was another turbulent year as the wars on Gaza and Ukraine continued to rage, eclipsing the coverage of other conflicts elsewhere such as in Sudan and Myanmar.² As in 2023, artists continued to be victims of war, censored for speaking out, arrested and even killed. There was a record number of elections held globally. Many were marked by accusations of fraud sparking demonstrations that were met with police violence. Artists were at the forefront of protests, and some suffered the consequences. The war on Gaza resulted in censorship in countries in the West that otherwise have good free speech protections. Commentary on the war led to cancellations of events and exhibits and threats of defunding, notably in Germany and the USA.

Artists are held in long-term imprisonment often in terrible conditions such as in Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Belarus, Russia and Nigeria. Women were targets of repression in conservative states, especially those headed by extreme theocracies. Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan stand out. Members of the LGBTQ+ community and minorities were singled out for repression. Satirists everywhere received backlash from thin-skinned leaders and zealots whom they dare to mock. The dominance of criminality in some countries, notably in the Americas, severely disabled artists from being able to practice without fear of reprisals.

It is unsurprising then that throughout the year, a common theme emerged: artists and arts institutions, even those in democratic countries, speak even more of needing to self-censor in order to avoid negative repercussions. In spite of these circumstances, the spirit of resistance among artists

is remarkable. Even under the harshest of regimes, in 2024 they continued to create, sometimes in secret, sometimes in public. And alongside the almost overwhelming bad news, there were also surprising positive developments. Not least is the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria in December, bringing with it hopes that Syrians will no longer have to fear the horrors of the previous decades. A change of government in Poland has brought optimism about an end to the repression of artists. New initiatives to improve freedom of expression in Zimbabwe and Brazil are other beacons of hope.

In this report we review repression of freedom of artistic expression in the tumultuous months of 2024. This year we have three regional focuses: on Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Other chapters focus on countries: China and Hong Kong, Russia, Egypt, the USA, Indonesia, Türkiye, Pakistan, and censorship in Germany and the USA on the war in Gaza. The issues raised in these chapters illustrate the wider global trends of repression.

The nature of censorship and the difficulties of gathering information, especially in areas of conflict, coupled with extensive self-censorship, makes it impossible to even attempt to list every instance of attack on artistic freedom or provide coverage of every country where it occurs. So Freemuse is grateful to be working through a global network of organisations who monitor artistic freedom in their regions, and with individual experts, some of whom are contributors to this report. See page 90. Their on-the-ground monitoring and observations bring invaluable insights to this report.

² K. Ahmed, "World's conflict zones increased by two-thirds in past three years, report reveals", *The Guardian*, 21 November 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/nov/21/world-conflict-zones-increased-by-two-thirds-past-three-years-report-ukraine-myanmar-middle-east-africa> (accessed 27 March 2025).

KEY TRENDS

Impact of the wars on Gaza and Ukraine on freedom of artistic expression beyond the conflict zones

A year after the outbreak of the **war on Gaza**, the situation is bleak as the Israeli bombardment has destroyed buildings and infrastructure, killing over 44,000 people, and cutting off essential supplies. Hostage exchanges at the end of the year had done little to alleviate the situation. By December 2024, hopes for peace seemed far off. Cultural life under these conditions has been all but annihilated, and civilians in Gaza continue to be killed, among them various artists.



Palestinian digital artist Mahasen al-Khateeb was killed in October in an Israeli airstrike. Self-portrait from al-Khateeb's Instagram account



Palestinian calligrapher and artisan, Walaa Jumaa al-Afranji, and her husband, Ahmed Saeed Salama, were killed in an airstrike on a refugee camp in Gaza in December. (Screengrab via X/Twitter @MiddleEastEye)

A result of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack and the ensuing devastation of Gaza by Israel's military has been censorship of commentary on the military offensive well beyond Israel and Gaza. Across a number of Western countries, the conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism has led to cancellations of exhibitions, and withdrawal of support for artists, notably in Germany (see page 51) and the USA (see page 57).

As was highlighted in the Freemuse State of Artistic Freedom 2024 report, the persecution of **Russian** artists who criticise the war on Ukraine has continued. They faced arrest, heavy sentences and cancellations of performances. The tragic and lonely death in prison of pianist Pavel Kushner is an example of the extreme danger of speaking out. By the end of 2024, the war had been going on for almost three years. Despite moves towards a ceasefire in early 2025, there appears to be little likelihood of an end to arrests and imprisonments of anti-war artists.

The chilling effect of foreign agent laws and institutional controls

The pattern of passing foreign agent laws continued into 2024, modelled on those that have been in place in **Russia**. These laws stigmatise dissidents, including artists and writers, as “traitors”, cutting off often vital foreign grants. Governments in **Hungary**, **Georgia**, and **Slovakia** were all considering putting in place similar laws, creating worry and uncertainty among the cultural sector. Outside Europe, in **Indonesia**, arts organisations that receive foreign funding are obliged to follow a rigorous screening procedure.

Public arts institutions are increasingly controlled by governments that influence decision-making, senior appointments, and even demand removal of senior managers. In a sector dependent on government funding, support is often restricted to artworks aligning with those in power. The result is indirect censorship through funding threats and administrative control rather than explicit bans. In the **USA**, for example, museums faced pressure to show “political neutrality”, leading to removed works, and cancelled projects, at the same time as government departments cut spending on issues like abortion. After the 2024 election, efforts to dismantle or limit programs on race, gender, and inclusion intensified.

In Europe, **Hungarian** cultural institutions, already heavily centralised, were faced with even tighter restrictions. In **Türkiye** the decision not to accept an international panel’s appointment of a curator for the 2024 Istanbul Biennial, led to widespread criticism of political interference. In a dramatic move, the **Slovak** Ministry of Culture withdrew its funding from the Kunsthalle Bratislava art gallery in retaliation for its progressive programming. As a result, all Kunsthalle staff lost their jobs, and the gallery was shut down. In countries such as **Egypt**, arts syndicates meant to support the creative sector, instead acted as censors, denying permission to artists whose work did not conform to stated norms.



Protestor demonstrating against the closure of Kunsthalle Bratislava, Slovakia. Photo: Eliška Šufliarska

Silencing inquiry and challenges to religion: Laws on blasphemy and insult to religion

Attempts by religious conservatives to control artworks and commentary that explores alternatives to, and challenges religion have long been a core concern for Freemuse. Over the years, the organisation has monitored imprisonment of religious dissenters, attacks, and even killings. 2024 was no exception and the countries where this was most prevalent remained unchanged. In **Afghanistan**, the return of the Taliban in 2021 brought with it harsh penalties for art celebrating women and promoting human rights. This repression deepened in 2024 with the introduction of the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Vice, clamping down even further on women’s rights, and on music, and banning images of people and animals.

In **Iran**, artists can be imprisoned for “insulting religious sanctities”, as in the case of cartoonist Ateena Farghadani, who spent several months in prison for displaying her work outside the Presidential Palace in Tehran. In **Pakistan**, there are heavy penalties for “wounding religious feeling” and the death penalty can be passed for “derogatory” remarks or visual representation of the Prophet Muhammed, casting a pall over artistic freedom and fostering self-censorship. Singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu spent his fourth year in prison under sentence of death in the Kano region of **Nigeria** for one of his songs, which was deemed blasphemous.

Women, LGBTQ+ and minority artists under attack

Conservative and religious elements across the world wield their power to shut down creative expressions of women, the LGBTQ+ community and minorities. Women and female creativity were particularly targeted by religious extremists, nowhere more than in **Afghanistan** where women are confined to their homes unable to take part in public life, least of all in culture and artistic expression. In the writing of this report, we spoke with women living under these restrictions and heard a bit about how they manage to continue creatively expressing themselves despite the extreme limitations.

In **Iran**, artists who took part in the 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” protests are still imprisoned, notably rap musicians. Women who didn’t comply with the compulsory wearing of the hijab were arrested after performing in person and online, such as one young singer who sang on public transport and another who faced consequences for her virtual concert. Women in **Pakistan** who took part in the Aurat (Women’s Day) marches had their protest art attacked, and the marches have been censored for the last few years. In the Kano region of **Nigeria**, female artists were penalised for “immoral behaviour” under the guise of protecting religion under Islamic law. Even in film dramas, the depiction of female characters wearing Muslim attire was seen as ridiculing Islam.

In 2024, LGBTQ+ expressions were shut down in many countries, often following threats from religious groups citing protection of family and traditional values. Protests from conservative Christian groups led to the banning of an LGBTQ+ film fes-

tival in **Brazil** and a drag themed play in **El Salvador**. In **Slovakia**, Ministry of Culture funding was removed from LGBTQ+ themed plays and festivals, leading to their closure. In Hungary a new law was passed banning “LGBT propaganda”. **Türkiye’s** vibrant LGBTQ+ arts community functions under increasing pressure with exhibitions and festivals banned, and artists needing to find ways to circumnavigate censorship. In **Indonesia**, growing restrictions on the *bissu* – gender-transcendent people who perform traditional rituals and ceremonies within the Bugis ethnic group – are evidence of growing anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in the country.

Attempts to suppress minority cultures also occurred in **Türkiye** where there was a wave of concert cancellations of Kurdish musicians throughout 2024, continuing a pattern of many decades of oppression. Artworks commemorating those killed during protests in 2023 in the Puno region in **Peru**, which has a large indigenous population, were removed from public display.

Artists at risk at political protests



Artwork by Elahe Zivardar, a contestant in the 2023 UN sponsored International Contest for Minority Artists, staged in collaboration with Freemuse.

In 2024 there was an exceptionally high number of elections - held in 77 countries, involving around half of the world’s population. Elections often bring with them protests with demands for fairness and questions about transparency and accountability. It is not uncommon in certain authoritarian states for such protests to be put down with force. Artists who take part can be singled out for attack as they often contribute their artworks in posters and graffiti or perform music and theatre. At other times it is their high public profile that results in them being singled out as examples.

Nicolás Maduro's re-election for a third term as President in **Venezuela** in July led to massive protests, which were met with violence by the state security forces. There were many arrests, including of singer-songwriter Wilmer Ramón Álvarez Vargas, who had composed a song supporting an opposition candidate. In **Somaliland**, musician Ugbaad Aragsan was detained soon after she had performed a song criticising the government prior to Presidential elections. In **South Sudan** three musicians were arrested for a song that was seen as defaming a politician accused of corruption.

Thirty-five years on, commemorating the events of the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square remains forbidden in **China**. In June, **Hong Kong** police arrested Sanmu Chan for his performance symbolising the mourning for those who were massacred in the crackdown. Meanwhile *Glory to Hong Kong*, a song that became the anthem to the 2019-2020 pro-democracy protests, was banned from streaming platforms.

In **Georgia**, protests against the government's decision to postpone discussions on European Union membership were met with police violence. Two actors were arrested, accused of complicity in the protests and remain detained. Artists were among those who suffered injuries and were allegedly tortured while in detention. The repercussions of mass protests in 2020 in **Belarus** against the fraudulent Presidential elections still reverberate, with around 100 artists among the over 1,000 political prisoners detained who are serving long prison terms for having stood up against oppression.

In an extraordinary case in **Nicaragua**, two artists who had painted murals celebrating the crowning of Nicaraguan Sheyniss Palacio as Miss Universe were arrested and then exiled. Ms Palacio had taken part in anti-government protests in 2018.

Mocking the powerful leads to harsh sentences

Among all art forms, it is satire that is most likely to result in the most negative response from authorities. Satire's role in mocking those in power, and its ability to highlight and tackle controversial issues, exposes uncomfortable truths to audiences that may not otherwise be engaged in political commentary, or not exposed to alternative narratives around religion and tradition.

A shocking sentence of 23 years in prison was served against a cartoonist in **Saudi Arabia**, Mohamed al-Hazaa, for his illustrations published in Qatar, mocking Saudi society and the economy. Meanwhile, Abdulaziz Almuzaini, creator of an animation series popular in the country for its satirical view of Saudi life received a 13-year sentence for promoting extremism.

Galal El-Behairy, the writer of lyrics to a song satirically comparing the **Egyptian** president to a well-known film character has been in prison for six years. Also a poet, he has served three years for his poetry. While his sentence expired in 2021, he remains in prison without further trial.

Gao Zhen, the creator of sculptures satirically portraying Mao Zedong and highlighting the violence of the Cultural Revolution was arrested in August in **China** on charges of "slandering China's heroes and martyrs" and remains detained.

A satirical painting suggesting connections between right-wing politicians and fascism in the **USA** was threatened with removal from an exhibition after being labelled as "hateful". It stayed on display, but in what could equally be considered satire, only if visitors to the gallery agreed to sign a waiver form acknowledging that the show contained images that could pose a danger to viewers before entering the space. In Malawi, a TikTok video showing an animation of the president doing a comic dance led to a sentence for its creator.

In good news from **Zimbabwe**, a High Court decriminalised insult, stating that the law was unconstitutional and limits the right to freedom of expression.

Film and music: The most targeted artforms

In 2024, the most targeted artforms were film and music, with widespread instances of arrests, censorship, festivals and performances cancelled, the removal of works from streaming services, and discriminatory permit refusals.

Iran's underground film industry is surprisingly resilient despite pressures from the authorities, and Iranian films have received accolades at international film festivals. Yet their makers face charges of "propaganda against the Republic" for

their depictions of life and love in Iran. An example from 2024 was the noted filmmaker and Cannes prize-winner Mohamad Rassoulof, who was forced to leave the country after being sentenced to eight years in prison and flogging for his films.

Chinese filmmakers live under tight restrictions and uncertainty as to whether or not their films will be penalised or restricted. In **Russia**, a screen adaptation of Bulgakov's *Master and Marguerita* was censored. In **Egypt**, films were banned for "insulting Islam" and for depicting scenes of homosexuality. In Türkiye, the film streaming service, MUBI, cancelled its annual film festival in protest after authorities demanded the removal of the Italian-American film *Queer* from the programme, while Türkiye's film authorities ordered digital platforms to take down foreign films deemed "offensive". A permit restriction that normally applies only to public screenings in **Indonesia** was imposed on a private showing of a documentary on the aftermath of the 1965 mass killings of protestors, leading to it being cancelled.

Mentioned earlier are musicians who found themselves targeted for making music on sensitive subjects, including on religion, politics, and satire. Nowhere, however, is music more suppressed than in **Afghanistan**, where music in public is banned. Radio stations were raided and ordered to stop playing background music. Thousands of instruments were seized and destroyed, and a new edict completely banned women from singing even in prayer. Musicians, notably rappers, who had performed songs supporting the "Women. Life. Freedom" in **Iran**, continued to be imprisoned and were even given sentences of death and flogging. Yet Iranian women still performed in the streets and online, despite the threat of arrest.

Musicians and artists: Accused of promoting criminality, yet others were victims of crime

Certain musical genres, particularly those popular among youth and marginalised communities, are often viewed as subversive or even "dangerous". For example, electronic music in **Indonesia** is associated by the authorities with promoting drug use and as a result, performances in this genre have been banned and keyboards and other associated equipment has been confiscated "for the public good".

In **Lesotho** criminality that has sprung up around Famo music – a genre that originated a century ago among migrant mining communities in South Africa – has led to outright bans of this musical form, even for performers of the genre who oppose violence. One, Lisuo Khupolo Khuloe, was murdered alongside a journalist as he was being interviewed about his calls for an end to the violence.

In some countries, particularly in the Americas, the prevalence of crime makes the practice of art, especially for musicians, particularly dangerous. While artists are usually not directly targeted for the content of their work, the climate of crime, their vulnerability as performers and the impunity under which this criminality exists makes it a particularly dangerous place to operate. Their low status as artists and the fact that many come from marginalised communities, makes governments less likely to take measures for their safety.

Colombia saw extreme levels of violence in 2024, with six recorded murders of artists, including two musicians. In **Peru**, a singer travelling with her band was killed in a robbery. Threats and extortions blighted the lives of artists in **Mexico** and **Haiti** as well. The prevalence of unchecked criminal violence around the globe and its impact on arts communities must be better understood and acknowledged, with a call for stronger protections.

Self-censorship as survival

"Self-censorship has taken over to the point that the system no longer has to exercise it," notes Jean Pierre Bekolo, an artist from Ghana³ neatly encapsulating the situation for artists around the world today. While the suppression of artistic freedom is evident when an artist is arrested, put on trial, or when artworks are removed from galleries or destroyed, the more insidious and pervasive impact of self-censorship remains silent, hidden, and immeasurable. Throughout the chapters in this report there are references to self-censorship, and to institutional censorship, where galleries, museums and other arts venues decline to take on works that could result in negative repercussions.

Threats of withdrawal of funding from cultural institutions have led international art fairs to reject works that deviate from "mainstream" values. The expansion of foreign agent laws further jeopardises funding for organisations and artists who

3 Quote from AFP article "Artists try to make Cameroon sing a different tune" via Modern Ghana, 15 February 2025, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1379731/artists-try-to-make-cameroon-sing-a-different-tune.html> (accessed 27 March 2025).

challenge the status quo. The existence of laws that penalise works of art – often applied arbitrarily – and seeing fellow artists banned and even imprisoned, can make artists hesitant to express themselves freely. In countries such as **Pakistan**, historic and oftentimes brutal clampdowns leave a long legacy of fear.

In 2024, heightened geopolitical and domestic tensions created an especially volatile landscape for arts and culture. Economic instability, coupled with funding being redirected to war efforts, adds to this precariousness. In such times, self-censorship becomes a “survival mechanism,” as one artist in this report describes it: “a way to create a feeling of safety in a very insecure environment.”



Artwork by Sahra Marwan, a contestant in the 2022 International Contest for Minority Artists, arranged by OHCHR, Freemuse and Minority Rights Group.

Resistance: “No force, no person, no system can silence art”

Despite the challenges and struggles, what comes up again and again through the chapters of this report is artists’ resilience. They find ways to continue to create – sometimes by going underground, sometimes through hiding their message, and other times by simply refusing to be silent whatever the risks.

In Afghanistan, secret writing groups for women have sprung up, and musicians play in hidden corners, out of sight of the authorities. As one told us, “*Music survives ... No force, no person, no system*

can silence its sound.” An imprisoned Cuban artist invited visitors to view his art exhibition in his prison cell. Despite harsh penalties, Iranian filmmakers working underground continued to produce remarkable, award-winning films, and female singers defiantly performed without the mandatory hijab. In Slovakia, artists staged a mock funeral for an art gallery forced by the authorities to close. In Türkiye, restrictions on LGBTQ+ art were resisted by finding ways around the censorship.

Over 200 theatre producers and institutions across Europe issued an open letter to the European Parliament in solidarity with their colleagues facing censorship and dismissal across Europe by governments seeking to exert control over the arts sector. Artists worldwide also condemned the cancellations and disinviting of other artists who have commented on the war on Gaza, which could lead to themselves being penalised. These are just some of the remarkable forms of artistic resistance to censorship.

Recommendations

This report closes with a call on governments to uphold and protect freedom of artistic expression, to end censorship, and to do all that can be done to strengthen and support their cultural sectors. In recent years, international organisations have begun integrating artistic freedom into their programs – a development Freemuse welcomes and urges that it be further strengthened. Arts and cultural institutions play a crucial role in understanding threats to artistic freedom. Freemuse urges them to enhance their monitoring and advocacy efforts. Finally, artists must be central to the struggle to protect their creative freedom.

Last but not least, artists have a crucial role to play as by working together and sharing experiences and ideas to protect creative freedom for themselves. What must be highlighted is that freedom of artistic expression is important not only to artists, but to all of us. When access to arts and culture is restricted, people lose the opportunity to experience diverse perspectives, to see their own cultures and experiences represented and have meaningful dialogue through art. In contrast, exposure to artistic expression that comments on socially relevant and difficult issues opens up a space for dialogue and creates better understanding – particularly relevant in these challenging times of war and conflict.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA REGION:

*SHOW RESPECT! – "BE DECENT. DON'T CRITICISE.
DON'T PROTEST."*

Lisa Sidambe

-
- *The enforcement of laws criminalising insult suppressed free expression critical of public officials.*
 - *Musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu sentenced to death in Nigeria remains imprisoned.*
 - *Artists' critical commentary threatened in the lead up to democratic elections.*
 - *TikTok expressions were the most affected in 2024, across the entire region.*
-

The exhibition of utmost respect is a phenomenon that almost seems sacred within the Sub-Saharan Africa region. The respect of public officials, moral values, religious figures, and allies of politicians is an esteemed attribute, with severe punishments applied for “disrespect”. In a world that ought to be governed through strict compliance to human rights standards and the fulfilment of human rights obligations, respect seems to reign supreme, bringing to question its compatibility with international human rights law, standards and practice. Throughout 2024, artists in at least thirteen Sub-Saharan Africa countries were entangled in this complex web, facing grave consequences for a perceived show of “disrespect” manifesting as alleged criticism of public officials and the exhibition of “immoral behaviour” deemed to insult the sanctity of religion. Critical dissent, as well as artists’ commentary on public policies was also criminalised in 2024, through tight restrictions. Equally, citizens expressing themselves artistically or contributing to the dissemination of artistic content deemed critical were also arbitrarily targeted. Consequently, there was a devastation to freedom of expression guarantees.

Criticism of heads of state and other public officials criminalised

Although criminalising criticism of public officials has consistently been classified as unduly restrictive by various United Nations agencies,¹ this suppression of freedom of expression has continued in several Sub-Saharan African countries unabated. The insulation of Heads of State and other public officials from criticism was more deeply entrenched in 2024, as permitted and rationalised by the legal architecture of countries such as **Malawi**, **Cameroon**, **Uganda**, **Tanzania**, **South Sudan** and **Angola**, through the application of Penal Codes, digital regulation laws and defamation laws. The imposition of heavy penalties that included fines, sanctions, imprisonment, and arbitrary detention in these countries, as punishments for legitimate political discourse, contradicted human rights guarantees.

“Viral but disrespectful”: A clampdown on the TikTok fever

As the TikTok wave continued to gain momentum across Sub-Saharan Africa in 2024, becoming a highly influential means through which information is packaged, disseminated and accessed, so did the intensification of a clampdown on TikTok expressions. In at least 3 countries in 2024, there were convictions for insulting various countries’ Presidents on the TikTok platform. In **Malawi** on 16 May 2024, a citizen identified as **Sainani Nkhoma** was found guilty of sharing a TikTok video depicting President Lazarus Chakwera as an animated figure dancing comically, captioning it with alleged derogatory commentary.² A portrait painter, **Shadrack Chaula**, was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment in **Tanzania** on 4 July 2024, for burning a portrait of President Samia Suluhu Hassan in a video in which he uttered “strong words”.³ A payment of a fine of five million Tanzanian shillings (approximately 1,700 euros) in lieu of imprisonment was sourced through crowdfunding, securing his release.⁴ Nearly three weeks later, there were allegations of the abduction and disappearance of the artist.⁵ At the time of writing this report on 31 December 2024, the artist remained missing. In **Uganda**, TikToker **Emmanuel Nabugodi** was sentenced to 36 months’ imprisonment on 18 November 2024, for creating and distributing a video in which he conducted a dramatised and imagined trial of President Yoweri Museveni, calling for his public flogging.⁶

In **Angola**, musician **Neth Nahara** was imprisoned for over 16 months and released on 1 January 2025 on a presidential pardon announced on Christmas day.⁷ An initial sentence of six months had been extended to two years on appeal, with prosecutors arguing that the judiciary had been too lenient in its punishment of the offence of “causing outrage and injury” to President João Lourenço. The musician had already been ordered to pay the President one million Angolan Kwanza (approximately 1,200 euros) for reputational damage.⁸ The offence was that Nahara had created a TikTok video express-

¹ Human Rights Committee 102nd session, General Comment No. 34: Article 19 – Freedom of Opinion and Expression, 12 September 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34, para 38, (accessed 16 December 2024).

² L. M. Akinyi, ‘Malawi man convicted of insulting president via animated TikTok video,’ *The African Exponent*, 18 May 2024, <https://www.africanexponent.com/malawi-man-convicted-for-insulting-president-via-animated-tiktok-video/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

³ W. Muia, ‘Tanzanian artist who burned president’s picture jailed,’ *BBC*, 5 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c25l04r4v1ko>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

⁴ ‘Public support frees imprisoned Tanzanian artist,’ *Media Wire Express*, 9 July 2024, https://mediawireexpress.co.tz/public-support-frees-imprisoned-tanzanian-artist/#google_vignette, (accessed 16 December 2024).

⁵ H. Mathias, ‘Artist who was arrested and later released after burning President Samia’s picture goes missing,’ *The Citizen*, 7 August 2024, <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/national/artist-who-was-arrested-and-later-released-after-burning-president-samia-s-picture-goes-missing-4718114>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

⁶ S. Ibrahim, ‘TikToker jailed for 32 months for insulting Uganda’s president,’ *BBC*, 18 November 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7n-jyvwn5o>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

⁷ ‘Angola: Five government critics released after more than a year of arbitrary imprisonment,’ *Amnesty International*, 7 January 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/angola-five-government-critics-released-after-more-than-a-year-of-arbitrary-imprisonment/>, (accessed 8 January 2025).

⁸ W. Muia, ‘Angolan TikToker Neth Nahara sentenced for insulting President Lourenco,’ *BBC*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67062264>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

ing views critical of the President's leadership. The emphasis on the stature of the President in the imposition of a severe sentence, as well as the choice of a sentence that does not meet the three years' threshold appealable in Angola's Supreme Court, presents a worrying trend of the deployment of legal tactics to target, punish and make an example out of dissenters critical of the President.

In accordance with international freedom of expression guarantees, holders of public office, including Heads of State, should legitimately be exposed to greater scrutiny, criticism and opposition.⁹ Criminal defamation, public officials' exclusive protection under laws, and the imposition of harsher penalties for critics of public officials, are all an illegitimate restriction of human rights.¹⁰ Cumulatively, these inhibitive measures and threats of legal action entrench a climate of self-censorship, undermining broad freedom of expression protections, and those of the right to create without censorship.

Managing feelings: Public debate thwarted

In other separate instances, President Museveni of Uganda and President Hassan of Tanzania were further insulated from insult. On 6 April 2024, eight members of the **Crane Performers** band were detained in **Uganda** by the President's security, the Special Forces Command, while at the 50th wedding anniversary celebrations of the country's former prime minister, to which they had been invited to perform.¹¹ Their remark "rutabandana waturusya rugahamuzindaro," translating to "over speaker, we are tired, leave the microphone," were reportedly recorded by the microphones they were wearing and transmitted through the event's sound system, allegedly disrupting the President's speech.¹² They were charged with the offence of "intending to alarm, annoy or ridicule the President," under Section 24 of Uganda's Penal Code, and released from detention the same day. In Tanzania,

three newspapers (*The Citizen*, *Mwananchi* and *Mwanaspoti*) had their online licences suspended for 30 days by the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, as punishment for using their virtual platforms to publish an animation video that was deemed to undermine "national unity and social peace".¹³ The video portrayed a female cartoon character wearing a hijab resembling that of the President, who was watching news reports of abductions and forced disappearances.¹⁴ It was widely regarded as a critique of the President's response to human rights violations implicating state security agents, further compounding the domestic and international criticism she has faced for lack of initiative in halting these violations.¹⁵



Crane Performers.

Photo: Crane Performers Ltd, Instagram

Pre-election silencing targeting artists' political commentary

The United Nations classified 2024 as a "super year for elections" globally, reflecting on the significance of democratic participation in the strengthening of good governance and civic engagement in the seventy-two countries scheduled to have elections.¹⁶ By the end of 2024, eleven out of seventeen Sub-Saharan Africa countries had engaged in electoral processes, with their elections serving as a 'litmus test'¹⁷ of freedom of expression and

⁹ Human Rights Committee 102nd session, General Comment No. 34: Article 19 – Freedom of Opinion and Expression, 12 September 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34, para 38.

¹⁰ 'Defamation and freedom of expression: A summary,' Article 19, 8 December 2020, <https://www.article19.org/resources/defamation-and-freedom-of-expression-a-summary/>, (accessed 3 January 2025).

¹¹ E. Chweya, 'Eight artists arrested for insulting Museveni at a wedding anniversary,' Citizen Digital, 8 April 2024, <https://www.citizen.digital/news/eight-artists-arrested-for-insulting-museveni-at-a-wedding-anniversary-n339987>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

¹² M. Okech, 'Ugandan music band arrested for criticising President's speech,' The African Exponent, 8 April 2024, <https://www.africanexponent.com/ugandan-music-band-arrested-for-criticizing-presidents-speech/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

¹³ A. Lasteck and W. Muia, 'Tanzania news sites banned over animation deemed critical of president,' BBC, 3 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czeg6wkelz5o>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ C. Mureithi, 'Tanzania suspends news websites over ad referencing killing of dissidents,' The Guardian, 3 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/03/tanzania-citizen-newspaper-publisher-advert-killing-dissidents>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

¹⁶ 'A super year for elections,' UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/super-year-elections>, (accessed 24 January 2025).

¹⁷ R. Masters, 'Africa's 2024 elections: Disputed results and graceful exits, historical shifts and new beginnings,' IFEX, 14 January 2025, <https://ifex.org/africas-2024-elections-disputed-results-historical-shifts-graceful-exits-and-new-beginnings/>, (accessed 24 January 2025).

the right to participate in democratic processes.¹⁸ Leading up to some elections however, there was evidence of not affording dissenting expressions the same protections as expressions favourable to ruling governments, notably in **Somaliland** and **South Sudan**. Musicians with a history of criticising authorities through songs were particularly vulnerable. In what appeared to be political persecution disguised as penalising “indecenty”, Somaliland musician **Ugbaad Aragsan** (given names Ugbaad Mohamud Abdi) was detained for at least nine days in April 2024,¹⁹ before the withdrawal of all charges for the alleged offense of promoting indecenty in videos circulated online.²⁰ Leading up to her arrest, she had endorsed an opposition political party, performed a song supporting the party’s leader and released a song with the lyrics “*don’t sell the sea*,” condemning the government of Somaliland for leasing a part of the Indian Ocean to Ethiopia.²¹ In **South Sudan**, opposition members in the transitional government were given special protection from “disrespect”, a privilege previously the exclusive reserve of the ruling party. Consequently, musicians **Lual Lual**, **Akol Mangok** and **Ateny Akol Akol** were arrested by the police on grounds of defamation, for a song critical of the appointment of a politician publicly accused of corruption.²²



Ugbaad Aragsan. Source – Horn Observer

Insult decriminalised in Zimbabwe

A positive development for freedom of expression emerged in **Zimbabwe**. On 22 November 2024, a High Court ruling decriminalised insult, stating that the law applied against insult was not only unconstitutional but “overly vague, overbroad and disproportionately limiting the right to freedom of expression”.²³ The Southern African country joined Zambia, which in 2022 repealed a law making it a criminal offence to defame and insult the President.²⁴ While welcoming these developments, Freemuse notes that the decriminalisation of insult must be reinforced by the implementation of measures that deter excessive civil remedies as recourse for insult. This would avert the practice similar to Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) often deployed by wealthy individuals or quite often financial entities, corporations and the like, to harass, intimidate and financially frustrate critics and dissenters.

Kano state authorities remain unshaken

Throughout 2024, Unchained Vibes Africa, Freemuse’s colleague organisation defending artistic freedom in **Nigeria**, raised the severity and prevalence of artistic freedom violations emerging from **Kano State**, a region governed by Islamic law. The organisation reported that the region constituted 85% of recorded violations in Nigeria, and that its governing authorities justify violations as fulfilment of a duty to uphold the sanctity of Islamic principles and ideology.²⁵ Notably, the authorities have not heeded global advocacy efforts calling for the unconditional release of musician **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu**, who has been imprisoned since 2020 and who is appealing a death sentence imposed for a song deemed blasphemous.²⁶ In a statement issued in May 2024, five UN Special Rapporteurs expressed concerns, notably about

¹⁸ ‘2024 elections are testing democracy’s health,’ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1 March 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/03/2024-elections-are-testing-democracys-health>, (accessed 24 January 2025).

¹⁹ ‘Somaliland singer goes on hunger strike inside Hargeisa police detention,’ Horn Observer, 20 April 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2724/Somaliland-frees-female-singer-jailed-for-critical-rap-song>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²⁰ ‘Somaliland frees female singer jailed for critical rap song,’ Horn Observer, 26 April 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2724/Somaliland-frees-female-singer-jailed-for-critical-rap-song>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²¹ ‘Somaliland female singer goes on hunger strike inside Hargeisa police detention,’ Horn Observer, 20 April 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2716/Somaliland-female-singer-goes-on-hunger-strike-inside-Hargeisa-police-detention>, (accessed 4 January 2025).

²² ‘3 musicians detained in Northern Bahr el Ghazal or allegedly defaming local official,’ Sudans Post, 15 February 2024, <https://www.sudanspost.com/3-musicians-detained-in-northern-bahr-el-ghazal-for-allegedly-defaming-local-official/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²³ ‘Criminal insult law is unconstitutional, court says in nod to freedom of expression,’ Zimlive, 11 December 2024, <https://www.zimlive.com/criminal-insult-law-is-unconstitutional-court-says-in-nod-to-freedom-of-expression/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²⁴ ‘Human Rights Commission welcomes the replacement and repeal of laws relating to the death penalty and defamation of the president,’ Zambia Human Rights Commission, 1 June 2023, <https://www.zimlive.com/criminal-insult-law-is-unconstitutional-court-says-in-nod-to-freedom-of-expression/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²⁵ B. Bello, ‘Kano accounts for 85% of violations – group,’ Vanguard, 22 September 2024, <https://www.zimlive.com/criminal-insult-law-is-unconstitutional-court-says-in-nod-to-freedom-of-expression/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²⁶ ‘Nigeria: UN experts demand the release of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu,’ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 16 May 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/05/nigeria-un-experts-demand-release-yahaya-sharif-aminu>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

the prolonged imprisonment of the musician in the course of lengthy Supreme Court processes, and that a re-trial enforcing the state's Sharia Penal Code is likely to re-impose capital punishment.²⁷ Freemuse has been campaigning for Sharif-Aminu's release since his arrest, calling for the abolition of the death penalty, and the decriminalisation of blasphemy, alongside the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all charges against him. Additionally, Freemuse has annually highlighted the plight of the musician in the State of Artistic Freedom reports published since 2020, demonstrating that the musician's imprisonment contradicts international human rights law guarantees.

Women face the repercussion of disrespecting religion

The silencing of female artists and feminist perspectives persisted in 2024 in Kano State. Following a 2023 Sharia court ruling ordering community service and mandatory psychiatric evaluation for alleged indecency exhibited in videos posted online, renowned TikToker **Murja Ibrahim Kunya** was the subject of yet another restriction of her fundamental freedoms. On 13 February 2024, she was remanded to seven days' detention by a Sharia Court, of which she served two, on charges of indecency and public nuisance.²⁸ Barely a month later, she was one of six TikTokers declared wanted by the Islamic police, accused of disrespecting religion through 'immoral behaviour'.²⁹ In 2022, she was also the subject of a declaration of wanted persons issued on similar grounds.³⁰ The incessant persecution of Kunya, mostly for video content that is not specifically referenced by authorities, is emblematic of the persistent, severe and inhumane treatments that female artists are especially subjected to in Kano State, rationalised by authorities as the protection of religion permitted by Islamic law and ideology.

The Islamic gaze with which female artists are policed also extended to the representation of women in films, in the form of institutionalised public

complaints by conservative religious institutions. In July 2024, Muslim Rights Concern and the Muslim Public Affairs Centre separately advocated for the prohibition of the release of a local Nollywood movie, ***Blood Brothers***, arguing that the portrayal of female characters wearing Muslim attire within the context of dramatised criminality was inflammatory, ridiculed Islam and promoted Islamophobia.³¹ Consistent public complaints couched as petitions and demand letters in Nigeria, especially in relation to Islamic ideology, emboldens non-state actors to entrench a culture of censorship by demanding the application of existing laws, regulations and other legally binding measures. Consequently, public sentiment and religious sensitivities become central to the wider sphere of censorship, severely impacting women's artistic expression and women's representation in artistic content.

Threats beyond Kano but within Nigeria: Visual artist accused of disrespecting religion

On 23 May 2024, visual artist **Adedamola Shogo** (also known as Adamarati) filed a report with the police over death threats he was receiving for an art exhibition in which he concurrently used pages from the Bible and the Quran in his artwork.³² The threats were reportedly made by unknown individuals who alleged that they knew the artist's place of residence, sparking fears for his safety.³³ Although the artist states that the artwork had been intended to promote harmony between Christians and Muslims,³⁴ it was heavily criticised by some conservative Islam groups, including the influential Arewa Reliance Youth Movement, as provocation demonstrating disrespect and insensitivity to Islamic values and beliefs.³⁵ The movement argued that "religious sensitivity should take precedence over any artistic statement".³⁶ In an act of self-censorship under pressure, the artist removed the artwork from his website.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ M. Bakar, 'Kano correctional centre explains disappearance of TikToker Murja from prison,' *Daily post*, 19 February 2024, <https://dailypost.ng/2024/02/19/kano-correctional-centre-explains-disappearance-of-tiktoker-murja-from-prison/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

²⁹ K. Badmus, 'Why we arrested popular TikToker G-Fresh in Kano - Hisbah,' *Osun Defender*, 3 June 2024, <https://www.osundefender.com/why-we-arrested-popular-tiktoker-g-fresh-in-kano-hisbah/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

³⁰ A. Jalal, 'Murja Kunya, controversial TikToker setting arewa social media on fire,' *Daily Trust*, 31 January 2024, <https://dailytrust.com/murja-kunya-controversial-tiktoker-setting-arewa-social-media-on-fire/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

³¹ 'Ban anti-Muslim movie now - MURIC TO NFVCB,' *Emergency Digest*, 19 February 2024, <https://emergencydigest.com/2024/07/26/ban-anti-muslim-movie-now/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

³² T. Joseph, 'Artist faces death threat over exhibition,' *Independent*, 11 June 2024, <https://independent.ng/artist-faces-death-threats-over-exhibition/>, (accessed 16 December 2024).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ A. Bamgboye, 'Refrain from religious balkanisation, group warns,' *Daily Trust*, 1 July 2024, https://dailytrust.com/refrain-from-religious-balkanization-group-warns/#google_vignette, (accessed 16 December 2024).

³⁶ Ibid.



Adedamola Shogo's art. Source – Daily Trust <https://dailytrust.com/refrain-from-religious-balkanization-group-warns/>

Sound democratic culture is not only confined to the transfer of power but is measured by society's tolerance of dissenting views, alternative voices, and expressions which may offend, provoke or insult. The cumulative poor state of artistic freedom in the Sub-Saharan Africa region in 2024 points worryingly towards the tendency to target artists and the dissemination of artistic content critical of public officials, public policies and religion.

The recurrence of religion-based violations, notably in Nigeria's Kano State, especially targeting free expression online and women's participation in cultural life, repetitively showed a flagrant disregard of protections that authorities are mandated to extend to ensure full enjoyment of artistic freedom.

The wrongful incarceration of artists such as **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu** in Nigeria and **Neth Nahara** in Angola, despite global calls for the upholding of international human rights standards, is a simulacrum of the region, a vivid illustration of how detention, prosecution and imprisonment are used as currency to penalise "disrespect," at the expense of robust religious and political discourse.

ARTISTIC SUPPRESSION IN EGYPT: *AND SOME NOTEWORTHY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST*

Ghias Aljundi

-
- *Long sentences are being served in Egypt for satirising the leadership.*
 - *Films are banned for insult to religion and LGBTQ+ content.*
 - *Arts syndicates act as censors, denying permission to artists whose work does not conform to stated norms.*
-

In 2024, artists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) continued to face significant challenges and risks due to their creative expression, which often put them at odds with authoritarian governments, conservative social norms, or ongoing conflicts. Governments across MENA used vaguely defined laws, including cybercrime and morality rules, to suppress artistic expression.

This chapter focuses on the current state of artistic freedom in Egypt, where artists often navigate a complex landscape of government restrictions, social expectations, and legal barriers. We also refer to the lengthy sentences served against artists in Saudi Arabia, the attempts to find out what happened to the ‘disappeared’ in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime.

Egypt: Satire and insult to religion among purported reasons for censorship

In **Egypt**, the state employs a combination of repressive laws, cultural policies, and extra-legal measures to suppress dissent and control the public. These restrictions disproportionately target creators addressing politically sensitive issues, marginalised groups such as women and LGBTQI+ individuals, and those critiquing societal or religious norms.

Arbitrary pre-trial detention of political prisoners is of long-standing concern, with many held – sometimes for years – on continuously renewed detention orders. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights (CIHR) refers to the practice of ‘recycling’ where detainees are charged with new cases as their current term of detention for a previous case expires, prolonging the two-year limit set by Egypt’s criminal code. In addition time served in pre-trial detention is not included in sentencing¹ as experienced by cartoonist Ashraf Omar and lyricist Galal el-Behairy whose cases are described below.

As regards artistic expression, the Egyptian government uses laws such as Article 98(f) (blasphemy law) and the Cybercrime Law (2018) to restrict

artistic content. Films, plays, and online works are routinely censored, and public performances require prior approval, stifling creativity. Artists and social media influencers are often arrested for creating satirical or critical content. Charges typically include “spreading false news,” “undermining national unity,” or “violating public morals.” Women and LGBTQI+ artists are particularly vulnerable, facing societal backlash and legal persecution for works deemed “immoral” or “offensive.” Gender and sexuality-related themes are heavily censored, further marginalising these communities².

The General Directorate for the Censorship of Artistic Works has the final say on whether art works are shown publicly or not. Either they grant approval, or they ban the work, or demand some changes. Some examples of censorship in 2024 include:

- **The Atheist (Al- Molhed)**, a film directed by Mohammad Al-Adel, which was first approved, then banned and referred to Al-Azhar, Egypt’s leading Islamic establishment, for review and final approval. The film was supposed to be released on 14 August 2024 but, hours before, it was withdrawn after a campaign on social media against the work, accusing it of “insulting Islam”. A legal action was filed against the filmmakers and the Administrative Court reviewed the case on 24 August 2024. The film’s licence was revoked, and it was prohibited from being screened in all cinemas across Egypt. The film team argued that there was nothing in the film that contradicted Islamic law.³
- **Hany**, directed by Mohamed Allam, was banned from being screened during the Hurghada Youth Film Festival, in September 2024. The film was apparently banned because it contained scenes referring to homosexuality. The filmmakers couldn’t obtain a screening licence and the officials at the festival requested that the director delete some scenes, which were described as “contrary to the values and morals of Arab society.”⁴

¹ CIHRS, ‘Hundreds of political detainees, overdue for release, instead referred to terrorism courts by Supreme State Security Prosecution’, CIHRS, 26 January 2025, <https://cihrs.org/hundreds-of-political-detainees-overdue-for-release-instead-referred-to-terrorism-courts-by-supreme-state-security-prosecution/> (accessed 24 February 2025)

² Association for Freedom of Expression, “Growing violations... The third quarterly report on the state of freedom of expression in Egypt” (1 July – 30 September 2024), AFTE, 15 September 2024 <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/monitoring-reports-en/2024/12/15/39157-afteegypt.html> (accessed 17 January 2025)

³ a. Al-Youn, “Controversial Egyptian film ‘al-Molhed’ (The Atheist) delayed once more”, Egypt Independent, 14 August 2024 <https://egyptindependent.com/controversial-egyptian-film-al-molhed-the-atheist-delayed-once-more/> (accessed 17 January 2025)

⁴ “Details of the ban on the screening of the film ‘Hani’ starring Ahmed Malek... and conflicting reasons for the ban”, Foochia, 22 September 2024, <https://www.foochia.com/celebrities/lizcr1w> (accessed 17 January 2025)

Silencing satire

The Egyptian government has long targeted satire and satirical artists.

- Cartoonist **Ashraf Omar**, a contributor to the independent news outlet *Al-Manassa*, was arrested on 22 July 2024⁵. Omar had published several cartoons satirising Egypt's electricity crisis, economic policies, and its sale of state assets to Gulf countries⁶. Omar was interrogated for six hours by the Supreme State Security Prosecution during which he was asked whether his cartoons were intended to incite the public. The prosecution charged him with "joining a terrorist group with knowledge of its purposes, spreading rumours and false news, and misusing social media"⁷. After his arrest, Omar was held incommunicado before being transferred to prison. His pre-trial detention was extended for the tenth consecutive time on 10 December 2024 via a video conference call. According to a joint statement organised by the Cartoonists Rights Network International (CRNI) condemning this irregular process, future extensions to Omar's pre-trial detention could be expected every 45 days and could last as long as 18 months from the date of his arrest.⁸



The last cartoon published by Ashraf Omar before his abduction, mocking Egypt's electricity crisis and the construction of a monorail in Cairo. (Via cartoonists-rights.org).

- A prominent case is that of **Galal El-Behairy**⁹, a poet and lyricist imprisoned since March 2018 for writing lyrics critical of President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi. Initially charged for the song *Balaha* that he collaborated on with the exiled musician, Ramy Essam, he was later sentenced to three years by a military court for his unpublished poetry collection *The Finest Women on Earth*. El-Behairy completed his sentence in July 2021, but, more than three years later, he remains in prison on additional charges of "disseminating false information" and "joining a terrorist organisation", far exceeding the maximum [two-year legal](#) limit for detention without trial. He is said to be in poor health, having undergone hunger strikes in 2023, a reported suicide attempt, threats of torture and, most recently [concerns](#) that he is being denied essential medical treatment.

Arts unions act against arts freedom

Arts Unions, ostensibly set up to support artists, are used to exert pressure of sanctions on Egyptian artists. For example, to be granted permission to perform in public, musicians are obliged to be members of the Musicians' Syndicate. Rather than supporting musicians in their careers, the Syndicate can refuse such permission for performances for reasons ranging from "indecentcy" to opposing the government. There are concerns that there is a coordination between these unions and the authorities.¹⁰

One case example in which penalties were incurred for damaging the reputation of Egypt, was that of singer **Hassan Shakosh**, who was suspended in August 2024 and his performances put on hold pending an investigation. The singer had posted a video on social media in which he criticised the way he was treated at Tunis airport, and which had reportedly sparked outrage among his fans in Tunisia.¹¹

⁵ "Alert Egypt – Ashraf Omar", Cartooning for Peace, 25 January 2025, <https://www.cartooningforpeace.org/en/soutiens/kidnapping-of-egyptian-press-cartoonist-ashraf-omar/> (accessed 14 February 2025)

⁶ "Egypt: Police arrest cartoonist and satirist Ashraf Omar in dawn raid", Middle East Eye, 22 July 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egyptian-security-forces-arrest-cartoonist-ashraf-omar-dawn-raid> (accessed 27 January 2025)

⁷ AFTE – as for footnote 2

⁸ "Ashraf Omar – 100 days a prisoner", Cartoonists Rights, 30 October 2024, <https://cartoonistsrights.org/ashraf-omar-100-days/> (accessed 27 January 2025)

⁹ "Galal El-Behairy", PEN America, n.d. <https://pen.org/individual-case/galal-el-behairy/> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁰ Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, "A closed door.. A paper on membership as an entry point for independent artistic syndicates in Egypt", AFTE, 22 March 2021, <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-papers-en/2021/03/22/21293-afteegypt.html> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹¹ M. Nazir, "Hassan Shakosh Is Suspended And Facing Investigation After His Controversial Comments On Tunis", Lovin Cairo, 27 August 2024, <https://lovin.co/cairo/en/news/hassan-shakosh-faces-suspension-and-investigation-after-controversial-comments-on-tunis/> (accessed 27 January 2025)

Artistic freedom in Egypt is subject to complex and dynamic factors. It reflects the tension between traditions and modernity and is also subject to political control. Egypt has a rich history of cultural heritage and an excellent arts scene. However, artists often face challenges, including persecution and censorship. These challenges have a negative impact on artists' ability to express themselves, especially when tackling sensitive subjects, be they of a political or social nature.

Safeguarding of artistic freedom in Egypt can only manifest through systemic reforms, which must include repealing repressive laws, fostering dialogue, and protecting artists from harassment and violence. The use of these laws, coupled with a disregard for a fair trial process create a climate of fear and self-censorship within the artistic community, notably those broaching subjects that could be deemed blasphemous, immoral or indecent. The role of arts syndicates operating as government-approved censors, rather than supporting and promoting Egyptian arts and culture, is central to the pervasive climate of censorship and self-censorship across Egypt.

Syria: Signs of lifting of censorship while families mourn the disappeared

After years of agony of not knowing what had happened to their loved ones, some families in Syria were able to finally receive some clarity on their fate and begin the long process of healing. Several artists¹² who had been "disappeared"¹³ during the years of civil war after being arrested by the Bashar al-Assad regime's security forces, were confirmed dead in December 2024 after the regime was ousted from power. Thousands are still missing.¹⁴ Among the most well-known of the disappeared is playwright **Zaki Cordillo** and his son, also an artist. They were last seen in 2013.¹⁵ They were not found among those who were released from the prisons, and their fate and whereabouts continue to be unclear.

United Nations bodies, Syrian civil society groups, and international forensic teams are working to find evidence of the crimes, searching prisons, offices and grave sites to uncover the fate and whereabouts of the victims. The transitional authorities in Syria are being urged to ensure that the evidence is preserved leading to the investigation and prosecution of the perpetrators, who could be brought to trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁶

In the meantime there are some early signs of cultural revival and the lifting of censorship since the collapse of the Assad regime after decades of artistic repression. An example of this is the satirical film *Stars in Broad Daylight* by Ossama Mohammed, which has been restored for screenings in Syria, after being banned in the country since its debut in 1988. It had been denounced for mocking the dictatorship of then President Hafez al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's father).¹⁷



'Portraits of the disappeared: Art as advocacy in Syria' – published by the Syria Network for Human Rights 2020.

¹² PEN International, 'Syrian playwright arrested, whereabouts unknown', via IFEX.org, 22 January 2013, <https://ifex.org/syrian-playwright-arrested-whereabouts-unknown/> (accessed 25 January 2025)

¹³ "Even artists are terrorists!", Creative Memory, n.d. <https://creativememory.org/even-artists-are-terrorists/> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁴ B. McKednran, "Tears of joy and sadness as 'disappeared' Syrians emerge from Assad's prisons", The Guardian, 8 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/08/tears-of-joy-and-sadness-as-disappeared-syrians-emerge-from-assads-prisons> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁵ "Even artists are terrorists!", Creative Memory, n.d. <https://creativememory.org/even-artists-are-terrorists/> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁶ "Syria: Preserve evidence of mass atrocities", Amnesty International, 23 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/syria-preserve-evidence-of-mass-atrocities> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁷ "Restoration of Banned Film Signals New Era for Syrian Arts", Kurdistan 24, 10 January 2025, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/819103> (accessed 27 January 2025)

Saudi Arabia: Artists receive heavy sentences for satire while state is accused of “art-washing” its poor rights record

In Saudi Arabia, artists face persecution, with the government suppressing creative expression that challenges political, religious, or social norms.

- Prominent cartoonist **Mohamed Ahmed al-Hazaa al-Ghamdi** (known professionally as Mohamed al-Hazaa) was sentenced in October 2024 to 23 years in jail for contributing caricatures to a Qatari newspaper during a Saudi-led blockade of Qatar (which lasted between 2017 and 2021, due to a diplomatic crisis between the two countries). He has been in detention since 2018. He was convicted for creating around 100 illustrations for the newspaper, which allegedly mocked Saudi society and the economy. First sentenced to six years in prison, he was not released upon completing his sentence. Instead his case was reopened in December 2023, leading to the subsequent heavier sentence.¹⁸ According to the human rights organisation Sanad, there was no explanation as to why the authorities reopened the case and handed him the new sentence. *“The case of Mohammed al-Hazaa is one example of the suppression of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia, which has not spared anyone, including artists ... This is supported by the politicized, non-independent judiciary in Saudi Arabia”* Sanad operations manager Samer Alshumrani told AFP.¹⁹
- A U.S. citizen and the co-creator of the popular *Masameer* animation series, widely streamed on Netflix, **Abdulaziz Almuzaini** was in July 2024 convicted of promoting extremism through his cartoons and for over decade-old tweets *Masameer* takes a satirical view of life in Saudi Arabia, commenting on topics such as discrimination against women and religious restrictions. Almuzaini received a 13-year prison sentence, and a 30-year travel ban for promoting extremism through his animations and posts on social media²⁰. He is appealing the sentence.



Despite Vision 2030's launch in 2016, dissent in Saudi Arabia remains tightly controlled.

These cases illustrate the challenges artists face in Saudi Arabia, where despite the launch in 2016 of the government's Vision 2030²¹ initiative aimed at increasing economic, social and cultural diversity, stringent controls on dissent persist. While the kingdom has made strides in expanding its art scene, including by hosting international film festivals and establishing auction houses, the suppression of artistic freedom and freedom of expression in general continues to be of significant concern. This leads to accusations from international rights organisations of Saudi Arabia's attempting “art washing” its poor rights record.²² Art-washing refers to the strategy where governments or corporations use art and cultural initiatives to create a positive image and deflect attention from controversial issues, such as human rights concerns, political repression, or social challenges. In Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 projects include high-profile art exhibitions, and major art events. Critics argue that these are used to distract attention from the poor state of human rights in Saudi Arabia, giving the impression that it is a progressive country.

An end to the imprisonment and censoring of artists, and restrictions of free speech in Saudi Arabia, will provide reassurance that it is truly committed to protecting open and diverse expressions for its citizens and those who take part in its international arts projects.

¹⁸ S. Asem, “Saudi Arabia sentences prominent artist Mohamed al-Hazaa to 23 years in jail”, Middle East Eye, 14 October 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-sentences-prominent-artist-23-years-jail> (accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁹ “Saudi cartoonist gets 23-year prison sentence: rights group”, VOA News, 4 July 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/saudi-cartoonist-gets-23-year-prison-sentence-rights-group/7824085.html> (accessed 27 January 2025)

²⁰ V. Nereim, “Netflix Show Earns Its Saudi Creator Plaudits, and a Prison Sentence”, New York Times, 4 July 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/04/world/middleeast/netflix-masameer-saudi-arabia-prison.html> (accessed 27 January 2025)

²¹ Public Investment Fund Program 2021-2025, <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/strategy-and-impact/the-program/> (accessed 27 January 2025)

²² A. Lawson, “‘Art-washing’? Unease as British cultural institutions lend lustre to Saudi trade push”, The Guardian, 17 May 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/may/17/art-washing-unease-as-british-cultural-institutions-lend-lustre-to-saudi-trade-push> (accessed 27 January 2025)

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN:

ESCALATING REPRESSION OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Parvin Ardalan

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- *The Islamic Republic of Iran intensified its crackdown on artistic freedom in 2024, with severe punishments, including death sentences and violent arrests of artists.*
 - *Two high-profile cases highlighted the government's harsh response: rapper Toomaj Salehi faced a death sentence for supporting protests, and cartoonist Atena Farghadani was arrested and sentenced to prison.*
 - *Despite the risks, Iranian filmmakers continued to defy censorship, with several producing works challenging state narratives, subsequently facing travel bans and pressure to withdraw their films from international festivals.*
 - *As a revolution in the making - Woman, Life, Freedom has emerged cultural outcomes at the intersection of gender, ethnic, and class discrimination.*
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In 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran intensified its crackdown on artistic freedom, employing increasingly severe tactics against artists who supported the 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement or challenged state narratives. The government’s actions included violent arrests, and imposing lengthy prison sentences, and even the death penalty, as exemplified by the case of rapper **Toomaj Salehi**. These measures forced many artists into exile and created a climate of fear among the creative community.

The scale and severity of these violations were unprecedented, affecting hundreds of artists across various disciplines, from music and visual arts to cinema. Despite the harsh repression, Iranian artists continue to produce work that defies censorship, often at great personal risk. This struggle for artistic freedom in Iran is significant not only for the artists themselves but also as a broader indicator of the ongoing tension between the state’s desire for control and the populace’s demand for greater liberties.

The Hijab and Chastity Bill and the resistance of artists

In September 2023, in response to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement uprising and widespread protests against mandatory hijab measures, the Iranian parliament introduced the Hijab and Chastity Bill to further enforce the strict dress code for women.¹ However, government repression could not stop society, especially the artistic community, from continuing to resist.

The Hijab and Chastity Bill, which comprises more than 70 articles, aims to enforce stricter dress codes, and impose harsher penalties on those violating compulsory veiling laws. However, the implementation of this law has been postponed following the public backlash and international criticism. It is worth noting that President Massoud Pezeshkian described the legislation as “vague and in need of revision,”² indicating a desire to reevaluate its provisions. The law includes severe pen-

alties, including fines, prison terms, and in some extreme cases, even the death penalty for certain hijab-related offenses.

Underground cinema and its growth in Iran

The emergence of underground cinema in Iran and the disregard for official censorship became more prominent after the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. In 2024 there was a significant growth in the number of underground films being made, raising concerns among officials inside Iran. According to *Etemad* newspaper³, various independent Iranian films were submitted to the Cannes Film Festival. Examples include *Me, Maryam, the Kids, and 26 Others* by Farshad Hashemi, *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* by Mohammad Rasoulof and *My Favorite Cake* by Maryam Moghaddam and Behtash Sanaeiha. These films focused on topics such as women’s rights, protests, and power structures in Iran. *My Favorite Cake*, which was also released online, received international acclaim.⁴ It is a story about an elderly Iranian woman who decides to end her loneliness and begin a romance of her choice in a strict patriarchal and political Islamic morality encompassed society. As the filmmakers have stated, this work “*has a simple story, but it is a big step towards telling the truth and rejecting lies and censorship*.”⁵ The filmmakers were banned from leaving the country to attend the film’s premiere abroad and are facing charges of “propaganda against the Islamic Republic” and “actions against national security.” Filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof, whose film won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes, also went into exile in May 2024 after being sentenced to an eight-year prison sentence, lashes, a fine, and confiscation of his property.⁶ Part of the charges against him included “assembly and collusion with the intent to commit a crime against national security” through signing statements and making films and documentaries.⁷ Rasoulof, winner of the Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlinale for *There Is No Evil*, was previously facing three charges and served six months in prison for one of them between July 2022 and January 2023.⁸

¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Iran: New Hijab Law Adds Restrictions and Punishments’, Human Rights Watch, 14 October 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/14/iran-new-hijab-law-adds-restrictions-and-punishments> (accessed 7 January 2025)

² J. Gol, ‘Iran pauses controversial new dress code law’, BBC Online, 16 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0mv83m4z7vo> (accessed 7 January 2025)

³ T. Dams & M. Rosser, ‘Iranian independent filmmakers step into limelight at Cannes’, Screen Daily, 21 May 2024 <https://www.screendaily.com/news/iranian-independent-filmmakers-step-into-limelight-at-cannes/5193820.article> (accessed 7 January 2025)

⁴ P. Bradshaw, ‘My Favourite Cake review – charming portrayal of a 70-year-old Iranian’s appetite for romance’, The Guardian, 16 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/feb/16/my-favourite-cake-review-charming-portrayal-of-a-70-year-old-iranians-appetite-for-romance> (accessed 7 January 2025)

⁵ Interview with @dw_persian: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9VPbMUPof2/?igsh=dnd2djljC9lCtkw>

⁶ Interview with @dw_persian: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9VPbMUPof2/?igsh=dnd2djljC9lCtkw>

⁷ P. Oltermann, ‘Exhausting and extremely dangerous’: Mohammad Rasoulof on his escape from Iran, The Guardian, 17 May 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/article/2024/may/17/exhausting-and-extremely-dangerous-mohammad-rasoulof-on-his-hazardous-escape-from-eight-year-sentence>, (accessed 7 January 2025)

⁸ M. Tabbara, ‘Iranian filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof released from prison but faces more charges’, Screen Daily, 14 February 2023, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/iranian-filmmaker-mohammad-rasoulof-released-from-prison-but-faces-more-charges/5179077.article> (accessed 10 February 2025)



My Favorite Cake earned global praise, but its Iranian filmmakers face charges and a travel ban.

Atena Farghadani – a visual artist accused of “insulting religious sanctities”

Atena Farghadani is an Iranian artist, cartoonist, and children’s rights activist, known for her bold critique of social, political, and economic injustices. Her work portrays themes such as war, corruption, poverty, executions, and discrimination. Over the years, Farghadani has faced severe repercussions for her activism, including imprisonment, harassment, and deprivation of education. She has also received international recognition, including the Courage in Cartooning Award from Cartoonist Rights Network International (2016) and the Václav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent (2016). Farghadani’s activism has made her a target. In April 2024, she was arrested for displaying a cartoon titled *Class Difference in Iran* on a Tehran Street, near the Presidential Palace. Initially sentenced to six years on charges that included “insulting religious sanctities” and “propaganda against the system,” her sentence was reduced to eight months on appeal. She was released in

December 2024, having reportedly suffered abuse during her detention. Farghadani is one of the artists who views her work as “*challenging and being challenged, [by the state] which comes at a heavy cost.*”⁹

Underground music and female singers

The tightening of censorship boundaries extended to the field of music. Despite a ban on women’s public singing in effect since the 1979 revolution, female rappers and singers held underground concerts or posted samples on social media platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube, or were confined to singing for female only audiences in Iran. A recent example is **Zara Esmaeili**, a young singer who performed covers of songs by Iranian and international artists in the metro and other public places. She was arrested at her home in Karaj in July 2024 and transferred to Tehran Central Prison after singing on the metro without wearing the mandatory head covering¹⁰. Her Instagram page was also blocked by order of the judiciary.



Still from a video of Zara Esmaeili performing on the metro [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/zaraesmaeili).

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Atena Farghadani’s Telegram Channel, 18 April 2024 <https://t.me/AtenaArts/70> (accessed 7 January 2025)

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M. Zarghami, ‘Back To Black: Iranian Woman Jailed After Amy Winehouse Performance’ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 5 August 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-amy-winehouse-woman-singer-headscarf/33066309.html> (accessed 7 January 2025)

A concert held without the mandatory hijab and its repercussions

On 11 December 2024, **Parastoo Ahmadi**, a pop and rock singer, held her first concert along with her music group, without following the compulsory hijab measures. Her "Imaginary Concert" was performed in a *caravanserai* (historic inn) without an audience but was broadcast live on YouTube, where it received over a million views. She was released on bail¹¹ shortly after her arrest. She had previously been prosecuted for performing music pieces during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests.¹² During her virtual concert, the singer firmly stated: *"I am Parastoo, a girl who cannot stay silent and refuses to stop singing for the people she loves. This is my right; one I will never surrender. I sing for this land I adore, for the soil of my homeland. Here, in this sacred corner of our beloved Iran, listen to my voice in this imagined concert, and dream of a free and beautiful nation."*

Persecution of musicians and rappers

Government restrictions in Iran have pushed many musicians whose works are not permitted to be broadcast towards unofficial and underground music, particularly protest rap. In the context of the 2022 protest movement, rappers and singers such as **Toomaj Salehi**, **Shervin Hajipour**, and **Saman Yasin (Seyedi)** performed songs in support of this movement and faced prosecution. The main themes of their music address societal issues, such as addiction, prostitution, economic corruption, and more. They faced imprisonment and heavy sentences during and after the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

In many of these cases, the main charges include "insulting sacred values," "the Supreme Leader," and fundamentally "propaganda against the regime." These charges, which are open to interpretation, are widely used to suppress dissenting voices and popular protests.

Toomaj Salehi, known for his protest raps, was released from prison in December 2024. Upon his release, he said, *"Today we are not separate trees; we are intertwined roots."* His journey to freedom

has been emblematic of the tension and upheaval that have defined Iran's political climate since the 2022 protests. Salehi's arrest, in October of that year, followed his outspoken role in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests. His music and activism, criticising systemic oppression and the violence of the state, led to a conviction for "corruption on earth," and a death sentence handed down in April 2024. Though the Supreme Court overturned the sentence in June following an international campaign in his support, Salehi remained imprisoned, held on a constantly shifting list of allegations that underlined the arbitrary cruelty of the regime. Finally, on 1 December 2024, after serving a one-year term for propaganda against the Islamic Republic, he was released. During his detention, Salehi was allegedly subjected to torture, including electric shocks, beatings that fractured his bones, and solitary confinement that stretched for months.¹³



Toomaj Salehi. Photo by [Hosseinronaghi](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=112679809)
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=112679809>.

Another singer who escaped execution is **Saman Seyedi (Yasin)**, a rap singer also detained during

¹¹ HRANA, 'Singer Parastoo Ahmadi and Musicians Charged Over Virtual Concert', HRANA, 23 December 2024, <https://www.en-hrana.org/singer-parastoo-ahmadi-and-musicians-charged-over-virtual-concert/> (accessed 7 January 2025)

¹² Women's Voices Now, 'Parastoo Ahmadi's Historic Concert in Iran', Women's Voices Now, n.d., <https://www.womensvoicesnow.org/parastoo-ahmadi> (accessed 7 January 2025)

¹³ Freemuse, 'Toomaj Salehi Freed: A Victory for Resistance and Solidarity', 4 December 2024, Freemuse, <https://www.freemuse.org/toomaj-salehi-freed-a-victory-for-resistance-and-solidarity> (accessed 7 January 2025)

the 2022 nationwide protests. He was released on medical leave in November 2024 after serving 26 months in prison. He had been arrested in October 2022 on charges that including “enmity against God” and “actions against national security” and was sentenced to death,¹⁴ a sentence which was later overturned by the Supreme Court.¹⁵

Shervin Hajipour, whose song *Baray* became the anthem for the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, was arrested in 2022 and subsequently released on bail. He was initially sentenced to three years in prison, but his case was closed, and he was pardoned¹⁶ in September 2024. Shervin was given a special prize at the 2023 Grammys for his song *Baray*, receiving the inaugural “Best Song for Social Change Award.” Neither the Iranian regime nor Hajipour have stated that the pardon was because of the rewarded Grammy, but the importance of international attention cannot be ignored. Hajipour has also expressed gratefulness to all those who supported him during his imprisonment.¹⁷

Behrad Azargan, a Baha’i musician, was sentenced to 11 years in prison after his arrest in July 2024, which was later reduced to seven years on appeal. His charges included “educational or promotional activities deviating from the sacred law of Islam” and “spreading falsehoods [that] Baha’i citizens are a persecuted minority in Iran and face heavier penalties.”¹⁸ ¹⁹ International organisations have documented Iranian authorities’ systematic violation of the fundamental rights of members of the Baha’i community through discriminatory laws and policies that target them.

Vafa Ahmadpour, a protest rapper known as “Vafadar,” returned to Evin Prison in December 2024. He was first arrested during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising for singing protest songs and was released on bail in February 2024. For this, he was later sentenced to one year in prison for “propaganda against the regime.” Despite this, on

9 May he and fellow musician **Danial Moghadam** released a music video titled “*Amadeh Bash*” (“Be Prepared”), criticising the government and addressing issues such as economic problems and the morality police.²⁰ This led to their arrest; each of the artists subsequently received a one-year prison sentence in August. Moghadam was released on bail. Ahmadpour remained in prison to serve his first sentence.²¹

Government response and censorship

The Islamic Republic of Iran response to artistic expression challenging its authority constitutes clear violations of the right to freedom of expression under international human rights laws that have been ratified by Iran.

Notably, the government’s harsh stance towards works addressing the Woman, Life, Freedom movement or challenging religious norms, labelling them as threats to national security, are clear violations of these standards.

In many of cases discussed above, international solidarity, media coverage, and pressure from human rights organizations played a crucial role in advocating for the artists’ freedom and bringing attention to their situations. The global support often contributed to reduced sentences, pardons, or releases, though the impact varied in each case. The state of artistic freedom in Iran remained dire in 2024, with the government intensifying its efforts to silence dissenting voices in the arts. Despite these challenges, Iranian artists continued to produce powerful and thought-provoking work, often at great personal cost. The resilience of the artistic community, coupled with international support, ensured that Iranian art remained a vital force for expression and resistance.

The international community’s support for Iranian artists, including promotion of their work

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, ‘Iran: Popular Rapper Sentenced to Death for Dissent’, Human Rights Watch, 24 April 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/24/iran-popular-rapper-sentenced-death-dissent> (accessed 7 January 2025)

¹⁵ Radio Farda, ‘Jailed Iranian Rapper Says He Was Tortured And Forced To Confess In Prison’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/jailed-iran-rapper-saman-yasin-torture-forced-confession/32563341.html> (accessed 7 January 2025)

¹⁶ Associated Press, ‘Iran pardons Grammy Award winner whose song became an anthem to the 2022 protests’, Associated Press, 23 September 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-shervin-hajipour-grammy-mahsa-amini-amnesty-ebcd60fa8d8b0e94534c05be103494ba> (accessed 7 January 2025)

¹⁷ Shervin Hajipour speaking to BBC Farsi on his release in September 2024 https://youtu.be/bOtuQrwrMc?si=_O9uV29GnFkNkQSP (accessed 20 February 2025)

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, ‘Iran: Persecution of Baha’is’, Human Rights Watch, 1 April 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/01/iran-persecution-bahais> (accessed 7 January 2025)

¹⁹ Artists at Risk Connection, ‘Iranian Authorities Sentence Behrad Azargan’, Artists at Risk Connection, 22 November 2024, <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/iranian-authorities-sentence-behrad-azargan> (accessed 7 January 2025)

²⁰ Voice of America, ‘Dissenting Iranian rappers arrested in Shiraz’, Voice of America, 10 May 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/dissenting-iranian-rappers-arrested-in-shiraz/7606178.html> (accessed 7 January 2025)

²¹ HRANA, ‘Singers Vafa Ahmadpour and Danial Moghaddam Sentenced to Prison and Additional Punishments’, HRANA, 13 August 2024, <https://www.en-hrana.org/singers-vafa-ahmadpour-and-danial-moghaddam-sentenced-to-prison-and-additional-punishments/> (accessed 7 January 2025)

at film festivals and distribution across borders, has played an essential role in enabling artists to continue to create despite the threats. Notably the campaigns by human rights organisations and artistic freedom advocacy groups for imprisoned artists, such as Toomaj Salehi, identifying them as both artists and human rights defenders, have no doubt contributed to the early release of some of the artists.

Support of exiled artistic communities by organisations such as ICORN, PEN, Artists at Risk, Artistic Freedom Initiative, and Freemuse, is crucial for providing platforms and performance opportunities to continue their creative work and to reach new audiences. Resettlement assistance to artists at risk and their families is essential for artists trying to rebuild their lives and careers in a new country and context.

As the struggle for artistic freedom in Iran continues, it is crucial for the international community to maintain pressure on the Iranian government and provide support for persecuted artists. The courage of these individuals in the face of severe repression serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of artistic freedom in challenging authoritarianism and promoting social change.

Absolutely, one of the most evident themes in the works, writings, songs, and art of these artists is their unwavering commitment to staying, standing, and striving to build and reclaim their future. Their resilience and determination shine through despite the challenges and adversities they face. This spirit of perseverance and hope is truly inspiring!

CREATING AND RESISTANCE UNDER MULTIPLE THREATS IN A CONVULSED LATIN AMERICA

Diana Arévalo

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- *In 2024, authoritarian regimes in Cuba and Venezuela intensified their repressive tactics against artists and critical voices.*
 - *Forced exile and stripping of citizenship was used in Nicaragua to silence critical artists.*
 - *Violence and organised crime have become systemic structural threats, affecting artists in countries such as Mexico, Peru, Haiti and Colombia, where at least 10 artists and cultural leaders were killed in 2024.*
-

2024 was another year in which authoritarian governments, flawed democracies and organised crime once again sought to silence the voices of artists and limit freedom of artistic expression in Latin America. In **Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela**, criminalisation and the censorship of critical voices continued to be tools of repression. Once again, the violence associated with organised crime in **Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Haiti** affected artists directly, exposing them to extortion, threats, cancellation of concerts and violent attacks.

Cuban artists arrested and threatened, and a defiant act from a prison cell

In **Cuba**, severe shortages of food, fuel and drinking water, along with the collapse of basic services and an increase in citizen insecurity¹ were accompanied by systemic human rights violations. In 2024, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) denounced that the repression by the Cuban regime of critical voices was carried out in various forms, such as internet shutdowns, house arrests, constant surveillance, arbitrary detentions, fines, citations, interrogations and arbitrary judicial processes².

Artists were among those subjected to this repression.

- Art historian and activist **Yamilka Lafita** was threatened on several occasions in 2024, most recently in December when she refused to accept a document that a State Security agent tried to hand to her through the gate to her home, believing it to be an official summons. The agent threatened her by referring to what she could face if she were taken to prison, implying being subjected to sexual and physical assault. Lafita had already received previous threats in March and September 2024 through anonymous

messages to her cell phone accusing her of conspiring against the regime.³ Lafita, is among the most active voices of Cuban activism today, notably since her participation in the 27N movement launched by artists in November 2020 to protest restrictions on artists, many of whom were subsequently arrested⁴. She focuses her activism on the defence of human rights and democracy primarily through her support of humanitarian causes in the island.

Artists imprisoned after the mass protests of July 2021 – when thousands took to the streets against government authoritarianism, restrictions on civil liberties, strict COVID-19 lockdown measures, and unfulfilled economic and political reforms – continue to face precarious conditions and constant harassment, alongside the hundreds of others arrested during the uprising⁵. According to the *Observatorio de Derechos Culturales* (Observatory of Cultural Rights), an independent Cuban organisation that monitors the state of cultural rights in the island, as of mid-2024, 16 artists were imprisoned under extremely poor conditions, and three were being held under house arrest⁶.

Among them is **Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara**, visual artist and leader of the San Isidro Movement that was formed in 2018 to combat suppression of artistic freedom. Imprisoned since July 2021, his request for parole after serving three years of his five-year sentence, was rejected in February 2024. The argument was that he was not ready for “social reintegration”⁷. Despite this, Otero Alcántara continued his artistic practice from prison as an act of defiance. In November 2024, coinciding with the government-sponsored Havana Biennial, he staged a performance piece titled, *Fe de Vida* (Proof of Life)⁸. As part of this work, he invited artists and participants in the Biennial to visit him in his cell to examine and discuss the pieces he had created

1 Justicia 11J, “Otro año sin justicia (2024)”, Justicia 11J, <https://justicia11j.org/otroaño2024/> (accessed 4 December 2024).

2 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), “Cuba: CIDH, RELE y REDESCA condenan represión a organizaciones y medios, en el contexto de una grave crisis social y económica”, https://www.oas.org/pt/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2024/306.asp&utm_content=country-cub&utm_term=class-mon (accessed 2 December 2024).

3 K. Pérez, “Una puñalada se la dan a cualquiera”: oficial amenaza a Yamilka Lafita”, ADN Noticias, 19 December 2024, <https://adncuba.com/derechos-humanos/una-punalada-se-la-dan-a-cualquiera-oficial-amenaza-yamilka-lafita>, (accessed 10 January 2025).

4 RIALTA, “What is the 27N?”, nocountry magazine, 3 March 2021, <https://nocountrymagazine.com/what-is-the-27n/>, (accessed 10 February 2025).

5 Cubalex, “Informe mensual sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en Cuba (octubre 2024)”, 15 November 2024, <https://cubalex.org/report/informe-mensual-sobre-la-situacion-de-los-derechos-humanos-en-cuba-octubre-2024/>, (accessed 28 November 2024).

6 Observatorio cubano de derechos culturales, “Artistas presos políticos en Cuba: Septiembre 2024, registro y actualización”, September 2024, <https://hypermediamagazine.com/sociedad/artistas-presos-politicos-en-cuba-septiembre-2024-registro-y-actualizacion/>, (accessed 4 December 2024).

7 Diario de Cuba, “El Tribunal Provincial de Artemisa desaprueba otorgar la libertad condicional a Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara”, 7 February 2024, https://diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1707339366_52715.html, (accessed 28 November 2024).

8 G. Harris, “Artist jailed in Cuba invites biennial visitors to ‘become part’ of his work in prison”, The Art Newspaper, 4 November 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/11/04/artist-jailed-in-cuba-invites-biennial-visitors-become-part-of-his-work-in-prison>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

during his imprisonment. Reflecting on the significance of this act in an interview he granted via phone call to an independent Cuban media outlet, he stated: “*The Biennial was born as an opportunity for the periphery and the displaced, and since it is not possible for me to attend the event, why not bring a fragment of the Biennial to the artist?*”⁹.

When asked if anyone had been able to visit him in prison, one of the curators of the performance, **Yanelys Núñez Leyva**, told Cartel Urbano¹⁰ and Freemuse: “*The work remains open and in progress. We have received visit requests, even from outside Cuba. In February 2025, we plan to arrange a visit for a Cuban resident on the island who has persistently requested to see him, although approval from the prison authorities is still required.*”¹¹



Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara –
Photo: Alcántara's Facebook.

Nicaragua: Forced exile and stripping of citizenship

In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega's regime consolidated the use of forced exile and the stripping of nationality as tools of repression¹². On 5 September, after serving 10 months in prison, visual artists **Kevin Laguna (Vink Art)** and **Oscar Parrilla (Torch**

Místico) were released and exiled to Guatemala along with 134 other political prisoners. They had been imprisoned in 2023 for murals celebrating the crowning of Nicaraguan model Sheynnis Palacios as Ms Universe, who became a target after the regime learned that when she was a college student, she had joined the mass protests that broke out in 2018 demanding the administration's removal¹³. In addition to their forced expulsion, the government also stripped the artists of their citizenship and confiscated their property¹⁴. On 11 November, musicians **Nieves Martínez, Dagoberto Palacios** and **Juan Pablo Rosales** were arbitrarily arrested in the city of Masaya and later transferred to prison, where they were held incommunicado. They were then stripped of their nationality and exiled to Spain in the case of Martínez and Palacios, and the United States in the case of Rosales. Their “crime” was that they were “suspected” of planning to produce a protest song to be released at Christmas¹⁵.

Artists caught up in repression of protests against Venezuelan authoritarianism

Meanwhile, in **Venezuela**, with the announcement of Nicolás Maduro's re-election for a third term as President in July, state repression and human rights violations intensified. Allegations of electoral fraud led to massive protests in which thousands of citizens mobilised in the streets to demand electoral transparency. The largely peaceful demonstrations were met with violence and a disproportionate response by the state security forces, who used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters¹⁶.

The state response was condemned by the United Nations, which documented serious abuses, including extrajudicial executions, torture and forced disappearances, perpetrated by security forces and armed groups aligned with the govern-

⁹ Diario de Cuba, “Otero Alcántara convoca a los artistas que asistirán a la Bienal de La Habana a visitarlo en prisión”, 2 November 2024, https://diario-decuba.com/derechos-humanos/1730558262_58113.html#google_vignette, (accessed 9 December 2024).

¹⁰ Cartel Urbano is an independent media of (counter)cultural journalism in Colombia that, since 2005, has made artistic expressions and alternative movements visible through its magazine, digital platform, and events. Together with its foundation, which bears the same name, Cartel Urbano supports freedom of artistic expression and cultural diversity, articulating independent creators and projects to strengthen critical thinking and cultural identity in Latin America.

¹¹ From interview dated 3 February 2025.

¹² Echoes of Freedom: Art as a Voice of Resistance in Nicaragua, Artistic Freedom Initiative, November 2024, <https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/our-programs/advocacy-for-artistic-freedom/research-2/nicaragua/>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

¹³ To read more about the crackdown on the Miss Universe celebrations in Nicaragua visit: [Nicaragua is cracking down on its Miss Universe winner for her protest history](https://www.npr.org/2024/11/11/1311111111/nicaragua-is-cracking-down-on-its-miss-universe-winner-for-her-protest-history) - NPR

¹⁴ EFE Latam, “Nicaragua ha privado de su nacionalidad y de sus bienes a 452 nicaragüenses en dos años”, 4 December 2024, https://fmtophit1027.com.ar/mundiales/id-19889_Nicaragua-ha-privado-de-su-nacionalidad-y-de-sus-bienes-a-452-nicarag-enses-en-dos-a-os (accessed 9 December 2024).

¹⁵ I. Olivares, “El ‘delito’ de tres músicos desterrados: ‘sospechosos’ de preparar ‘una canción de Navidad’”, El Confidencial, 16 November 2024, <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/el-delito-de-tres-musicos-desterrados-sospechosos-de-preparar-una-cancion-de-navidad/>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters”, September 2024, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters> (accessed 9 December 2024)

ment¹⁷. Among those arrested, was singer-songwriter **Wilmer Ramón Álvarez Vargas**, known as “Willy Álvarez”, on 12 July, by officers of the Bolivarian National Guard in the state of Táchira¹⁸. He had composed the song “*Estoy contigo*” (*I’m With You*) in support of opposition presidential candidate Edmundo González. He and two people accompanying him were charged with “resistance to authority” on 14 July¹⁹. On 4 August, they were released under the condition that they report to the court every 30 days and were banned from leaving the country.

The Colombia-based arts freedom monitor *Bulla* of the Cartel Urbano Foundation²⁰ has identified cases of artists and cultural workers who were forced to leave Venezuela as a result of harassment and constant surveillance by the authorities and “colectivos”, groups of civilians sympathetic to Chavism.²¹ Audiovisual artist and photographer **Franciso Colmenarez** told Cartel Urbano and Freemuse that he made the decision to leave Venezuela in August 2024 due to the harassment from his neighbours for using photography to record life on the streets:

*“I began to suffer harassment from some neighbours of the sectors I photographed because the order was to denounce or stop everything that could show that things were happening in the streets, [the government] ... called on its supporters to denounce the dissident population, ... having a camera became a crime, the police stopped you wherever and if they found a camera it was sure for them that you were against the government and for that you could go to jail for at least 10 years”.*²²

In the midst of growing tension in Venezuela, censorship, harassment, media closures, and the cancellation of concerts and music festivals became more pronounced during the second half of 2024. On 3 December, the Venezuelan pop band **Rawayana** announced the cancellation of its concert tour of ten cities across the country. This decision came two days after President Maduro publicly criticised their song “*Veneka*”²³, describing it as “*insulting*” and “*horrible*” to Venezuelan women. He argued that the term was used pejoratively, was an affront to women and disrespected them, further stating, “*women in Venezuela should be referred to as Venezuelan, they are not venekas*”²⁴. The cancellation of the group’s concert tour coincided with the suspension of the prestigious *Cusica Fest 2024*, initially scheduled for 7 December and whose platform managed ticket sales for Rawayana’s tour²⁵. Although the festival organizers attributed the cancellation to “reasons beyond their control,” it added to the list of concerts and festivals that had to be cancelled due to the political crisis in the country after the presidential elections²⁶.



T-shirts with official slogans by Francisco Colmenarez from his series of street photography taken just before the 2024 presidential elections.

Photo: Francisco Colmenarez.

17 “UN International Mission reveals gross human rights violations in Venezuela,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 3 October 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2024/10/un-international-mission-reveals-gross-human-rights-violations-venezuela>, (accessed 9 December 2024)

18 Diario La Nación, “Confirman detención del cantante Willy Álvarez en Peracal”, 14 July 2024, <https://lanacionweb.com/sucesos/confirman-detencion-del-cantante-willy-alvarez-en-peracal/>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

19 N. Kolster, “Venezuela: Imputan a compositor musical de campaña de oposición”, *Voz de América*, 15 July 2024, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/venezuela-imputan-a-compositor-musical-de-campana-de-oposicion/7699365.html>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

20 To learn more about Cartel Urbano’s arts freedom monitor *Bulla* visit this link: <https://cartelurbano.com/bulla/>.

21 Chavismo, also known in English as Chavism, is a left-wing populist political ideology based on the ideas, programs and government style associated with Hugo Chávez, President of Venezuela between 1999 and 2013.

22 From an interview dated 5 December 2024.

23 The song refers to the term “*Veneka*”, which is used to refer to Venezuelans in a derogatory way. But the group has sought to reclaim the term and highlight the dignity of Venezuelan women who have become victims of xenophobia in the midst of the massive migration that began in 2014.

24 NTN24, “Se les dice venezolanas, no son venekas”: Maduro considera un insulto la canción de Rawayana y Akapellah”, 2 December 2024, <https://www.ntn24.com/noticias-actualidad/se-les-dice-venezolanas-no-son-venekas-maduro-considera-un-insulto-la-cancion-de-rawayana-y-akapellah-526970>, (accessed 10 December 2024).

25 J. Roiz, “Rawayana cancela gira en Venezuela tras críticas de Maduro a su canción ‘Veneka’”, *Billboard*, 3 December 2024, <https://www.billboard.com/espanol/noticias/rawayana-gira-venezuela-cancelada-1235844397/>, (accessed 10 December 2024).

26 D. León, “Los conciertos cancelados y suspendidos en Venezuela en el contexto poselectoral”, *El Diario*, 14 August 2024, [Los conciertos cancelados y suspendidos en Venezuela en el contexto poselectoral - El Diario](https://www.eldiario.es/venezuela/los-conciertos-cancelados-y-suspendidos-en-venezuela-en-el-contexto-poselectoral), (accessed 3 March 2025).

Censorship at the intersection of ethics and power

Censorship of diverse artistic expressions in Latin America reflects the social, ethical and political tensions experienced throughout the region. From debates on ethics and political correctness, to restrictions motivated by political interests or conservative positions, artistic works can become points of tension between freedom of artistic expression and the demands of different social sectors according to the socio-cultural context in which they are exhibited.

Puerto Rico: On 10 April, Garvin Sierra's *Retratos de una deuda* (Portraits of a debt) was excluded from the exhibition Poli/gráfica at the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. The work, which criticised public debt and figures responsible for the economic crisis, was withdrawn by decision of the exhibition's curator, Lisa Ladner, who argued that it could make local and federal authorities feel uncomfortable²⁷.

Peru: On 8 November, the cultural association Brisas del Titicaca denounced the censorship of the paintings *Puno sí es el Perú* and *Mi Puno en el Bicentenario*, created by artists Ruth Ingaluque and Juan Carlos Condori. These pieces were part of the exhibition *Brisas del Titicaca, Puno en el Bicentenario, Cultura e Identidad*, organised by this association and exhibited at the National Library of Peru²⁸ a public institution reliant on the Ministry of Culture for support. In a letter sent to Brisas del Titicaca, the National Library organisers informed that these artworks could not be exhibited, warning that if they were not removed, the exhibition would be cancelled. The censored pieces portrayed the struggle of the people of Puno and their demand for justice since the protests of January 2023, in which 22 people died during demonstrations against the government²⁹.



Ruth Ingaluque Flores with her painting “Puno Sí es el Perú”, censored by the National Library of Peru in the exhibition “V Brisas de Titicaca Painting Biennial – Puno in the Bicentennial: Culture and identity” (Photo: [Creative Commons](#)).

Cases of censorship and attempted censorship by conservative and religious groups appealing for respect for Christian principles, family values, and the protection of minors continued to be a constant in the region. Works caught up under such concerns were often labelled as immoral and degrading for dealing with themes related to sexual diversity, gender violence, and ethnic-racial issues, and in some cases for their explicit sexual content.

Brazil: On 27 March, in Rio do Sul, Mayor José Thomé banned the LGBTQ+ film festival *V Transforma*, arguing that it violated “Christian principles.” The film festival, which had toured other cities without incident, was cancelled after threats from religious groups³⁰.

El Salvador: On 15 June in San Salvador, the Ministry of Culture ordered the cancellation of the second performance of the play *Inmoral*, by the theatre company INARI. The play, performed in drag and dealing with sexual and emotional abuse, was reported to be unsuitable for families. After the first performance successfully went ahead, pressure from conservative groups led to the cancellation of the second of the two scheduled shows³¹.

²⁷ S. Rodríguez Cotto, “Censura en la Poligráfica provoca renuncias y denuncias de artistas”, *En Blanco y Negro con Sandra*, 14 April 2024, <https://sandraro-driquezotto.substack.com/p/censura-en-la-poligrafica-provoca>, (accessed 11 December 2024).

²⁸ J. Chávez Cardoza, “Gobierno de Dina Boluarte censura a artistas de Puno que ilustraron protestas de diciembre de 2022: ‘Puno sí es el Perú’”, *La República*, 21 November 2024, <https://larepublica.pe/politica/2024/11/20/gobierno-de-dina-boluarte-censura-a-artistas-de-puno-que-ilustraron-protestas-de-diciembre-de-2022-puno-si-es-el-peru-puno-biblioteca-nacional-del-peru-noticia-1958600>, (accessed 11 December 2024).

²⁹ The deadliest day of anti-government protests in Peru, *Aljazeera*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/1/10/photos-the-deadliest-day-of-anti-government-protests-in-peru>, (accessed 11 December 2024).

³⁰ A. L. Basilio, “Prefeito de Rio do Sul, em Santa Catarina, veta mostra de cinema LGBT: ‘Princípios cristãos’”, *CartaCapital*, 27 March 2024, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/prefeito-de-rio-do-sul-em-santa-catarina-veta-mostra-de-cinema-lgbt-principios-cristaos/>, (accessed 11 December 2024).

³¹ R. Mixco and F. Rubio, “Puesta en escena LGTBI+ cancelada por Ministerio de Cultura”, *El Diario de Hoy*, 17 June 2024, <https://www.elsalvador.com/entretenimiento/cultura/cultura-teatro-comunidad-lgtbi-ministerio-de-1149590/2024/>, (accessed 11 December 2024).

Impact of criminal violence and organised crime on urban art, popular music, and cultural leaderships

Violence and organised crime³² represent significant barriers to freedom of artistic expression in the region. This violence is a tragic result of wider society issues affecting communities suffering the presence of criminal structures and actors, which arises from deep seated inequalities, rampant corruption and local conflicts. What in some areas has become a crisis is exacerbated by a lack of state capacity or even an unwillingness to address a problem that largely affects poorer communities. Criminal networks in many places, as a result, act with impunity and use violence and threats as means to reinforce their power.

These situations generate an unsafe environment for artists and cultural workers, who often lack adequate security measures and guarantees to create and develop their work without risking their lives. This multifaceted violence – primarily in the form of hired killings, extortion, and threats – has profoundly impacted urban art, popular music, and cultural workers. Perpetrators of these crimes are rarely brought to justice, fostering a climate of impunity in countries like **Colombia, Peru, Mexico and Haiti**.³³

In **Colombia**, there have been numerous murders and threats directed at the artistic profession. According to Cartel Urbano's arts freedom monitor *Bulla*, at least 10 artists and cultural leaders³⁴ were murdered in 2024. On 17 July, **Cristian García**, alias "Ebri-Drunk," a graffiti artist known for his activism, was killed by unidentified individuals

while painting a mural in Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá³⁵. Artists have also been victims of drug cartels and armed gangs, sometimes in targeted attacks, and others by simply being in the wrong place. On 26 April, popular singer **Sebastián Muñoz**, known as "El León de la Canción," and his DJ, **JJ Villegas**, were killed in Corinto, Cauca, during a private event in what authorities presume was a settling of scores between armed gangs³⁶. On 15 August, urban artists **Camilo Sanchez**, known as "Mc Cub," and **Camila Ospitia**, of the Distreestyle collective, were killed after a cultural event in El Porvenir Park in Bogotá. This attack was attributed to gangs dedicated to small scale, domestic drug trafficking.³⁷ Other artists became victims of FARC dissident groups that still operate³⁸ in certain parts of the country. On 2 August, **Edgar Eduardo Victoria Segura**³⁹, an artist and teacher from the Indigenous Guard of Vitoncó, Cauca, was killed by alleged FARC dissidents⁴⁰.

On 8 November, in the village of El Plateado, Cauca, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP dissidents threatened artists invited to the "**Cultural and Artistic Festival**" organised by the Ministry of Defence. Through a statement, they warned of reprisals against those who participated, forcing the cancellation of several presentations, despite the security guarantees offered by the authorities⁴¹, evidencing the vulnerability of artists in zones of armed conflict.

In **Peru**, artists and groups from popular music genres such as cumbia and chicha continued to be targets of extortion and attacks, reflecting how organised crime in the region has expanded its

32 This chapter defines organized crime as: A structured group of people who associate on a regular and prolonged basis to profit from illicit activities and illegal markets. This group may be local, national or transnational in nature, and its existence is maintained using violence and threats; corruption of public officials and their influence on society, politics and the economy. Source: <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/elites-and-organized-crime-conceptual-framework-organized-crime/>

33 C. Noce y D. Arévalo, "Cómo la violencia impacta el arte urbano, la música popular y los liderazgos culturales en Latinoamérica", Cartel Urbano, 13 September 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_wa4gaOCcA/, (accessed 13 December 2024).

34 Cultural leaders are those artists and community leaders/activists who, through art and culture, work for the strengthening of their territories, the defence of human rights and the safeguarding of their cultural heritage. This term has great relevance in Colombia where organisations such as INDEPAZ and Cartel Urbano, recognised this term as part of a special category in their monitoring methodology.

35 L. Alarcón Vargas, "Hombre es asesinado en Bogotá mientras, aparentemente, se encontraba realizando un grafiti en la localidad de Ciudad Bolívar", El Tiempo, 18 July 2024, <https://www.eltiempo.com/bogota/hombre-es-asesinado-en-bogota-mientras-aparentemente-se-encontraba-realizando-un-grafiti-en-la-localidad-de-ciudad-bolivar-3363589>, (accessed 13 December 2024).

36 Radio Nacional de Colombia, "Murió cantante Sebastián Muñoz en masacre en Corinto", 27 April 2024, <https://www.radionacional.co/actualidad/murio-cantante-sebastian-munoz-en-masacre-en-corinto>, (accessed 13 December 2024).

37 G. Herrera, "Disparos, intimidaciones y zozobra: lo que ha pasado en Bosa Porvenir después del asesinato de dos líderes sociales", CeroSetenta, 15 September 2024, <https://cerosetenta.uniandes.edu.co/disparos-intimidaciones-y-zozobra-lo-que-ha-pasado-en-bosa-porvenir-despues-del-asesinato-de-dos-lideres-sociales/>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

38 J. Pappier and K. Johnson, "Does the FARC still exist? Challenges in Assessing Colombia's 'Post Conflict' under International Humanitarian Law", Human Rights Watch, 22 October 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/22/does-farc-still-exist-challenges-assessing-colombias-post-conflict-under>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

39 J. Sánchez Romero, "Atribuyen a disidencias el asesinato de líder social, docente y artista huilense: le dispararon en la cabeza", Infobae, 3 August 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2024/08/03/atribuyen-a-disidencias-el-asesinato-de-lider-social-docente-y-artista-huilense-le-dispararon-en-la-cabeza/>, (accessed 13 December 2024).

40 FARC-EP dissidents are residual armed groups made up of former FARC-EP combatants who did not take advantage of the peace agreement with the Colombian government and returned to arms, acting as actors in Colombia's internal armed conflict.

41 V. Rodríguez, "La fuerte amenaza de las disidencias a artistas por concierto en Argelia, Cauca", La Opinión, 2 November 2024, <https://www.laopinion.co/colombia/la-fuerte-amenaza-de-las-disidencias-artistas-por-concierto-en-argelia-cauca>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

influence beyond drug-trafficking. On 3 November, **Thalia Manrique Castillo**, lead singer of the cumbia orchestra **Hermanos Guerrero**, was killed during an assault on the bus she was traveling in with her bandmates after a performance. The artists also reported the theft of their musical instruments during the attack⁴². A month later, on 1 December, the cumbia group **Armonía 10** suffered a similar attack in the city of Callao, when a motorcyclist shot at the bus that was transporting the musicians to a performance. Days before, the group had received extortion messages demanding the payment of 20.000 soles [c. € 5,174] to guarantee their safety during the event⁴³.

In **Mexico**, on 14 October, the traditional Sinaloa Livestock Fair and the Palenque de Culiacán, emblematic events in the region, were suspended following a series of violent acts and threats attributed to criminal groups interested in controlling economic and territorial activities in the area. The incidents included the arson of the main box office and the posting of narcomantas⁴⁴ with intimidating messages addressed to Governor Rubén Rocha Moya, who was attending the event, and guest artists such as regional music⁴⁵ singers **Julián Álvarez**, **Yuridia** and **Cristian Nodal**⁴⁶. Although local authorities provided security measures, the organisers opted to cancel the events due to the prevailing climate of insecurity.

Likewise in **Haiti**, there was violence linked to organised crime. On 29 November, Jimmy Cherizier, alias “Barbecue,” leader of one of the country’s most active and dangerous criminal groups, issued direct threats against all the country’s artistic community, demanding that they prioritise areas under his control for their performances before performing in other locations⁴⁷.

2024 was a year in which artists and cultural workers across Latin America faced diverse practices and strategies that often had profound impacts on their creative work. These range from long established authoritarian governments to conservative and religious groups’ influence, and often extreme

violence from criminal gangs acting with impunity. These multiple layers of threats to artistic freedom across Latin America and the Caribbean not only affect the creators, but also the wider public, limiting audiences’ access to a diverse and enriching cultural offer. All states in the region must abide by the international human rights conventions to which they have pledged commitment, by:

- Ending the practice of imprisoning and censoring artists and ensuring the amendment or removal of legislation that penalises legitimate freedom of expression.
- Resisting pressure from non-government bodies to censor or penalise works that do not accord with religious or other social values and removing from the statute books laws relating to insult to religion.
- Taking measures to protect artists from attack from criminal and other violent organisations, and to ensure that they cannot act with impunity.

Positive development: Institutional recognition of new forms of artistic expression and their cultural value in Brazil

Law No. 14,996, enacted on 15 October in **Brazil**, states “*caricatures, cartoons and graffiti are recognized as manifestations of Brazilian culture, and it is the responsibility of the public authorities to guarantee their free artistic expression and promote their appreciation and preservation*”. This recognition represents a significant advance for freedom of artistic expression in the region, by legitimising these cultural practices and protecting artists from possible censorship or persecution. This legal framework not only directly benefits artists, but also promotes an inclusive and open environment, setting an example for other countries in the region on how to value and protect urban and popular art.⁴⁸

42 M. Farroñay, “Vocalista de ‘Hermanos Guerrero’ pierde la vida en asalto armado a la orquesta en Bagua Grande”, Infobae, 3 November 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2024/11/03/vocalista-de-hermanos-guerrero-thalia-manrique-es-asesinada-en-violento-asalto-a-la-orquesta-en-bagua-grande/>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

43 R. Solís Uribe, “Armonía 10 denunció extorsiones de hasta 200 mil soles antes del atentado”, Gaceta Perú TV, 1 December 2024, <https://gacetaperutv.pe/2024/12/armonia-10-denuncio-extorsiones-de-hasta-200-mil-soles-antes-del-atentado.html>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

44 Narcomensajes or narcomantas are messages left by criminal groups, belonging to a drug cartel, accompanied by attacks and/or executions in which they try to justify their crimes and/or send threats to rival groups, police, politicians, businesspeople, etc.

45 Regional Mexican music is a broad term encompassing mariachi, banda, corridos, norteño, sierrero, and other popular genres from Mexican culture.

46 A. Gallegos and Y. Bonilla, “Ante amenazas, cancelan Feria Ganadera en Sinaloa”, La Razón, 12 November 2024, <https://www.razon.com.mx/esta-dos/2024/11/12/ante-amenazas-cancelan-feria-ganadera-en-sinaloa/>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

47 “Barbecue habría lanzado nuevas amenazas luego de escapar de la Policía”, Hoy Digital, 25 November 2024, <https://hoy.com.do/barbecue-habria-lanzado-nuevas-amenazas/>, (accessed 14 December 2024).

48 Ley Nº 14.996, de 15 de octubre de 2024, Presidencia de la República de Brasil, 15 October 2024, <https://legislacao.presidencia.gov.br/atos/?tipo=LEI&numero=14996&ano=2024&ato=a70ITWE9ENZpWTef3>, (accessed 18 December 2024).

EASTERN EUROPE: “PLEASE ACT! IT'S NOT TOO LATE!” *CULTURAL WORKERS RESIST*

Małgorzata Kaźmierczak

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- *Governments across Eastern Europe are continuing to exert control over cultural institutions limiting the space for independent creative sectors.*
 - *Foreign agent laws, similar to those in Russia, are being introduced and strengthened in several countries.*
 - *LGBTQ+ expressions continue to be the targets of laws protecting "family" and "traditional" values.*
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The repression of cultural workers and the politicisation of art and media continue to challenge the foundations of freedom and creativity in Eastern Europe. In countries such as Belarus, Hungary, Slovakia, Georgia, and even in Poland, where the new (since December 2023) government is restoring democracy in various areas, including culture, the arts have become a battleground for ideological control and resistance. From the imprisonment of artists and cultural figures in Belarus to the sweeping cultural reforms and censorship in Hungary, Slovakia, and Georgia, authoritarian regimes are using culture as both a tool for propaganda and a target for repression. However, amidst these challenges, artists and cultural communities remain resilient, finding innovative ways to resist and assert their independence, even as they face severe consequences.

Belarus: Creativity in chains, resistance unbroken

The prosecution and imprisonment of cultural workers continues to be of acute concern in Belarus. As PEN Belarus reported in September 2024, *“there were 1,317 political prisoners in Belarus, including at least 101 cultural figures. No fewer than 164 cultural figures are incarcerated or serving home confinement sentences.”*¹ PEN Belarus also recorded 67 cases of censorship, most frequently applied to content referring to the 2020 mass protests against President Lukashenko’s re-election, and “propaganda of wrong values” – in particular, LGBTI+-related themes, sexuality, Western culture, and works of Ukrainian and Polish cultures.



Diagram from PEN Belarus report, January to September 2024.²

The art community across Europe, primarily filmmakers, united in defence of **Andrei Gnyot**, a film director and journalist accused of alleged tax evasion. It is more likely, though, that Gnyot was targeted because of his role in filming the 2020 protests and for speaking openly against President Lukashenko. He also co-founded a group known as SOS.BY, which brought together a number of high-profile athletes who had spoken out against the Belarusian leader’s authoritarian rule. Gnyot helped them create short, powerful films to deliver their message.³ Facing many years in prison, possibly torture and even death, as suffered by other political prisoners, Gnyot emigrated to Thailand.⁴ In October 2023, he was arrested at the Belgrade airport and spent seven months in detention and then another five under house arrest as the Belarus government attempted to have him extradited. More than 70 European artists and film directors signed an open letter urging Serbia not to extradite him. Thanks to diplomatic action and the involvement of a number of European governments, as well as the European Commission and the Council of Europe, Gnyot was released on 1 November 2024 and left for Berlin.⁵

State control of cultural institutions, the threat of “foreign agent laws” and LGBTQ+ expression endangered

In countries across Eastern Europe, governments are attempting to take away the independence of cultural institutions, alongside the introduction or strengthening of “foreign agent laws”, similar to those that are in place in Russia. While mainly targeting independent media and civil society groups, artists could be caught up under such legislation, as is happening in Russia where the scope of these laws have led to the arrests of artists who are seen as “dangerous” political operators (see page 42). Foreign agent laws are frequently accompanied by new laws that penalise LGBTQ+ expression, seen as a threat to family and traditional values. The prohibition of Pride festivals, LGBTQ+ film screenings and censorship of books will no doubt have a deterrent effect, with resources and opportunities quashed.

¹ ‘Monitoring violations of cultural and human rights of cultural workers. Belarus, January – September 2024’, PEN Belarus, 6 November 2024, <https://penbelarus.org/en/2024/11/06/bel-manitoryng-parushennyau-kulturnyh-pravou-i-pravou-chalaveka-u-dachynenni-da-dzeyachau-kulturny-belarus-studzen-verasen-2024-goda.html> (Accessed 30 December 2024)

² Ibid.

³ S. Rainsford, ‘Belarus filmmaker pleads with Serbia not to send him back,’ BBC Online, 27 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3rd117pdyvo> (accessed 30 December 2024)

⁴ S. Walker, ‘Serbian court approves extradition of anti-Lukashenko activist to Belarus,’ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/20/serbian-court-approves-extradition-anti-lukashenko-activist-belarus-andrei-gnyot>; and T. Farrant, ‘European artists urge Serbia to block extradition of Belarusian filmmaker facing persecution,’ EuroNews, 27 August 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2024/08/27/european-artists-urge-serbia-to-block-extradition-of-belarusian-filmmaker-facing-persecuti> (accessed on 30 December 2024)

⁵ See Andrei Gnyot Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/andrew.gnyot/>

Key among these countries is **Hungary**, where Prime Minister Victor Orbán has long and rigorously pursued a cultural policy clearly aimed at suppressing creative freedom with the removal of inconvenient directors of arts, science and other institutions who were replaced with political appointees, and the taking of full control over public media and cultural funding. In the past year, the situation further deteriorated with the introduction of a ban on the spread of “LGBT propaganda” and what is in effect a “foreign agent law” (a so called “sovereignty protection” law) that penalises organisations that receive funding from abroad⁶ – both may cause artists to self-censor. In addition, in the middle of 2024, a new law began to be drafted that would allow for even tighter centralisation and control of all cultural institutions throughout the country, a system that is already centralised. However, work on its introduction was halted in July and as of the end of year there was no further news on its progress.

Following in the footsteps of Hungary, in May, the **Georgian** legislature overruled a presidential veto to approve a “foreign agent law”, which requires nongovernmental groups and media companies that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from international sources to register as organisations “pursuing the interests of a foreign power”. In **Slovakia**, Prime Minister Rober Fico’s government also intended to introduce a version of a “foreign agent law” but under the pressure of the European Union its implementation was halted.⁷

In September, **Georgian** lawmakers approved a law on “family values and the protection of minors,” which allows the government in this culturally conservative country to prohibit Gay Pride events and censor films, books and art that it deems “promote homosexuality”.⁸ This move adds to the growing numbers of countries with similarly illiberal repression.

Slovakia: Art in the crosshairs

The changes that Victor Orbán was gradually introducing in Hungary over several years are being replicated by Prime Minister Robert Fico’s government in Slovakia, within months of him coming to power in October 2023.⁹ Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, a member of the ruling Slovak National Party, has been criticised for dismissing directors of various arts institutions and for the increasing centralisation of decision-making about culture. For example, it was announced that as of 1 April 2024, the Kunsthalle, the only Slovak public institution showing contemporary art, would be merged with the Slovak National Gallery (SNG) in Bratislava, thus losing its independence.¹⁰ This followed the resignation of the Kunsthalle’s director, Jen Kratochvíl, in January and the revocation of all of the funding for the institution’s 2024 artistic and educational programme. The Ministry of Culture explained that “Kunsthalle Bratislava did not take advantage of its historic chance, both in terms of its programme content, public expectations and the efficiency of its management.”¹¹ The Ministry of Culture criticised the Kunsthalle’s programme content and accused it of mismanagement – an allegation which was also repeated by SNG director Alexandra Kusá. Despite international protests¹² in support of Kunsthalle, and in a further dramatic move, all of the institution’s employees were made redundant as of 1 April.¹³ In August, Alexandra Kusá herself was sacked as the director of the SNG, together with the director of the National Theatre, Matej Drlička, followed by the sacking of the director of the National Museum, Branislav Panis. The swift removal of directors was made possible thanks to an amendment to the Museums and Galleries Act, which was introduced by the government earlier in 2024, and which took away a previous stipulation that directors of museums and galleries could not be dismissed without cause.¹⁴

6 B. Kelly, ‘Hungary faces the EU Court over foreign influence law’, European Interest, 4 October 2024, <https://www.europeaninterest.eu/hungary-to-face-eu-court-over-foreign-influence-law/> (accessed 30 December 2024)

7 CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Letter to the Slovak National Council on Civil Society’, CoE, 7 May 2024, <https://rm.coe.int/commhr-2024-24-letter-to-slovak-national-council-on-civil-society-and-1680afa042>; and H. Mihalková, ‘Zákon o zahraničných agentoch nebude, SNS chce do legislatívy dostať lobing’, Spavý Pravda, 24 November 2024 <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/731655-zakon-o-zahranicnych-agentoch-nebude-sns-chce-do-legislativy-dostat-lobing>, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/731655-zakon-o-zahranicnych-agentoch-nebude-sns-chce-do-legislativy-dostat-lobing> (both accessed 30 December 2024)

8 K. Córdova, ‘As Georgia Decides Its Future, Artists Are Worried About Theirs’, 25 October 2024, New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/25/arts/25georgia-artists-crackdowns-drag.html> (accessed 30 December 2024)

9 D. Tomková, ‘Practicing Solidarity in Slovakia: The Story of Kunsthalle Bratislava’, ArtMargins, 15 April 2024, <https://artmargins.com/practicing-solidarity-in-slovakia-kunsthalle-bratislava/> (accessed 30 December 2024)

10 Kunsthalle was a branch of SNG between 2016 and 2020.

11 ‘Kunsthalle vraj nevyužila historickú šancu, prevezme ju Slovenská národná galéria’, Standard, 17 January 2024, <https://standard.sk/544280/kunsthalle-vraj-nevyuzila-historicku-sancu-prevezme-ju-slovenska-narodna-galeria> (accessed 9 January 2025)

12 e.g. ‘Statement on Freedom of Artistic Expression in Republic of Slovakia’, AICA (International Association of Art Critics), 1 February 2024, <https://aicainternational.news/agora/2024/2/1/statement-on-freedom-of-expression-in-republic-of-slovakia> (accessed 14 January 2025)

13 Kunsthalle Bratislava statement, 16 January 2024 <https://kunsthallebratislava.sk/en/program/7566/> (accessed 30 December 2024)

14 ‘Interim National Gallery director removed to “fix” the National Museum’, Slovak Spectator, 1 October 2024, <https://spectator.sme.sk/politics-and-society/c/interim-national-gallery-director-removed-to-lead-national-museum> (accessed 30 December 2024)

Yet the Slovak art community has not allowed the changes to go ahead without protesting. In January, artists united in the Open Culture! platform, an independent civic group. The initiative was launched directly following the Open Call for the Resignation of the Minister of Culture, which was published in January 2024 by representatives of the cultural community and signed by more than 180,000 people within a few of days.¹⁵ One of actions took place during the opening of the Slovak pavilion at the Venice Biennale, whose curator was Lýdia Pribišová, one of the Kunsthalle's curators. Resistance, however, has its consequences. Artist **Ilona Németh**, in an interview with curator and art historian **Lýdia Pribišová**, mentions that she was questioned by the police in July for initiating a call for the resignation of the Minister of Culture in mid-January. She spoke of a complaint filed against her by the ministry to the prosecutor's office, citing sabotage, forgery of signatures and restriction of the state body in normal functioning".¹⁶

The police also interrogated a student of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in connection with a performance that took place in March as a "farewell" to Kunsthalle Bratislava, when protesters symbolically "buried" the institution by carrying a coffin representing it in front of the Ministry of Culture. On 21 November, 177 out of 270 employees of the National Slovak Gallery (SNG) announced their resignation effective from January 2025 if the situation does not improve. Among other demands were that the reputation of the SNG be preserved "under the leadership of a competent Director General who ... communicates transparently and makes all decisions in the interests of the institution, not on the basis of expediency or personal motivations."¹⁷



Protestors stage a symbolic funeral for the Kunsthall in Bratislava. Photo: Eliška Šufliarska.

LGBTQ+ arts are also under pressure in Slovakia, where the new director of the National Theatre, **Zuzana Ľapáková**, cancelled a performance of the play *Moonstone*, about a boy named Máni (Moon), ostracized because of his sexual orientation which was to be presented in October as part of the Drama Queer Festival, an international theatrical showcase focusing on the lives of LGBTQ+ people.¹⁸ The official reason was that the contract regarding the production was presented to Ľapáková too late. The cancellation, however, aligns with a statement made by Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová at the beginning of the year, suggesting that projects with LGBTQ+ themes would not receive "a single cent" of government support. In November, long-running LGBTQ+-themed events, including the Drama Queer Festival, Rainbow Pride, and the Otherness Film Festival, did not receive grants for 2025, despite having received grants in previous years and a favourable evaluation from an expert committee that makes recommendations to the Ministry of Culture.¹⁹

¹⁵ 'Sme platforma Otvorená Kultúra!', Platforma.sk, n.d., <https://platformaok.sk/kto-sme/otvorena-kultura> (accessed 30 December 2024)

¹⁶ B. Mante, 'Statement to the ERSTE Foundation' ERSTE Stiftung, n.d. <https://mailchi.mp/erstestiftung.org/slovakia-2024?e=25de61f408> (accessed 9 January 2025)

¹⁷ 'Vyše 170 zamestnancov SNG zvažuje výpovede, pokiaľ sa nesplnia ich požiadavky', Spravy Pravda, 21 November 2024, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/731520-vyse-170-zamestnancov-sng-zvazuje-vypovede-pokial-sa-nesplnia-ich-poziadavky/> (accessed 30 December 2024)

¹⁸ 'National Theatre director pulls the plug on a Prague production over LGBTQ+ themes', Slovak Spectator, 8 October 2024, <https://spectator.sme.sk/culture-and-lifestyle/c/national-theatre-director-pulls-the-plug-on-a-prague-production-over-lgbt-themes> (accessed 30 December 2024)

¹⁹ 'Šimkovičová stopla akékoľvek dotácie pre LGBTQ+ projekty: Odborná komisia však mala iný názor' Duhový Magazin, 9 November 2024, <https://duhovymagazin.sk/2024/11/simkovicova-stopla-akekolvek-dotacie-pre-lgbt-projekty-odborna-komisia-vsak-mala-iny-nazor/> and J. Močková, 'LGBTI+ projekty nedostali z dotácií u ministerky Šimkovičovej ani cent' Je to absurdné, reagujú kvir organizácie', Denník, 4 November 2024, <https://dennik.sk/4290521/lgbti-projekty-nedostali-z-dotacii-u-ministerky-simkovicovej-ani-cent-je-to-absurdne-reaguju-kvir-organizacie/> (both accessed 30 December 2024)

Repression amid Georgia's EU integration protests

In **Georgia**, protests erupted across the country following the Georgian Dream government's decision to postpone discussions on European Union integration until 2028, violating the constitutional commitment to European alignment. The authorities responded with violent crackdowns, detaining over 300 protesters, including many cultural workers.

Among those targeted were **Andro Chichinadze**, a theatre and cinema star facing a nine-year sentence, and **Onise Tskhadadze**, an actor and comedian; both were arrested at home. They are facing up to 9 years in prison on charges of being responsible for violence at the protests and were due to come before a court in mid-January. Freemuse and AICA issued a joint statement of calling for the two men to be freed pending trial.²⁰



Protestors showing posters of beaten artists
Photo: Zurab Tsertsvadze.

Artists among the many among the protestors who were injured by police included **Nodar Aronishadze**, an art historian, who was tortured, hospitalised, and fined. Poet **Zviad Ratiani** suffered severe injuries, including a fractured vertebra and nasal bone, during his detention. Similarly, **Tornike Chelidze**, another poet, was tortured while he was detained for eight days. Photographer **Giorgi Gamgebeli** required surgery after being beaten by special forces, and performance artist **Natia Bunturi** and student **Lazare Maglakelidze** were also

among the abused.²¹ These incidents highlight ongoing human rights violations in Georgia, with cultural professionals among the many victims.

Poland: A spoonful of honey with a drop of tar

Bucking the trend in Europe, **Poland** saw a change of government in December 2023, with the new government taking a less repressive and more open-minded approach than the previous regime. The selection in May 2024 as Minister of Culture of Hanna Wróblewska, an art historian and the former director of Zachęta National Gallery of Art – who had previously been dismissed from that position by the Law and Justice party when they were in power – is one positive indication of notable shifts in the management of the country's main cultural institutions. It would appear that new instances of censorship in 2024 are also uncommon, despite the fact that Poland still has a law in place that protects the religious feelings of others, which carries a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment. However, sentences are still being announced in cases brought against artists before the change of government in December 2023. In April, artist **Marcelo Zamenhoff** heard a final verdict in the case against his exhibition *Polish Vaginas*, which depicted religious and state symbols against a background of female genitalia. The case had been brought by one of those depicted, who claimed that their religious faith had been defamed. In September 2023, Zamenhoff the court decided on conditional discontinuance of the proceedings for a period of two years and ordered to pay 1,000 PLN (ca. 230 EUR) compensation and an apology to on one of the complainants. On 19 April 2024, the Court of Appeal in Łódź upheld the verdict of the first instance.

Although this was a relatively light sentence, Zamenhoff's lawyer announced that the case will be brought to the European Court of Human Rights.²² In another blasphemy law sentence, in October 2024, a student was sentenced by the same court that convicted Zamenhoff to four months in prison, suspended for a year, for painting over a statue of Pope John Paul II and writing "Maxima Culpa"

²⁰ 'Georgia in Crisis: Performers Face Prison' Freemuse, 15 January 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/georgia-in-crisis-performers-face-prison> (accessed 27 February 2025)

²¹ 'Georgian Authorities Unleash Repressive Wave Against Demonstrators and Artists', Artists at Risk Connection, 12 December 2024, <https://artistsatrisk-connection.org/story/georgian-authorities-unleash-repressive-wave-against-demonstrators-and-artists> (accessed 30 December 2024)

²² K. Brózda, 'Jest wyrok w sprawie łódzkiego artysty! Jak swoją decyzję uzasadnił łódzki Sąd Apelacyjny? [ZDJĘCIA]', Tutódz.pl, 19 April 2024, <https://tulodz.pl/wiadomosci-lodz/jest-wyrok-w-sprawie-lodzkiego-artysty-jak-swoja-decyzje-uzasadnil-lodzki-sad-apelacyjny-zdjecia/ZD2Vt4DJAMxFVAnV6dyt>, (accessed 9 January 2025)

on it, an allusion to the Pope's role in covering up paedophilia in the Catholic Church.²³ Legal actions such as these have a clear chilling effect on the arts community in Poland, and shows the necessity of removing blasphemy as an offence in Polish law, Article 196 of which provides up to two years imprisonment to *"Whoever offends the religious feelings of other persons by outraging in public an object of religious worship or a place dedicated to the public celebration of religious rites."*²⁴

As the political climate in Europe turns increasingly towards populism and conservatism, artists with alternative viewpoints are finding themselves hemmed in by legislation that targets expression that does not conform to the beliefs of those in power. New laws threaten to take away funding and opportunities for dissenting opinions. For artists and cultural institutions that are dependent on financial support from governments or donors from abroad, self-censorship may be the only solution. As shown in **Slovakia, Poland**, and now in **Georgia**, artists play an important role in the resistance against suppression.



RESISTANCE NOW: FREE CULTURE urges the EU to protect cultural freedom through concrete action.

The acute concerns for the state of artistic freedom across Europe is encapsulated in an open letter to the European Parliament published in November, where artists across Europe raised alarm at negative cultural policy developments with growing pressures on and censorship of the arts. In it they state:

*"Important areas of European culture and trans-national cooperation have already disappeared in the face of radical re-nationalization, and important cultural institutions have been filled with compliant bureaucrats – or starved to death – in many countries. In the face of looming cuts, we see self-censorship, fear and depression spreading. In the face of looming cuts, we see self-censorship, fear and depression spreading. We therefore stand in solidarity with artists who have been dismissed or obstructed in their work, and with cultural institutions across Europe that are threatened with closure or have already been closed."*²⁵ The statement closes with the plea to "Please act, it's not too late".

²³ '4 months suspended sentence for student who painted "Maxima Culpa" on JP II monument', Polskie Radio, 16 October 2024, https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7789/artykul/3436233_4-months-suspended-sentence-for-student-who-painted-maxima-culpa-on-jp-ii-monument, (accessed 9 January 2025)

²⁴ Text of the Polish Constitution in English can be found here: <https://legislationline.org/>

²⁵ European Theatre Convention et al, 'Resistance now: Free Culture', 28 November 2024, Available at: <https://klassiek-centraal.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/RESISTANCE-NOW-FREE-CULTURE-EN.pdf>, (accessed 30 December 2024)

ARRESTS, TRIALS AND BLACK-LISTING OF RUSSIAN ARTISTS

Polina Sadovskaya

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- *In Russia, artists cannot stay neutral to the war in Ukraine and are threatened with losing their audience if they do not demonstrate sufficient support for the war.*
 - *Russian authorities use support from their partners in the Global South to persecute artists who are abroad however, they are not always successful.*
 - *International pressure leads to the release of a small number of artists among political prisoners but still hundreds are persecuted for their art across the country.*
-

2024 was marked by high-profile cases of unjust persecution in almost every artistic field in **Russia**: music, theatre, cinema, and fine arts. Circumstances demonstrated that fame not only cannot save anyone from oppression but actually may well put popular artists in danger of being used for the purposes of the Russian war machine. Protecting Russian artists becomes more difficult when the Russian government exercises its transnational influence. Yet consolidated international pressure works and, in some cases, imprisoned artists were released, while many others are still experiencing difficulties in being able to continue their artistic practices due to attacks by the government.

Harsh prison sentences and conditions result in ubiquitous self-censorship

The start of 2024 was marked by the arrests of artists and the cancellation of concerts and brand deals, which followed a scandalous end-of-the-year party organised by Russian TV personality **Anastasia Ivleeva** in December 2023. The party's theme was "Almost Naked", which allegedly outraged conservative pro-government activists who initiated a class lawsuit against the organizer¹. Signatories to the lawsuit reported that this party caused them "moral and physical suffering," "fear for the future of their children and grandchildren, and for the future of Russia." Adding to this, Russia's federal censor Roskomnadzor found "signs of LGBTQ+ propaganda" in the gathering².

As a result, many popular personalities and artists who attended the party, including Ivleeva herself, were forced to publicly apologise, and to make donations to foundations supporting the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine or to visit occupied Ukrainian territories to perform for the troops, in order to be able to continue with their careers. In a separate case, in April 2024 Ivleeva was fined for 'discrediting' the Russian army in a 2022 Instagram post in which she had called for there to be talks to end the war in Ukraine. She denied the charges of "discrediting" the Russian army. Rapper

Vacio, who was arrested and held for 15 days after the party and then again for 10 days on charges of hooliganism, was handed a conscription notice in between the sentences. Eventually, he left the country in May 2024, reportedly after receiving pressure from the authorities³.

Musicians who challenge the government have long faced bans.⁴ However, with the presidential elections in 2024, the persecution of popular figures reached a higher level. Since the notorious "Almost Naked" party, musicians and actors across the country have been closely watched, allegedly by the Department of Public Projects, a department in the Presidential administration⁵. Musicians' names were rapidly added to the authorities' blacklists because of their previous participation in protests or anti-war statements on social media. In November 2021 there were around 20 people in the list: in February 2024 there were already close to 200. Even popular musicians who have not publicly taken any position on the war now face being targeted by the government, which sees them as a tool to secure public support for the war. "Many musicians who responded, whose names are included in the blacklists, note that they don't know what exactly caused them to be added to the lists. Some attribute this to the climate ahead of the presidential elections, while others - who may have had some "problematic words" in some previous songs - see it as simply a mistake," reports independent Russian media *Meduza*.

The year also started badly for filmmakers. Right after the January premiere of the long-awaited screen adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel **Master and Margarita**, the film's American director, **Mikhail Lockshin**, was attacked by pro-Russian media for his open anti-war position and support of Ukrainian filmmakers. The irony is that one of the major plot lines in Bulgakov's internationally acclaimed book is about a writer who is censored. Lockshin himself has, until then, been a popular filmmaker and had received government funding for the movie.⁶ The movie was screened in Russia

¹ 'Almost Naked' party of Moscow elites sparks outrage in increasingly conservative Russia, France 24, 29 December 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20231229-almost-naked-party-of-moscow-elites-sparks-outrage-in-increasingly-conservative-russia> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

² Russia's federal censor claims to find 'LGBT propaganda' in photos from celebrity-filled 'almost naked' party, Meduza, 22 December 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/12/23/russia-s-federal-censor-claims-to-find-lgbt-propaganda-in-photos-from-celebrity-filled-almost-naked-party> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

³ Jailed Russian Rapper Summoned To Recruitment Center, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 8 January 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rapper-vacio-party-jail-draft/32765966.html> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

⁴ Sadovskaya, P., 'Moscow on Mute: How Russia is Silencing the Voices of Its Young Musicians', PEN America, 10 December 2018, <https://pen.org/russia-silencing-voices-musicians/> (accessed 24 January 2025)

⁵ Они смотрят на нас как на классовых врагов, Meduza, 22 April 2024, <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/04/22/oni-smotryat-na-nas-kak-na-klassovykh-vragov> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

⁶ The Master and Margarita: The Russian box-office hit that criticised the state, BBC, 1 May 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240430-the-master-and-margarita-the-russian-box-office-hit-that-criticised-the-state> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

with the name of the director removed from the promotional material - and attacks by influential supporters of the Kremlin followed.

A case involving theatre director **Evgenia Berkovich** and playwright **Svetlana Petriychuk** that led to outrage from the artistic community around the world culminated in July when both artists received sentences of six years in prison⁷, Berkovich and Petriychuk's play, *Finist, The Brave Falcon*, is about Russian women who travelled to Syria to marry members of the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group they had met online. The work was condemned by Russian authorities for "glorifying terrorism"⁸. Both the director and the playwright refused to accept guilt for this, arguing that the play's intent was the opposite, to in fact warn young people of the dangers of IS.

Visual artists face severe persecution across Russia. In September 2024, Siberian artist **Vasily Slonov** was sentenced to one year of correctional labor, which later was changed to a travel ban, for displaying at an exhibition his version of the traditional round-bottomed tumbler toy which he had decorated with jail tattoos. The court deemed this to be "extremist imagery"⁹. Slonov is a contemporary artist known for his ironic depictions of Russian cultural symbols and prison iconography. He had been detained in February as he attempted to fly out to Kazakhstan.



Vasily Slonov's tattooed toy. Photo: Vasily Slonov/Instagram.

Conditions for political prisoners are often so harsh, sometimes involving complete isolation and can even lead to death. The more remote the area is, the less chances there are to learn about it soon enough to prevent a tragedy. In August, news emerged of the tragic death of pianist and writer **Pavel Kushnir** during pre-trial detention in Birobidzhan, a small town in the autonomous district of Russia's Far East, where he had been held since May 2024¹⁰. Kushnir had been arrested and charged with terrorism for anti-war comments contained in a video he created and posted on his YouTube channel (which had only five subscribers). He had reportedly been on hunger strike at the time of his death.

In October, **Alexei Moskalev** a father from Tula region, who had been detained after his daughter drew an anti-war picture at school and for which he was held responsible, was released from a penal colony where he was serving a two-year sentence on charges of "discrediting the army." Arrested in December 2022 and sentenced in March 2023, he managed to escape house arrest for Belarus, only to be re-arrested a month later.¹¹

⁷ Their sentences were reduced in December 2024 to five years and seven months for Berkovich and five years and ten months for Petriychuk.

⁸ Court reduces sentences of Russian theatre director and playwright jailed for 'justifying terrorism', Novaya Gazeta Europe, 25 December 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/12/25/court-reduces-sentences-of-russian-theatre-director-and-playwright-jailed-for-justifying-terrorism-en-news> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

⁹ Russian artist given year of correctional labour for doll featuring 'prison symbolism', Novaya Gazeta Europe, 24 September 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/09/24/russian-artist-given-year-of-correctional-labour-for-doll-featuring-prison-symbolism-en-news> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁰ Anti-War Russian Pianist Dies in Custody, The Moscow Times, 5 April 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/08/05/anti-war-russian-pianist-dies-in-custody-a85937>

¹¹ Father of girl who drew anti-war picture freed from Russia jail, BBC, 16 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7xlll39l5o> (Accessed 27 January 2025)



Pavel Kushnir, who died in prison in May 2024, plays at a festival in his hometown of Tambov in 2010. Source: his late father Mikhail Kushnir's YouTube channel, [you-tube.com/@SuperLiahim](https://www.youtube.com/@SuperLiahim).

Hope in a new home for exiled artists comes with risks: if they choose to return to Russia often ends with arbitrary detentions

August 2024 was marked by a historical prisoner swap with the US and other Western countries, which granted freedom to but sent in exile several noted political prisoners. Among them was artist **Sasha Skochilenko**, who was arrested in April 2022 and was serving a seven-year sentence¹² Her 'crime' had been to replace some price tags at a grocery store with small leaflets opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Her case made international headlines.

"My criminal case is so strange and funny that it was opened on April 1st. My case is so strange and funny that sometimes I feel like when I come into the courtroom for another hearing, confetti will start falling from above, fireworks will go off, music will start playing, and people will rise up, dance, and cry, "April Fool! April Fool!" My case is so strange and funny that the staff of the [jail where I'm held] open their eyes wide and exclaim, "Do they really put people in prison for that?"

From Sasha Skochilenko's final statement to the court¹³

Artists in exile can quickly become isolated from their audience and readers in Russia, losing contacts with their home regions, and being unable to share their work. There are, however, attempts to bridge this divide through cultural projects realised outside Russia and which are made accessible inside the country. One such project is the publishing house Freedom Letters founded by Georgy Urushadze, which publishes books that are forbidden in Russia and distributes them globally, including in Russia¹⁴.

The success of this project has not escaped the attention of the Russian authorities. In July 2024, Russia's general prosecutor demanded that the fantasy novel *The Mouse* by **Ivan Filippov** be removed from Freedom Letters' site and not be made available for sale, because it contains "false messages about acts of terrorism" and threatens public order¹⁵. The book tells the story of how a zombie apocalypse destroys Moscow and its inhabitants. It also mentions real people among the characters, such as President Vladimir Putin, as well as propagandists Vladimir Solovyov and Margarita Simonyan.

Later, in August, the Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor added Freedom Letters and all their books to the "registry of undesirable information". Among them, was *Not the Least Words* a collection of the last words spoken by political prisoners in court – including opposition leader Alexei Navalny who died in prison in early 2024, artist Sasha Skochilenko, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of the Pussy Riot protest performance group, and others. "The regime is looking increasingly ridiculous and weak, throwing tons of money to support pro-government writers whom no one reads. Meanwhile, Sorokin and Bykov¹⁶ continue to write great books, which people in Russia continue to read in secret. Banning books has never worked over the long term," said the founder and publisher of Freedom Letters, Georgy Urushadze¹⁷. On 27 September, Urushadze himself was added to the list of "foreign agents" under the Foreign Agent Act enacted in 2012 against non-governmental organisations. In 2022, the act was expanded to include individuals, including artists.

¹² Anti-War Artist Released as Part of Russia-US Prisoner Swap, Hyperallergic, 5 August 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/940954/anti-war-artist-alexandra-sasha-skochilenko-released-as-part-of-russia-us-prisoner-swap/> This prisoner swap was allegedly supposed to include Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny but he died in prison earlier this year: Russian prisoner swap deal was to have included Alexei Navalny, The Guardian, 2 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/02/russian-prisoner-swap-deal-was-to-have-included-alexei-navalny> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

¹³ From Sasha Skochilenko's website 'Yes, Life' <https://skochilenko.ru/yes-life> (accessed 11 February 2025)

¹⁴ Freedom Letters. Publishing House which publishes contemporary prose, poetry and drama, human rights, popular science and classical literature on current topics, books for children and teenagers in Russian language. <https://freedomletters.org/> (Accessed on 28 December 2024)

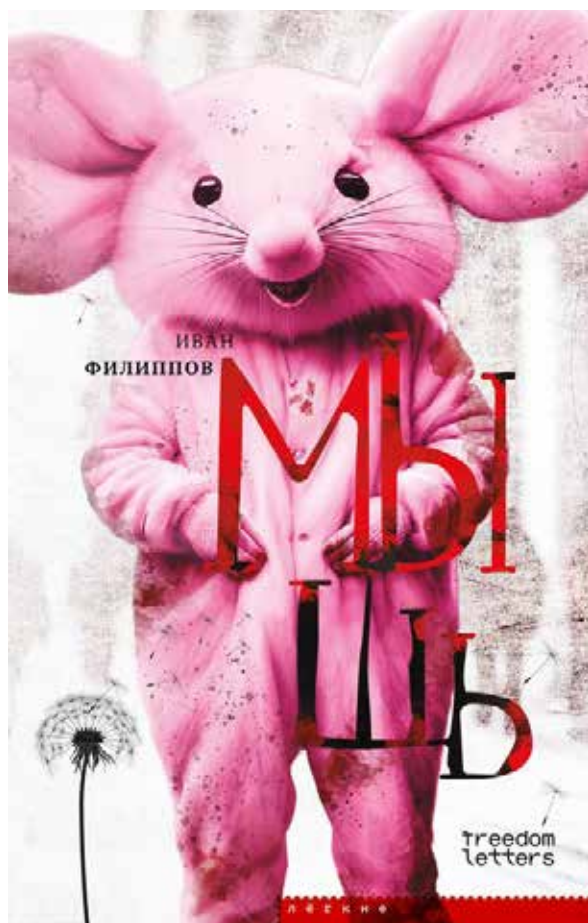
¹⁵ Russian censors' biggest fear: A book about a pink zombie mouse, The Times, 14 July 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/russian-censors-biggest-fear-a-book-about-a-pink-zombie-mouse-gsfajiaib> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

¹⁶ Vladimir Sorokin and Dmitry Bykov are award-winning contemporary Russian writers living in exile.

¹⁷ Russia Escalates Crackdown on Free Expression with Publisher Shutdowns, PEN America, 3 September 2024, <https://pen.org/press-release/russia-crackdown-on-free-expression-escalates-with-publisher-shutdowns/> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

*“The removal of these books from the publishers’ websites spotlights what the Russian government fears most: political prisoners, the LGBTQ+ community, citizens from remote regions, and even fiction novels. That Ivan Philippov’s novel *Mouse*, about a zombie apocalypse, is now banned because it could potentially ‘create interference with the functioning of life support facilities, transport or social infrastructure, credit institutions, energy, industrial, or communications facilities’ underscores the censorship agency’s complete detachment from reality”.*

Publisher Georgy Urushadze speaking to PEN America, September 2024¹⁸



Ivan Philippov's 'Mouse'.

Russian artists with an anti-war stance are not safe even abroad. In January 2024, the Russian rock band Bi-2 announced on its official Facebook page that they were facing deportation from Thailand after being found guilty by Thai authorities of performing a gig without the correct permit. They said, however, that they had paid a fine for the breach. Earlier, in May 2023, the band’s lead singer **Yegor Bortnik** had been labeled a “foreign agent” for opposing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – this was likely connected to the reason for the band being targeted¹⁹.

Russians living abroad must also think carefully before returning to the country, even for short visits, or else risk being arrested. The case of the U.S.-Russian dual citizen and ballet dancer **Ksenia Karelina**, who was detained in Yekaterinburg in January 2024 while visiting her grandparents, is particularly alarming. She was convicted to a shocking 12-year sentence in August, after being accused of donating \$52 to a Ukrainian charity in the US²⁰.

Two years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to be an artist who speaks out against the military action brings with it great risk of imprisonment and being labelled as a traitor or “foreign agent”. As the war drags on and the situation continues to be dire, there appears to be little likelihood of improvement. Russia remains impervious to calls for an end to the war, and dismissive of appeals that it should abide by human rights mechanisms to which it nevertheless remains a party. This situation makes it imperative that there is international solidarity between artists and human rights monitors abroad to keep their plight in the spotlight.

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Ibid.

19 Alexander Baunov. Russia’s Attempt to Extradite Bi-2 Rock Band Reveals the Extent of Its Fantasy World, Carnegie Politica, 9 February 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/02/russias-attempt-to-extradite-bi-2-rock-band-reveals-the-extent-of-its-fantasy-world?lang=en> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

20 US-Russian woman jailed for 12 years for \$51 charity gift, BBC, 15 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp9ryq15k4jo> (Accessed 27 January 2025)

TÜRKİYE:

A TENSE AND STRAINED LANDSCAPE

Musa Igrek

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- *Institutional censorship and self-censorship in Türkiye's cultural sector stifle artistic expression, often driven by fear of government reprisal or political pressures.*
 - *Kurdish and LGBTQ+ artists in Türkiye face significant challenges due to increasing censorship, societal pressures, and limited institutional support.*
 - *Restrictions on streaming platforms and film festivals in Türkiye highlight state and institutional control over art, especially on politically sensitive topics like sexuality, identity, and social norms.*
-

In Türkiye today, there is deep anxiety. The media is widely distrusted by many, while the political environment grows more oppressive for those who question the government. All of this has been unfolding against the backdrop of a troubled economy—after peaking at 85% in 2022, inflation fell to below 50% by October 2024, but uncertainty remains.¹ The overall picture is far from reassuring. Artists in Türkiye can be a powerful source of hope, yet optimism is fading as freedom of artistic expression, as past years have proved, over and over, is under pressure. This was illustrated by the rising number of cancellations and censorship cases across the country in 2024, pointing to a worrying trend for artistic freedom. In May 2025, Türkiye will come before the U.N. Human Rights Council and undergo its fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Seizing this opportunity, Freemuse and SUSMA - Platform 24 made a joint submission that highlights restrictions on freedom of expression, artistic freedom, and cultural expression—in particular, restrictions targeting LGBTQ+ groups and Kurdish artists.² The report underscores the growing restraints on the arts and civil society. But this won't surprise those who have been following freedom of expression in Türkiye.

How did we get here? First following the Gezi protests of 2013, and then more sharply after the 2016 coup attempt, the country entered a new struggle for civil liberties and human rights.³ In response, the government imposed a state of emergency and introduced further restrictions—measures that critics argue were used to suppress opposition voices, including artists, journalists, writers, and academics. In a country marked by authoritarian tendencies, political unrest, and economic instability, cultural workers have at times been cast as enemies of the state. What is particularly alarming is that as the political landscape darkens, many artists find themselves growing increasingly uneasy. This unease is further fuelled by the misuse of Laws No. 2911 and 5442 to restrict peaceful gatherings and arts events, as well as the frequent application of Article 216 to suppress artistic freedom—particularly targeting minoritised groups.

Similarly, Türkiye's Anti-Terror Law is widely criticised for its broad use against artists and writers, often charging them with "terrorist propaganda" or militant ties with little evidence.

Kurdish music under siege

Kurdish music, language, and culture have long been marginalised in Türkiye. Throughout 2024, as the joint Freemuse and SUSMA - Platform 24 UPR submission documented, Kurdish artists faced a wave of concert cancellations, both in predominantly Kurdish areas such as Siirt, Diyarbakır, Ağrı, Muş and Erzurum, as well as in Istanbul. Artist **Diljen Roni**, whose November concert was cancelled citing "renovation", said *"Art is a power that ensures the survival of our culture and language. As artists who strive to keep Kurdish music and language alive, we are determined despite these obstacles. We believe in the unifying power of art, and we are sure that we will meet again with you, our valuable listeners, on a freer platform. In the face of these injustices, we will continue our struggle for a more just future."*⁴ The cancellation was one of several that took place across Türkiye on spurious grounds.

Such arbitrary prohibitive attitudes, especially by Turkish municipalities, who were responsible for the majority of these decisions, is worrying. When municipalities act as gatekeepers by cancelling concerts or events, it raises serious concerns about institutional censorship and ongoing state efforts to control cultural narratives, particularly those tied to Kurdish identity and language. In Türkiye, Kurdish music and art are often cast as political provocations rather than cultural contributions, their very existence framed as a threat to national unity. The result is not only the suppression of a minority's voice but a narrowing of the cultural landscape itself, where access to diverse artistic expression is curtailed, and the possibility of dialogue between communities is steadily eroded.

¹ A. Samson, "Turkish inflation falls below 50% in boon to Erdoğan", *Financial Times*, 3 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/3ca2bf-cb-156d-4f73-bf58-e8ea60f8cbc2>, (accessed 10 December 2024).

² "Joint Stakeholder Submission to the UPR of Türkiye", Freemuse and Susma - Platform 24, 1 November 2024, <https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/UPR-2025-Turkey-Freemuse-and-P24.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2024).

³ M. Lowen, "Erdogan's Turkey", BBC, 13 April 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/Erdogans_Turkey, (accessed 10 December 2024).

⁴ "Kürtçe konserler arka arkaya iptal ediliyor", *Susma 24*, 11 November 2024, <https://susma24.com/kurtce-konserler-arka-arkaya-iptal-ediliyor/> (accessed 30 November 2024).



Kurdish musician Diljen Roni.
Photo: Roni's Instagram.

Censorship expands to streaming services

In 2024 the grip of institutional censorship tightened, with the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), a state agency, extending its reach to subscription-based platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, Blu TV, and MUBI. Its recent orders to the platforms instructing them to remove films like *Sausage Party: Foodtopia*, for its sexual innuendo violating “general morality”, and *Doctor Climax*, for explicit depictions of violence and sexuality labelled as “immoral content”, are prime examples of institutional censorship.⁵ RTÜK’s rationale is grounded in protecting “general morality” and “family structure”, citing explicit violence, sexuality, homosexuality, and drug use as problematic content.

Similarly, the situation at Mubi Fest Istanbul 2024 underscored the growing restrictions on artistic expression. The Kadıköy District Governorate of Istanbul banned the opening film *Queer*, an Italian-American co-production, citing its “provocative content” as a threat to “public peace”. The decision prompted the festival’s cancellation by its organ-

iser, Mubi.⁶ *Queer*, an adaptation of William Burroughs’s novel about a gay expatriate in Mexico, stars Daniel Craig, the internationally renowned actor. In a statement, Mubi condemned the ban, calling it “a direct restriction on art and freedom of expression.” The statement continued: “Festivals are spaces that celebrate art, cultural diversity, and community, bringing people together. This ban not only targets a single film but undermines the very essence and purpose of the festival.”

Both cases, restrictions on the streaming platforms and on the film festival, reveal the role of governmental and institutional actors in regulating art in Türkiye, particularly when it touches on politically sensitive issues such as sexuality, identity, and social norms.

Institutional censorship and the biennial

Censorship in Türkiye is prevalent, whether imposed by governmental or non-governmental institutions. The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts (İKSİV), for instance, ignored an international panel’s recommendation to appoint curator **Defne Ayas** for the 2024 Istanbul Biennial. An official reason for this has not been disclosed. However, critics link the decision to a controversy involving Ayas in 2015, when she was the curator of the Turkish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. A reference to the “Armenian genocide” in an essay included in the exhibition catalogue had prompted government intervention and resulted in the catalogue’s withdrawal.⁷

At any rate, instead of appointing Ayas for the 2024 Istanbul Biennial, the İKSİV opted to go with **Iwona Blazwick**, a member of the Biennial’s advisory board, as curator. This sparked debate, with artists criticising İKSİV for lacking transparency and ethics. Unsurprisingly, the controversy led to the 18th Istanbul Biennial being postponed to 2025, with a new curator appointed after Blazwick herself resigned. As one of Türkiye’s oldest and most influential cultural institutions, İKSİV’s actions are significant. Moreover, they represent a clear conflict between artistic freedom and political pressure.

⁵ “RTÜK’ten Netflix, MUBI ve Blu TV’ye Ceza”, *Susma 24*, 1 August 2024, <https://susma24.com/rtukten-netflix-mubi-ve-blu-tvy-ceza/> (accessed 30 November 2024).

⁶ A. Ritman, “‘Queer’ Ban in Turkey Prompts Mubi to Cancel Festival in Country”, *Variety*, 7 November 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/film/global/mubi-cancels-turkish-festival-queer-banned-1236203872/> (accessed 30 November 2024).

⁷ “Four artists withdraw from Istanbul Biennial over curator controversy”, *Bianet*, 23 October 2023, <https://bianet.org/haber/four-artists-withdraw-from-istanbul-biennial-over-curator-controversy-286763> (accessed 30 November 2024).

LGBTQ+ artists and subtle resistance

LGBTQ+ artists and exhibitions touching on this theme face growing challenges. In July, for instance, the Beyoğlu District Governorship banned *Dön-Dün-Bak*, an exhibition on the trans movement in Türkiye at the Depo gallery, citing “public hatred”. This ban, coming in the wake of anti-LGBTQ+ protests at a separate art show last year, has rattled artists and cultural workers.⁸ *“To be honest, half of our energy is going towards how we can create some safe space—not just for the organizations involved, the artists, and ourselves, but also for the audience,”* curator Alper Turan told *Hyperallergic*. *“We’re talking about which neighborhood will be safe for them to come to. That is new for me.”*⁹

Such incidents have become increasingly common in Türkiye, as documented in the joint UPR submission by Freemuse and SUSMA - Platform 24. But with political pressure mounting, many artists have to navigate a delicate line between creative expression and self-censorship. As overtly touching on LGBTQ+ themes becomes increasingly risky, artists are responding by finding subtle forms of resistance and adapting their work to evade restrictions while still pushing boundaries. One example is the Sınır/Sız (Border/Less) collective, which organises exhibitions featuring underrepresented LGBTQ+ artists. However, they carefully avoid directly associating art events with Pride Month or using overt LGBTQ+ language, often opting for alternative modes of expression instead. For example, the collective will exhibit work by Furkan Öztekin, who uses collage and abstraction to explore themes of belonging and loss. As Öztekin explains, *“These political threats and restrictions drive us to find alternative forms of resistance ... If colors are banned, we propose black-and-white exhibitions; if forms are restricted, we create shows with amorphous shapes.”*¹⁰



Poster for the banned *Dön-Dün-Bak* exhibition.

The intersection of art, politics, and identity in Türkiye reveals a deep struggle for artistic freedom amid increasing censorship and societal pressures. Kurdish and LGBTQ+ artists face significant barriers, while both governmental and non-governmental institutions often suppress diverse cultural expression. The state’s tightening grip on streaming platforms and film festivals further restricts content that challenges political and social norms. This climate of repression, reinforced by anti-terror laws, has led many institutions, artists, and curators to self-censor, fearing government reprisal. What is striking is that self-censorship has become a survival mechanism in an increasingly polarised and politically controlled environment. It can also be *“a way to create a feeling of safety in a very insecure environment,”* said **Ozan Ünlükoç**, a member of the Sınır/Sız team.¹¹ But this still creates a chilling effect whereby artistic expression is not just limited by external forces but also by the internalised understanding of what is “safe” to exhibit or curate. Despite these challenges, art remains a powerful force for resistance and unity. As the Freemuse and SUSMA - Platform 24 joint submission highlighted, measures must be taken to protect freedom of artistic expression and inclusivity in Türkiye’s cultural landscape. This includes ensuring that artistic works are not subject to anti-terror legislation and taking action to end non-elected officials’ use of Laws 2911 and 5442 to restrict peaceful gatherings and arts events, particularly targeting minoritised groups.

⁸ J. Hattam, “Pro-Erdogan Protesters Target Istanbul Exhibition Deemed LGBT Propaganda”, *Hyperallergic*, 30 June 2023 <https://hyperallergic.com/831172/pro-erdogan-protesters-target-istanbul-exhibition-deemed-lgbt-propaganda/> (accessed 30 November 2024).

⁹ J. Hattam, “Turkey’s Queer Art Community Walks a Thin Line”, *Hyperallergic*, 17 November 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/966639/turkey-queer-art-community-walks-a-thin-line/> (accessed 30 November 2024).

¹⁰ J. Hattam, “Turkey’s Queer Art Community Walks a Thin Line”, *Hyperallergic*, 17 November 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/966639/turkey-queer-art-community-walks-a-thin-line/> (accessed 30 November 2024).

¹¹ J. Hattam, “Turkey’s Queer Art Community Walks a Thin Line”, *Hyperallergic*, 17 November 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/966639/turkey-queer-art-community-walks-a-thin-line/> (accessed 30 November 2024).

CENSORSHIP OF COMMENTARY ON PALESTINE IN GERMANY:

ART IN THE CROSSFIRE: NAVIGATING CENSORSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES

Musa Igrek and Sara Whyatt

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- *Artistic censorship rose after the October 2023 attack, particularly around works on Palestine, with Germany at the centre of the controversy.*
 - *Germany linked arts funding to the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, raising concerns about self-censorship and limiting critical voices.*
 - *Artists pushed back, with public statements, withdrawals, and protests against restrictions on pro-Palestinian solidarity.*
 - *Cultural institutions face growing pressure, balancing historical responsibility with artistic freedom and the right to critique Israeli policies.*
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“Don’t mention the war,” warns a character in Nathan Englander’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, as she addresses her husband. But that didn’t stop him – just as it hasn’t stopped many artists worldwide creating work on the war on Gaza. In October, Englander’s play was staged at the intimate Marylebone Theatre in London, England. Through a darkly comic encounter between two Jewish couples – one secular American, the other ultra-Orthodox Israeli – it explores what it means to be Jewish today. Set in a Florida kitchen, it examines themes of identity, faith, the Holocaust, conflict, and genocide, updated to reflect the 7 October 2023 attacks in Israel, and Israeli army bombardment of Gaza. American-Jewish author Englander calls it “a plea for peace,” and notes, “The stage is where we can have the conversations we need to have.”¹ When director Patrick Marber, also Jewish, originally proposed the play to a prominent London theatre, however, its board declined, fearing potential backlash and controversy from potential funders and the acting community, despite the play’s neutral stance. The attitude of the “prominent” theatre is not only an example of conflict avoidance – it is also an indication of how fear of controversy can suppress the very conversations and critiques that art is supposed to provoke, especially on politically sensitive topics. But the move also highlights the tense intersection of artistic freedom and the ability to comment on the ongoing tragedy being inflicted on civilians in Gaza.

The crossroads between art and politics has grown increasingly tense following the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel, which killed about 1,200 people, and the taking of more than 250 hostages.² In response, Israel declared war on Hamas, triggering a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. By the end of December 2024, over 44,000 people – primarily women and children – had been killed, according to the United Nations (UN).³ Concern over the escalating violence had already been raised in November 2023, when eight UN special rapporteurs warned that Palestinians faced a “grave risk of genocide”.⁴ The situation in Gaza is

shifting fast, unfolding by the hour, escalating by the day, with the UN and other agencies issuing constant updates.⁵

Commenting on the Israeli-Palestine conflict has long been a challenging road for artists to navigate. But from the outset of the war on Gaza, artistic freedom has come under particular pressure worldwide, with exhibitions, performances, and installations related to the conflict routinely censored or cancelled – particularly in Germany, which is the focus of this article, and in the U.S. (see the America section of this report for details on cancellations) page 57. The policing of political expression was also a marked phenomenon as artists came under attack for having expressed an opinion, sometimes years before the exhibit or performance in question. The impact extends far beyond the region, restricting artistic expression on a global scale.

Art, dialogue, and the challenge of conflict

Artists, too, find themselves caught in the crossfire, yet they hold the power to shape public conversation. And art, in this way, can give us a shared language – a language to engage more meaningfully with one another. But, of course, in times of conflict, that task becomes ever more challenging. As Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, noted, “*Cultural and artistic institutions and event sponsors should not discriminate against individuals or deny participation purely based on their political views on Israel or Palestine.*”⁶ She urged the artistic community to reject cancel culture, defend artistic freedom, and promote intercultural understanding.

Freemuse’s data reveals a broad impact on artistic expression, most notably in Germany, the USA, and the UK, with visual arts most affected, followed by literature, music, and film – most involving pro-Palestine commentary. Reports of censorship peaked in early 2024, particularly in January and February. A more recent decline may stem from

¹ C. Allfree, “The Jewish play a big London theatre wouldn’t touch”, *Telegraph*, 8 October 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/anne-frank-marylebone-theatre/>, (accessed 24 October 2024).

² “What is Hamas and why is it fighting with Israel in Gaza?”, *BBC*, 21 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-67039975>, (accessed 23 October 2024).

³ “Middle East crisis: one child killed every hour in Gaza, UN says – as it happened”, *The Guardian*, 24 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2024/dec/24/israel-gaza-war-ceasefire-deal-hostages-netanyahu-hamas-syria-lebanon-middle-east-latest-news>, (accessed 30 December 2024).

⁴ P. Wintour, “Palestinian groups accuse UN adviser of failing to warn about potential genocide”, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/08/palestinian-groups-accuse-un-adviser-of-failing-to-warn-about-potential-genocide>, (accessed 20 November 2024).

⁵ For recent updates visit the UN: <https://news.un.org/en/news/region/middle-east>

⁶ I. Khan, “Global threats to freedom of expression arising from the conflict in Gaza”, *United Nations*, 23 August 2024, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/report-special-rapporteur-23aug24/>, (accessed 19 November 2024).

artists self-censoring, institutions avoiding controversy, or fading media attention. Together, these elements suggest that declines in cancellations, whether of pro-Israel or pro-Palestine content, are complex and multifaceted. The Archive of Silence, a crowd-sourced online project based in Germany, has documented incidents of silencing – mainly based on statements from those affected – over the past year.⁷ This article covers only a fraction of the events affecting artistic freedom in Germany as regards the Palestine-Israel conflict.

Germany's fight against anti-semitism, bds and its chilling effect

For decades, Germany has grappled with the legacy of its Nazi past — a reckoning known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or “coming to terms with the past.” It has shaped the country’s national identity, it has influenced its politics, it has reshaped its laws and culture. Through public admissions of guilt, reparations, and a strict commitment to remembrance, Germany has faced the immense challenge of acknowledging its role in the Holocaust.

Few movements have been as polarising in Germany’s cultural and political sphere as the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign. Founded in 2005 by more than 170 Palestinian civil society groups, it aims to exert economic, cultural, and political pressure on Israel.⁸ BDS, inspired by South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle, advocates boycotts and sanctions to end Israeli occupation, ensure Arab-Palestinian equality, and secure the right of return for refugees. Its impact has been felt globally, garnering support from various circles but also sparking opposition. Notably, in 2024, 38 U.S. states had enacted laws or executive orders to discourage participation in the movement.⁹ In Germany, BDS has ignited fierce debate, with cultural and political figures facing backlash for their support of the movement. Critics accuse BDS of anti-semitism for isolating Israeli institutions, a claim reinforced by the Bundestag – Germany’s main leg-

islative body – through its 2019 resolution likening BDS tactics to Nazi-era boycotts.¹⁰ Supporters of the campaign, including Palestinian and Jewish activists, argue that BDS targets Israeli policies, not Jewish people, rejecting the conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-semitism.

At the heart of the debate over BDS and anti-semitism lies the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism. Drafted in 2004 as a working definition, it was primarily created to assist European data collectors tracking anti-semitism across Europe¹¹. Adopted by the IHRA in 2016 and endorsed by 43 countries, it has since been criticised for conflating criticism of Israel with anti-semitism. Kenneth Stern, who was the lead drafter, has warned that it has become a “hate-speech code” used to suppress pro-Palestinian speech – an outcome he says was never anticipated.¹²

Germany's strong commitment to protecting jewish life

Germany’s growing reliance on the IHRA definition has blurred the line between criticism of Israel and anti-semitism. In November 2024, the Bundestag passed a resolution, “Never Again is Now: Protecting, Preserving and Strengthening Jewish Life in Germany”, tying public funding for cultural and scientific projects to adherence to this definition, barring support for groups deemed anti-semitic or supportive of BDS. While not legally binding, legal expert Ralf Michaels warns that the resolution will likely influence policy and encourage self-censorship, a concern shared by Amnesty International Germany, which supports efforts to combat anti-Semitism but warns it could undermine human rights and create legal uncertainty.¹³ The debate remains deeply polarising.

The Berlin state faced its own turbulence over these topics. The Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion in January 2024 introduced an “anti-semitism clause” for arts funding, requir-

7 Archive of Silence, https://www.instagram.com/archive_of_silence/

8 S. J. Hofmann, “BDS: 6 questions about the movement boycotting Israel”, Deutsche Welle, 1 December 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/bds-6-questions-and-answers-about-the-movement-boycotting-israel/a-41618245>, (accessed 20 November 2024).

9 “Anti-Semitism: State Anti-BDS Legislation”, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/anti-bds-legislation>, (accessed 30 December 2024).

10 B. Knight, “Lawmakers condemn ‘anti-Semitic’ BDS movement”, Deutsche Welle, 17 May 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-parliament-condemns-anti-semitic-bds-movement/a-48779516>, (accessed 20 November 2024).

11 K. Stern, “I Drafted the Definition of Antisemitism. Right-wing Jews Are Weaponizing It”, The Guardian, 13 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

12 E. Press, “The Problem with Defining Antisemitism”, The New Yorker, 13 March 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/persons-of-interest/the-problem-with-defining-antisemitism>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

13 H. Whittle, “Germany passes controversial antisemitism resolution”, Deutsche Welle, 6 November 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-passes-controversial-antisemitism-resolution/a-70715643>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

ing grants to go only to those who align with the state's definition of anti-semitism.¹⁴ The backlash was swift. Nearly 6,000 artists and cultural workers signed a petition arguing that the clause threatened artistic freedom.¹⁵ After facing mounting pressure and legal concerns, Berlin eventually withdrew the requirement.

The rise of self-imposed censorship

In January, hundreds of artists, including French author, Annie Ernaux, winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize for Literature, and British artist, Jesse Darling, winner of the 2023 Turner Prize, signed a document circulated by Strike Germany, an initiative urging cultural workers to withdraw from institutions restricting solidarity with Palestine. The movement condemns the IHRA anti-semitism definition that, it argues, suppresses dissent, calling instead for artistic freedom and clearer terms.¹⁶ This initiative set the stage for a series of controversies throughout the year.



Graphic image produced by Strike Germany.

In February, the Berlinale, famed for its political edge, found itself in turmoil. After inviting, then disinviting, politicians from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland AfD amid backlash, the controversy deepened. Filmmakers withdrew in protest over perceived censorship of pro-Palestinian voices, while Berlinale Talents alumni denounced the weaponization of anti-semitism to stifle criticism in Germany's cultural sphere.¹⁷ Berlinale co-directors Mariëtte Rissenbeek and Carlo Chatrian expressed concern about the rising hostility around the world, condemning anti-semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and hate speech, but reaffirmed the festival's commitment to open dialogue.¹⁸ For some, the Berlinale's Documentary Award presented to Israeli filmmaker **Yuval Abraham** and Palestinian co-director **Basel Adra** for *No Other Land* provided a glimmer of hope. Amid death threats in Israel, Abraham issued a sharp critique of German officials for, as he put it, "weaponizing a term designed to protect Jews" to silence dissent from both Palestinians and Israelis critical of the occupation.¹⁹

Growing pressure on cultural institutions and policing of political expression

A wave of art show cancellations has highlighted the growing pressure on cultural institutions. For example, in February, Turkish artist **Banu Cennetoglu** and Finnish artist **Pilvi Takala** cancelled their exhibitions at Neue Berliner Kunstverein, citing restrictions on expressing views about Israel's actions in Gaza. Both joined Strike Germany and withdrew in protest against perceived institutional censorship.²⁰ Also in February, American musician, artist **Laurie Anderson** stepped back from her appointment as Pina Bausch Professor at Folkwang University in Essen, after facing backlash for her support of Palestine.²¹ This uproar was ignited by her endorsement, three years earlier in 2021, of

¹⁴ V. Chow, "Following Outcry, Berlin's Culture Ministry Scraps a Controversial 'Anti-Discrimination' Requirement for Art Grants", Artnet, 22 January 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/antisemitism-clause-berlin-2421684>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

¹⁵ Open Letter Berlin Culture, "Open letter to the Berlin Senate Cultural Administration and to Joe Chialo, State Minister for Culture and Social Cohesion", Open Letter Berlin Culture, 7 January 2024, <https://openletterberlinculture.net/offener-brief-an-die-berliner-senatskulturverwaltung-und-an-joe-chialo-senator-fur-kultur-und-gesellschaftlichen-zusammenhalt#english>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

¹⁶ A. Greenberger, "Hundreds of Artists Say They Won't Show at German Institutions with 'McCarthyist Policies' on Palestine", Art News, 11 January 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/strike-germany-call-artists-sign-protest-palestine-1234692733/>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

¹⁷ S. Pan, "Berlinale 2024: Memories of War", International Documentary Association, 13 May 2024, <https://www.documentary.org/feature/berlinale-2024-memories-war>, (accessed 25 October 2024).

¹⁸ S. Roxborough, "Berlin Film Fest Braces for Protests Over Israel-Hamas War", The Hollywood Reporter, 8 February 2024, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/berlin-film-fest-protests-israel-hamas-war-1235817282/>, (accessed 25 October 2024).

¹⁹ E. Grenier, "When Germany targets Jewish artists as antisemitic", Deutsche Welle, 12 September 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/when-germany-targets-jewish-artists-as-antisemitic/a-70180570>, (accessed 20 October 2024).

²⁰ A. Greenberger, "Two Star Artists Pull Shows in Berlin, Claiming Museum Would Not Exhibit Pro-Palestine Gesture", Art News, 13 February 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/banu-cennetoglu-pilvi-takala-pull-shows-neue-berliner-kunstverein-palestine-gesture-1234695467/>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

²¹ A. Kassam, "Laurie Anderson ends German professorship after criticism of Palestine support", The Guardian, 1 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2024/feb/01/laurie-anderson-ends-german-professorship-pro-palestine-letter>, (accessed 19 October 2024).

the “Letter Against Apartheid,” which the university claimed advocated for boycott measures and was linked to the BDS movement.

In March, American artist **Johanna Hedva** announced the cancellation of their solo exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig. The official reason given by the museum was “understaffing” and “capacity issues.”²² But Hedva publicly challenged this rationale, claiming the real issue was their insistence on describing Israel’s actions in Palestine as an “undeniable genocide” in the exhibition’s press release. In April, the Alternatives Kultur Werk Bitterfeld cancelled a performance by Scottish punk band **Oi Polloi** due to their social media posts criticising Israeli actions in Gaza.²³ The incident highlighted how cultural venues were increasingly policing political expression to avoid accusations of anti-semitism.

“For me the question isn’t whether my political opinions have shifted. The real question is this: Why is this question being asked in the first place? ... Based on this situation I withdraw from the project.” Musician, Laurie Anderson.

Silencing palestinian voices in german arts

In September, the Bahnhof Langendreer arts centre in Bochum cancelled “Guernica Gaza”, an exhibition by Palestinian artist **Mohammed Al-Hawajri**. The series, which combines 19th- and 20th-century paintings with images from the 2008–09 Gaza War, was cancelled amid political accusations that it equated Israeli military actions with

historical atrocities.²⁴ Similarly, in October, Leipzig’s euro-scene festival cancelled the scheduled performance of the play *AND HERE I AM* by the Freedom Theatre of Jenin in the West Bank. Directed by **Ahmed Tobasi**, **Hassan Abdulrazzak**, and **Zoe Lafferty**, the production faced allegations of promoting anti-semitism and endorsing terrorism.²⁵ This decision followed a 2019 Leipzig City Council resolution requiring cultural institutions to distance themselves from calls to boycott Israel. In the same month, Iranian-German photographer **Shirin Abedi** faced backlash after publicly advocating for Palestinian rights during an event in Germany, drawing allegations of anti-Israeli rhetoric from certain cultural circles.²⁶



²² A. Greenberger, “Artist Says Comments on Palestine Cost Them a German Museum Show”, Art News, 15 March 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/johanna-hedva-kunstverein-braunschweig-suspended-show-palestine-comments-1234700028/>, (accessed 25 October 2024).

²³ Oi Polloi, Facebook, 12 April 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=971051981052244&id=100044423529917&set=a.243035637187219>, (accessed 25 October 2024).

²⁴ R. Casey, “Questions of Funding”, London Review of Books, 7 November 2024, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2024/november/questions-of-funding>, (accessed 25 October 2024).

²⁵ euro-scene Leipzig, “Press Release”, 15 October 2024, https://euro-scene.de/media/pages/files/8253a8c608-1728993002/24-10-15-pm-absage-and-here-i-am_en.pdf, (accessed 25 October 2024).

²⁶ M. Pontone, “Iranian-German Photographer Asked to Apologize for Saying ‘Free Palestine’”, Hyperallergic, 23 October 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/960502/iranian-german-shirin-abedi-photographer-asked-to-apologize-for-saying-free-palestine/>, (accessed 20 October 2024).



Still from AND HERE I AM – Jenin Theatre.

In November, the Schelling Architecture Foundation withdrew a €10,000 award given to British artist **James Bridle** following his endorsement of a cultural boycott against Israel.²⁷ The foundation explicitly referenced a Bundestag resolution discouraging financial support to individuals supporting anti-Israel boycotts, reinforcing concerns about the politicisation of cultural funding. In December, American photographer **Nan Goldin** caused a stir during the opening of her exhibition at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie by condemning Israel's actions in Gaza, explicitly linking them to historical atrocities.²⁸ Additionally, Mexican artist **Frieda Toranzo Jaeger** said her pro-Palestinian stance led to the cancellation of her Berlin exhibition and the loss of a \$19,000 stipend from the Günther Peill Foundation after she signed the Strike Germany letter.²⁹ She denied claims the decision was mutual, insisting she was pressured and felt she had no legal recourse to do anything else.

The wave of censorship in 2024 highlights a core tension in German cultural policy: balancing the fight against anti-semitism with the protection of artistic freedom. The cancellations and withdrawals in 2024 exposed growing pressure on German cultural institutions – many found themselves policing artistic expression, raising concerns about self-censorship driven by political sensitivities. The result was less dialogue, more silence – a troubling signal of the challenge in reconciling Germany's historical responsibilities with its commitment to free expression.

²⁷ P. Oltermann, "German architecture award rescinded over British artist's Israel boycott vow", *The Guardian*, 18 November 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/18/german-architecture-award-rescinded-british-artist-israel-boycott-vow-james-bridle>, (accessed 20 December 2024).
²⁸ K. Brown, "A Speech Heard Around the World: How Nan Goldin's Retrospective Became a Stress Test for a Fraught German Art Scene", *Artnet*, 25 November 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nan-goldin-neue-nationalgalerie-2-2574980>, (accessed 15 October 2024).
²⁹ A. Greenberger, "Artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger Says Her Views on Palestine Caused Her to Lose Funding and a Show in Germany", *Art News*, 2 December 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/frieda-toranzo-jaeger-strike-germany-loses-exhibition-funding-1234725180/>, (accessed 20 December 2024).

USA 2024:

A YEAR OF POLITICAL TENSIONS AND GROWING FEARS FOR ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Svetlana Mintcheva

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- *Global and domestic political tensions are having a strong impact on the art world making exhibiting institutions more fearful than ever.*
 - *In the effort to demonstrate their "political neutrality," art institutions install extensive warning labels and sometimes remove work and cancel projects.*
 - *Threats of funding cuts and legislation on issues such as abortion are used by government officials to indirectly censor art without resorting to outright censorship.*
-

While *direct* government suppression of art has not been a serious issue in the United States in recent years, concerns about the erosion of artistic freedom are growing. Under the new administration, things are likely get worse, especially if government financial regulation is used to stifle political unorthodoxy. Before going into the specifics, it is worth taking a brief look at the context of the last few years.

Around 2016, art institutions, anxious to shed the historical taint of colonial violence, became acutely vigilant about avoiding the re-traumatisation of vulnerable communities. They also took a more active political and social position after Donald Trump was elected in 2016, and, following the 2020 killing of George Floyd, committed publicly to fighting racism and diversifying internally.

While these were positive steps, the dual commitments to political engagement and protecting marginalized groups from offense have created confusion and internal tensions. These tensions have been brought to a head in the need to navigate the volatile discourse around Palestine and Israel, involving two groups bearing historical traumas. Museums are trying hard to not appear as taking sides on the current conflict in the Middle East, at the same time that their staff and many of the artists they exhibit feel a strong moral obligation to do so. One example is the Brooklyn Museum, which faced calls to take a public stance on Gaza in line with the museum's stated commitment to amplify the voices of historically marginalized groups.¹ The Museum, however, was wary of taking a political stance on a divisive issue and risking alienating audiences and donors. This reluctance to take sides was echoed in many other institutions, which have been evoking the notion of museum neutrality with unprecedented frequency.

Museum neutrality

The idea of "museum neutrality" has become a key point of contention between museum staff, committed to the ideals of social justice, and institutional leadership, concerned about broader audiences and funding flows. Staff at the Queens

Museum in New York, for instance, asked the institution to issue a statement on Palestine, given the building's history as the site of the United Nations 1947 vote on the Partition Plan. Director Sally Tallant declined, saying that the Museum could not make "political statements." Similarly, employees at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA signed open letters calling for the institutions to take a clearer stance on the Gaza conflict, urging them to publicly support Palestinian rights and call for a ceasefire that would also protect cultural heritage sites from destruction.² Neither museum did that.

The principle of museum neutrality appears to extend beyond public statements to include restrictions on personal expression. For example, three employees at the Noguchi Museum in New York were fired for violating a new dress code banning overtly political symbols, such as the keffiyeh, a headpiece commonly associated with pro-Palestinian sentiment. The museum argued that such measures were necessary to maintain a "neutral and professional environment."³

Institutions whose mission is to serve a broad community, understandably do not want to be perceived as taking active political positions on divisive issues. Museum neutrality becomes less convincing, however, when institutions censor the expression of exhibiting artists – or single out specific works and frame them with prejudicial warning labels – all in the service of maintaining their neutrality.

The tangled challenges of staying neutral: cancellations, removals, warning labels

2024 has been a difficult time for institutions. They have moved or removed artwork and subsequently often changed their positions or apologised, testifying to a high degree of fear and confusion over how to react to multiple political pressures. San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), for instance, concerned about appearing politically engaged, prevented **Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo**

¹ V. Di Liscia, 'Ahead of Anniversary, Artists Urge Brooklyn Museum to Stand With Palestine' Hyperallergic, 30 September 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/954794/ahead-of-anniversary-artists-urge-brooklyn-museum-to-stand-with-palestine/>, (accessed 17 January 2025)

² M. Pontone, 'Queens Museum Director Declines to Issue Statement on Gaza', Hyperallergic, 17 November 2023 <https://hyperallergic.com/857430/queens-museum-director-declines-to-issue-statement-on-gaza/>; C. Porterfield, 'In open letter, Metropolitan Museum employees call on the institution to 'stand in defence of Palestinians'', The Art Newspaper, 13 March 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/03/13/in-open-letter-metropolitan-museum-employees-call-on-the-institution-to-stand-in-defence-of-palestinians>; and T. Akers, 'In open letter, MoMA employees urge institution's leaders to call for 'unconditional ceasefire' in Gaza', The Art Newspaper, 14 February 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/02/14/museum-modern-art-employees-open-letter-gaza-ceasefire-israel-hamas-war> (all accessed 17 January 2025)

³ A. Irish, 'Noguchi Museum fires three employees for failing to comply with ban on overtly political dress', The Art Newspaper, 11 September 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/09/11/noguchi-museum-employees-fired-dress-code-keffiyeh-ban> (accessed 17 January 2025)

from including the phrase “Free Palestine” in a museum marquee above her outdoor mural and rejected **Jeff Cheung’s** design for an outdoor piece that exclusively used the colors of the Palestinian flag. Eight artists reacted by modifying their own works in the ongoing exhibition to include messages like “Ceasefire Now!” and “Viva Palestina.” In response, YBCA closed its galleries and issued a public statement saying, “We do not intend to expand division by providing a stage for it.” YBCA eventually reopened with the altered artworks on display but accompanied by disclaimers that they represent the artists’ views, not the institution’s.⁴ Sometimes it is not even the content of the piece on display, but the artist’s political opinions expressed elsewhere that are seen as compromising the “neutrality” of an arts program. For instance, the Town of Vail, Colorado cancelled Native American artist **Danielle SeeWalker’s** residency with the town’s Art in Public Places Program after community complaints about a previous artwork of hers (a portrait of a figure wearing a keffiyeh and an eagle feather, titled *G is for Genocide*). The town was concerned the artist’s political views expressed on social media, as well as in this past portrait, would “politicise” the public art program, even though there was no indication that the artist’s work in the residency would refer to Palestine.

Justifying censorship: the specter of violence

Uncomfortable with the display of work supporting Palestine, some cultural institutions have recently resorted to the claim that phrases like “from the river to the sea” can be seen as hate speech and a call to violence or discrimination. The presence of the phrase in a neon piece by a Palestinian American employee, for instance, led to its exclusion from a staff exhibition at Brooklyn nonprofit UrbanGlass. Eight months later, the organisation expressed regret over the decision.⁵

In this and other similar cases it has been evident that, in the context of an art exhibition, an art installation intended to raise awareness and express protest is not a call for violence or discrimination. Protest work can bring up tensions and provoke anger, but a politically critical exhibition has never been reported to inspire immediate violent acts.



Neon artwork by Phil Garip ([Instagram p_garip](https://www.instagram.com/p_garip)).

Potential violence has been brought up to justify other cases of Palestine-related censorship – not inspired by the content of the work, but as a possible reaction to the artist’s political position. In 2023 Indiana University canceled a retrospective of Palestinian artist **Samia Halaby’s** abstract art. It justified this citing concerns that the artist’s social media posts in support of Palestine might lead to protest and disruption. Even if such fears were justified (there was no evidence of pending protests) a cultural institution sets a terrible precedent in cancelling a show because it fears a violent reaction: in doing so it empowers bullies to dictate its programming.

Should political art be allowed to disturb?

While, in 2024, the Middle East geopolitical crisis has been by far the greatest source of censorship and self-censorship in the arts in the United States, domestic political tensions also came into play. In this category of cases, the leading justification for censorship was maintaining a comfortable “welcoming” environment.

Artwork critical of then former President Donald Trump, for instance, was taken down during the summer of 2024 by the Simsbury public library in Connecticut after a city official complained. The library board of directors determined that the installation violated the library’s policy requiring artwork to be suitable for family viewing and to not create a hostile work environment. Eventually the work was restored to display but the accompanying titles, referring to Trump’s felony conviction and impeachment proceedings, were removed.

⁴ N. Voynovskaya, ‘An Embattled YBCA to Reopen Amid Censorship Accusations, CEO’s Resignation’, KQED, 14 March 2024, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13954119/an-embattled-ybca-to-reopen-amid-censorship-accusations-ceos-resignation> (accessed 17 January 2025)

⁵ A. Villa, ‘Brooklyn Arts Studio Apologizes for Removing Work of Palestinian-American Staffer’, The Arts News, 23 October 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/urbanglass-apologizes-removal-work-palestinian-staffer-1234721958/> (accessed on 17 January 2025)



"Evolution" – a painting by Joel Gibbs, one of the works deemed "dangerous" at an exhibition at East Tennessee State University. Permission for use granted by the artist.

After the 2024 re-election of a highly controversial president, we can expect that artists will put more of their political concerns and anger into their work and that more efforts to censor such art will come from the right, now empowered by a sweeping political victory in Congress. In one early example, in November 2024, Republican state officials asked for an exhibition at East Tennessee State University, which suggested connections between right wing politicians and fascism, to "be taken down immediately," calling it "disturbing and hateful" and "extremely dangerous left-wing propaganda" that should not be funded by taxpayers. The university administration stood by their First Amendment obligations in keeping the show on display but demanded that an extensive warning text be installed at the entrance of the exhibition and that visitors were required to sign a waiver before entering it. The warning text described the show in many of the terms used by its critics and served to prejudice the viewer, while the unprecedented waiver presented the show as something posing actual danger to the viewer and compromised viewer privacy.⁶ The University President also promised to review the process through which exhibitions are organised and curated, raising concerns that the inside process may be insidiously modified so that potentially controversial art is never put on display in the first place.

Often removals and cancellations happen quietly behind the scenes, through negotiation with the artist or even without their knowledge. In most cases nobody other than those very closely involved in the process knows what happened. Unbeknownst to the artist, for instance, the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami temporarily removed a work depicting the late Palestinian thinker Edward Said from Charles Gaines' retrospective exhibition around the time of the museum's annual benefit.⁷

Funding fears

The fear of lost funding lingers in every case above, and censorship through the purse strings is very familiar to anyone that has any memory of the 1990s culture wars in the arts, when Republicans in Congress operated under the slogan that taxpayers should not be paying for art that they deemed offensive. Occasionally an old-style defunding initiative hits the news to remind us that such arguments are alive and well: in May 2024, for instance, the City Council of Lubbock, Texas cut funding for a local art event because of city council members' apparent distaste for drag performances and LGBTQ+ themed programming. But funding pressures today are expanded through a slew of new legislation.

Although not directly targeting the arts, new legislative prohibitions on funding for abortion have resulted in the censorship of art. In 2023, a recent Idaho state law, which prohibits the use of public funds for abortion, including speech that would "promote abortion," was cited as a reason to censor an exhibition on health issues at Lewis-Clark State College. Allegedly concerned about violating the law, the College decided to exclude several works about reproductive health. One of the censored works featured bottles of miscarriage-inducing medications represented in simple cross stitch and embroidered handwritten letters, originally written in the 1920s by a woman hoping to get information about birth control.⁸

⁶ K. Palmer, 'Anti-Fascist' Exhibit Stirs Controversy at Campus Museum, *Inside Higher Ed.*, 9 December 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2024/12/09/campus-museum-required-waivers-view-anti-fascist> (accessed on 17 January 2025); J. Scurry, K. Hagood, 'Art exhibit at ETSU's Reece Museum draws controversy', *WJHL news. Channel 11.*, 24 November 2024, <https://www.wjhl.com/news/local/art-exhibit-at-etsus-reece-museum-draws-controversy/> (accessed on 5 February 2025)

⁷ M. Durón, 'Artist Charles Gaines Says ICA Miami Suggested Removing and Altering Artworks in His Exhibition,' *ARTnews.*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ica-miami-charles-gaines-work-removal-1234700234/> (accessed on 5 February 2025)

⁸ B. Boucher, 'An Idaho College Removes Artwork About Abortion, Citing a State Law', *New York Times*, 13 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/13/arts/design/idaho-abortion-lewis-clark-college.html> (accessed 17 January 2025)

In late November 2024, the House of Representatives passed legislation that would allow the Treasury Department to revoke the tax-exempt status of nonprofit groups it accuses of supporting terrorist entities, without due process. Since material support for terrorism is already a felony, it is hard to understand why the law is needed, unless it was to intimidate non-profits, which can lose their non-profit status (hence cease to exist) if accused – without due process – of supporting terrorism. One can imagine that some politicians could claim that art and protests calling for Palestinian liberation, for example, are support for terrorism. Or an artist's call to resist a repressive government might become a liability for the organisation displaying or funding the work. The legislation failed to pass Senate approval in 2024, but with a new Republican-dominated Senate in 2025, it is likely to become law.

Geopolitical tensions, angry donors, upset audiences, concerns about violent protests, and new legislation all lead to a fraught environment, dominated by anxiety and self-censorship. In this atmosphere, extremist groups appear to be gaining cultural power. In one of the strangest, yet significant censorship incidents this year, the University of Houston came under fire for installing a sculpture that a “pro-life” organisation outlandishly claimed used “satanic imagery to honor abortion.” Testifying to the new power of such marginal groups, the University's Public Art program delayed the installation of the complete work and canceled public events around it. In July, shortly after the full exhibition was finally installed, a vandal beheaded the sculpture. The artist, **Shazia Sikander**, whose symbolic sculpture installation is about women, power, and justice, did not want the work repaired.⁹ As it stands beheaded, it serves as testimony to deep cultural conflicts ready to explode into violence.

9 L. Dolan, 'Show the violated work': Artist requests beheaded sculpture remains on view, CNN, 12 July 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/12/style/shazia-sikander-vandalized-sculpture-houston/index.html> (accessed on 17 January 2025)

CHINA AND HONG KONG:

*"THERE ARE NO REDLINES. EVERYTHING IS RED."*¹

Eric Wear

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- *Artistic Freedom Remains Under Tight Control: In both China and Hong Kong, 2024 saw continued crackdowns on artistic freedom with laws and vague censorship criteria fostering an environment of widespread self-censorship.*
 - *Expansion of Censorship and Surveillance: New legislation has broadened the scope for censoring artistic expression under charges of sedition or subversion.*
 - *Arrests, Surveillance, and Cultural Engineering: Artists have been arrested for politically sensitive works, while others face career penalties for failing to align with Party ideology.*
 - *Impact on International Cultural Institutions in Hong Kong: Pressures on foreign galleries, museums and cultural organisations to self-censor, with legal risks discouraging politically sensitive content.*
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¹ An artist who wished to remain unnamed commenting on conditions in Hong Kong after the passage of new national security legislation in 2024. Interview with the author, May 2024.

In China, there was no improvement in the state of artistic freedom in 2024. Space for communication and exchange continued to contract as the authorities sought to silence challenges or criticisms. This aligns with President Xi Jinping's position that art must serve the Party's interests, with "national security" and "cultural security" prioritised over freedom of expression.

In Hong Kong, new security legislation introduced in March 2024 lowered the threshold for censorship, under the pretext of combating sedition and subversion. The law broadens the scope of prosecutions to encompass all stages of art production, distribution, and ownership, contributing to an overall climate of intimidation. The Secretary for Security has also emphasised the need to crack down on "soft resistance," explicitly including art practices within this framework.²

In addition, both China and Hong Kong engage in transnational censorship and repression, having for example pressured European museums and exhibitors over portrayals of history or contemporary culture that deviate from China's narrative. The Hong Kong government also asserts extraterritorial jurisdiction for its national security laws. This has implications for the international art market owing to Hong Kong's role as an important venue for art fairs and auctions. Despite disavowals, self-censorship by global participants at these venues now seems endemic as they seek to mitigate legal risks.

Art that serves the Party

Since 2014, Xi Jinping has reversed former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader and reformist Deng Xiaoping's approach of allowing culture to develop autonomously, instead adopting Mao Zedong's perspective that the arts should serve a "nationalistic purpose" by promoting "correct viewpoints of history, nationality, statehood, and culture."³ Under this vision, the state art system has been tasked with developing an "art and culture criticism system with Chinese characteristics," aiming to construct an alternative to Western narratives. In practice, this involves a combination of censorship of exhibitions and publications, and rewards in the form of state employment and patronage.

Government censors review publications prior to their release and artworks prior to exhibition, trade or export. Regulations for the Administration of Business Operations of Artworks, first issued by the Ministry of Culture in 2016, prohibit the trade or export of artworks with content that is deemed to undermine social stability, spread rumours, distort history, violate social morality or national cultural traditions, threaten national security, or harm national honour. Specific requirements are regularly reviewed by the Ministry in the light of Party congresses and Five-Year Plans. In practice, censorship work is delegated to provincial cultural bureaus and may also be independently undertaken by local authorities. Inasmuch as this lacks central oversight or an appeal process, artworks approved for public display in one city may be banned in another. It is also not uncommon for works previously approved for exhibition to be rejected for later events. The vagueness of censorship criteria prompts officials to err on the side of stricter restrictions. In determining approval, authorities also consider whether an exhibition tells "a good China story" and exerts "maximum positive energy." This requirement for positive content is also reflected in criteria for funding provided by the China National Arts Fund, which requires that projects "reflect the realization of the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, cultivate and promote core socialist values, inherit and promote the excellence of traditional Chinese culture, sing the main theme of patriotism, strengthen cultural confidence, and reflect the Chinese spirit".⁴

Inasmuch as the distribution or public presence of artistic activity generally involves monitored digital platforms, surveillance is common. Since 2021, the Ministry of Culture has undertaken a number of initiatives to control online content under the guise of protecting cultural security. They also aim to establish a comprehensive national cultural big data system by 2035, including a database called "Red Gene" which will focus on revolutionary culture and socialist culture.⁵

Those artists with positions in art academies face additional requirements to sustain career advancement and gain access to exhibition opportunities

² "The term 'soft resistance' refers to subtle methods of sowing distrust in the government." A Wong, 'Hong Kong government seeking to address 'soft resistance' in local security legislation', Jurist News, 18 July 2023, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2023/07/hong-kong-government-seeking-to-address-soft-resistance-in-local-security-legislation/> (accessed 9 January 2025).

³ J. Jiang, 'Art should serve the people: Xi', *The Global Times*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/886572.shtml> (accessed 9 December 2024).

⁴ K. Wu, *A Modern History of China's Art Market*, Routledge, 2023, p 154.

⁵ K. Wu, *A Modern History of China's Art Market*, Routledge, 2023, p 161.

and international travel. Increasingly, such privileges are reserved for artists who not only abide by censorship criteria but who also express public support for ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.’

However, restrictions are not straightforward. The dean of the Shanxi Film Academy, director Jia Zhangke, comments that “‘tighten’ is a bit too simplistic and symbolic to describe the dilemma faced by Chinese filmmakers. A more precise description should be: sometimes tightening, sometimes relaxing, in a state of constant uncertainty.” Jia also observes that “[t]he current restrictions on Chinese filmmakers depend mainly on public opinion. More specifically, the attitudes, opinions and emotions expressed by the public via the Internet have a direct impact on whether the Chinese government tightens or loosens its censorship on cultural creation standards. Based on the current public opinion, the Chinese government may prevent or delay the screening of certain films that are considered to involve sensitive issues or topics.”⁶ Consequently, the releases of films are sometimes delayed for several years or are shown abroad in festival settings or competitions. This was the case for director **Lou Ye**, whose *An Unfinished Film* about Covid-19 won best picture at the Golden Horse awards in Taiwan in 2024 but cannot be viewed in China. However, digital channels can provide an alternate avenue for filmmakers allowing them to evade the export censorship that physical artworks must pass.

Other artists relativise their position, describing how they deal with the limitations. Prominent video artist Zhang Peili in a 2024 interview stated that “[s]elf-censorship is a form of self-discipline” and that “[r]egardless of where one lives, in the West or in China, people are part of a system that poses various constraints. To censor and being censored establish a power relation that concerns what the individual can and cannot do within that system. No one is exempt from such a system of constraints.”⁷

“Slandering China’s heroes and martyrs”

On 26 August 2024, **Gao Zhen**, a renowned contemporary Chinese artist was arrested after police raided his studio in Yanjiao, Hebei. He is currently being held at the Sanhe City Detention Centre on charges of “slandering China’s heroes and martyrs”, a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. The charges are believed to stem from Gao’s sculptures, which satirically portray Mao Zedong or highlight the violence of the Cultural Revolution. These works, some created over a decade ago and exhibited internationally, were also confiscated during the raid. Gao, who usually resides in the United States, was visiting family in China at the time of his arrest. As of now, his situation remains uncertain.⁸



Gao Brothers, Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang, “Miss Mao Trying to Poise Herself at the Top of Lenin’s Head”, 2011 (The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith’s America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

⁶ Y. Zhang, ‘An outsider at home, a master abroad: Jia Zhangke’s struggles to film the real China’, Swiss Info, 21 April 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/culture/an-outsider-at-home-a-master-abroad-jia-zhang-ke-struggles-to-film-the-real-china/76031937> (accessed 9 December 2024).

⁷ F. He, ‘“This Very Moment May Be Your Deadline”: Pioneering Video Artist Zhang Peili on Pushing the Boundaries of Media’, Artnet, 22 October 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/this-very-moment-may-be-your-deadline-pioneering-video-artist-zhang-peili-on-pushing-the-boundaries-of-media-2542236>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

⁸ Y. Zhuang and X. Wang, ‘Gao Zhen, Artist Who Critiqued the Cultural Revolution, Is Detained in China’, New York Times, 2 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/02/world/asia/gao-zhen-arrested-china.html>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

Control of gender expression

The suppression of non-traditional gender roles and LGBTQ+ identities, particularly in mass media, continues unabated, alongside arrests of activists and the closure of NGOs connected to these topics. Since China's population began to decline in 2022, authorities have intensified efforts to control "unhealthy" depictions of love and marriage in popular culture. Officials have decried the lack of respect for "mainstream values" in so-called mother-in-law dramas, short videos about inter-generational conflict and bullied sons that have been produced for TikTok-like platforms. The government now requires self-censorship of these to assure representations of conventional gender roles and has reviewed back titles. At the same time, propaganda campaigns have been ramped up to encourage young couples to marry and to prioritise having children.⁹

Hong Kong: National security and "soft resistance"

19 December 2024 marked 40 years since the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration¹⁰ in 1984, which laid out the conditions for the British handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. The Declaration laid out the principles of 'one country, two systems' and guaranteed Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy from China. These principles were subsequently incorporated into the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini constitution, which included a framework for progressive democratisation. *"Despite this, Hong Kong has moved rapidly from being a vibrant beacon of free expression in the region, to increasingly resembling China as one of the most repressive environments in the world for freedom of expression, notes the free media organisation, Article 19."*¹¹

Since the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, freedom of expression in Hong Kong has been severely curtailed, and the right to public assembly has been effectively suspended. In March 2024, the introduction of the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO) further broad-

ened the definitions and penalties for sedition and subversion, with certain offenses now carrying the possibility of life imprisonment.

The SNSO prohibits expressions of "hatred or contempt" toward the Chinese government and enables the suppression of historical narratives that deviate from the Party's version yet lacks clear or explicit guidelines.¹²

Much of the pressure for self-censorship occurs informally. Lesser government officials, community organisations and private businesses take note of the comments of their seniors, articles published in the loyalist press, and the events, persons and organisations that attract criticism. This restrictive climate has resulted in frequent behind-the-scenes "systematic vetting of artists for even minor risks, and often choosing or pressuring organisations not to do an event."¹³ Art fairs and auction houses downplay censorship concerns while quietly appearing to implement them.

The ongoing turnover of personnel in universities and public arts institutions also increasingly places education and decision-making under the control of "patriots." Mainland-born academics have been appointed as university leaders and a report found that senior faculty who disagreed with Beijing lost positions of authority while those who fell in line were rewarded.¹⁴ Meanwhile, critical voices are emigrating, often due to fears of arrest.

International partnerships that might foster more daring artistic expressions are also being severed, as organisations that collaborate with global advocates for free expression risk being accused of working with "external forces" and face potential disbandment by the Secretary for Security.

Finally, so as to present a veneer of normality to both local and global audiences, public or quasi-public funding favours a culture of diversion, with a preference for artworks demonstrating technology or providing spectacles for tourists.¹⁵

9 C. Shepherd and P. Wu, 'Mama's boys and marital strife are no joke in today's China', *The Washington Post*, 22 April 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/22/china-short-dramas-censorship/>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

10 Text to the Joint Declaration can be found here: https://www.legco.gov.hk/general/english/procedur/companion/chapter_1/mcp-part1-ch1-n24-e.pdf

11 'Hong Kong: Free expression under attack 40 years after the Sino-British Joint Declaration', Article 19, 19 December 2024, <https://www.article19.org/resources/hong-kong-free-expression-under-attack-40-years-after-the-sino-british-joint-declaration/> (accessed 9 January 2025)

12 A detailed discussion in E. Wear, 'Hong Kong 2024: Cultural security and extinguishing soft resistance', *International Association of Art Critics (AICA) E-Mag*, no 8, 2024, <https://aicainternational.news/issue-8>, (accessed 20 November 2024).

13 L. Movius, "'The pendulum keeps tightening': what Hong Kong's new security law could mean for the art world", *The Art Newspaper*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/03/20/the-pendulum-keeps-tightening-artists-and-curators-warn-of-dangers-brought-by-hong-kongs-new-security-law> (accessed 9 December 2024).

14 "We Can't Write the Truth Anymore": Academic Freedom in Hong Kong Under the National Security Law, *Human Rights Watch*, 24 September 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/09/24/we-cant-write-truth-anymore/academic-freedom-hong-kong-under-national-security-0> (accessed 10 January 2025).

15 L. Movius, "'The pendulum keeps tightening': what Hong Kong's new security law could mean for the art world", (accessed 9 December 2024).

Don't mention the upcoming sensitive date

On 3 June 2024, in Hong Kong's busy shopping district of Causeway Bay, performance artist **Sanmu Chan**¹⁶ wrote the Chinese characters for "8964" (八九六四) with his finger in the air. He then mimed pouring wine onto the ground to symbolise mourning those massacred in the military crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square, in Beijing, on 4 June 1989. Hong Kong police officers watched the entire performance, then moved in and took Chan away. This was the latest instance of zero tolerance for remembrance of what the authorities called an "upcoming sensitive date." In a related case, Danish artist **Jens Galschiøt's** *Pillar of Shame* sculpture (memorialising those who were killed in 1989) remains in police custody, while the Secretary for Security has declined to confirm or deny the existence of an arrest warrant for the artist. Meanwhile, Galschiøt has also been denied entry into Hong Kong. He has erected versions of the *Pillar of Shame* in cities around the world to protest against infringements against humanity.



Image: Sanmu Chan led away by police, 3 June 2024.

From cultural security to transnational repression

A key policy initiative under Xi Jinping has been the concept of "comprehensive national security," which encompasses 16 dimensions, including "cultural security." This aspect specifically targets ideological dissent and narratives that deviate from Party doctrine. Under this framework, security concerns are prioritised over civil and human rights. The Hong Kong government has explicitly applied this principle to the arts.

In addition to demonising association with "external forces," the Hong Kong government asserts extraterritorial jurisdiction for its national security laws. It claims that these apply to anyone, regardless of citizenship, in any place in the world, who acts or expresses thoughts that endanger Hong Kong. While enforcement has so far been limited to cases involving online distribution (see example below), the mere possibility of prosecution may encourage global self-censorship among participants in Hong Kong's market as they seek to mitigate legal risks. Given Hong Kong's financial significance, such restrictions may be quietly accepted as a cost of doing business. Similarly, museums with opportunities for grants, sponsorships, or merchandise sales in Hong Kong and mainland China may be inclined to "avoid trouble" by steering clear of contentious topics.

China and Hong Kong have also engaged in instances of transnational repression, most recently pressuring European museums and exhibitors over portrayals of history or contemporary culture that deviate from the Party's narrative. Some artists, such as the exiled Hong Kong duo Lumli Lumlong, have faced repeated hacking of their social media accounts by unknown parties.

In Taiwan, cinemas screening *State Organs*—a controversial film documenting alleged cases of forced organ harvesting in China—were targeted with bomb threats and threatening letters. Taiwan police have suggested these acts were likely orchestrated by Chinese cybersecurity forces.¹⁷

¹⁶ T. Grundy, 'Tiananmen crackdown anniversary: performance artist surrounded, taken away by police', Hong Kong Free Press, 3 June 2024, <https://hongkongfp.com/2024/06/03/just-in-tiananmen-crackdown-anniversary-performance-artist-surrounded-taken-away-by-police/> (accessed 9 December 2024).
¹⁷ K. Everington, 'Bomb threats issued over documentary *State Organs* in Taiwan', Taiwan News, 9 October 2024, <https://taiwannews.com.tw/news/5949560>, (accessed 9 December 2024).

Glory to Hong Kong

The Hong Kong government has repeatedly issued “content takedown orders” to platforms like Spotify, Google, and other internet providers, aiming to suppress access to or searches related to *Glory to Hong Kong*, a song that became an unofficial anthem for Hong Kong protesters. The song is often mistakenly played at international sporting events when organisers search for a “Hong Kong anthem” to use during award ceremonies. This government directive not only represents an international extension of speech suppression, but also challenges the legal neutrality of platforms, making them liable for any content uploaded by users. Tech companies have largely complied with these demands, in stark contrast to their more robust defence of free expression in Western markets.¹⁸ The case has also seen as the struggle within the Hong Kong judiciary to hold on to its independence in the face of immense pressure from the authorities. A forthcoming bill in Hong Kong concerning the protection of critical cyber infrastructure is expected to introduce further controls on online expression.

China and Hong Kong are signatories to United Nations covenants and have constitutional guarantees and domestic laws that protect freedom of expression. Moreover, under the principle of ‘one country, two systems’, Hong Kong was supposed to enjoy a high degree of autonomy within China. However, a repressive political system now utilises vague and broad laws on national and cultural security to undermine both this autonomy and protections, fostering an environment where censorship and self-censorship are the norm. Both the PRC and Hong Kong governments engage in transnational repression and use economic incentives — including support for art fairs and exhibitions — to secure the cooperation of international companies and organisations.

¹⁸ ‘The Power of Song: Repercussions for Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights in Hong Kong.’ A Global Freedom of Expression webinar, Columbia University, 16 October 2024, <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/events/the-power-of-song-repercussions-for-freedom-of-expression-and-digital-rights-in-hong-kong/>, (accessed 20 November 2024).

INDONESIA:

AUTHORITARIANISM STRIKES BACK

Ratri Ninditya

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- *An increase in the number of regulations that criminalise dissent and LG-BTQ+ expressions.*
 - *Musicians became collateral damage in the "war on drugs" policy.*
 - *Since 2023, 110 cases have been documented, with 153 individuals and groups being targeted. 62.5% of violations were carried out by government entities, mostly by the police. The music sector was affected the most.*
 - *Censorship against any form of artistic expressions related to the 1965 massacres still persists, heightening the fear and self-censorship among arts communities.*
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In October 2024, Prabowo Subianto, an ex-military general with a record of human rights violations, was inaugurated as Indonesia's new president. He was allegedly involved in war crimes, both in Timor Leste and Papua from the late 1970s to the 1990s.¹ In the late 1990s, as the bloody authoritarianism regime of Soeharto (1967-1998) was coming to an end, he orchestrated a campaign to kidnap, arrest and torture pro-democracy student activists, thirteen of whom are still missing today.² He was fired from the military only to return to Indonesian politics in 2004, then failing in two attempts in running for the presidency, finally winning the 2024 election.

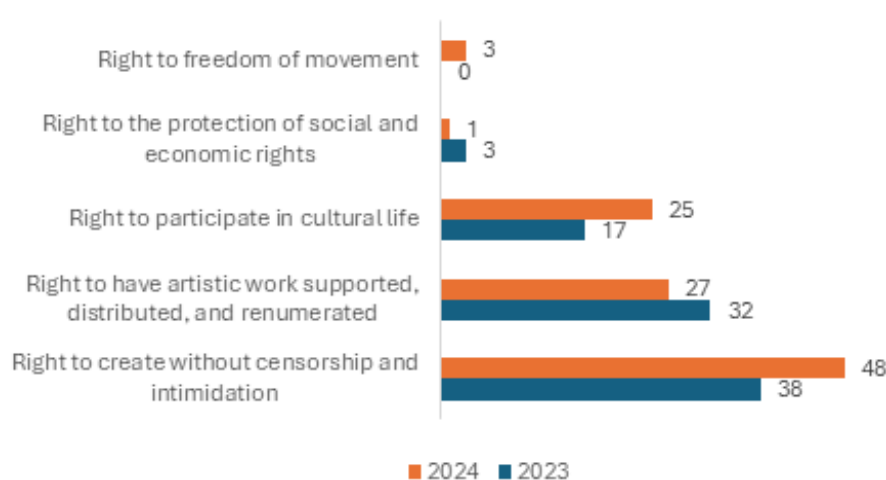
His rise to power, however shocking, did not come as a surprise. The previous government had been laying the groundwork for a resurgent authoritarian regime. Once referred to as the third largest democracy in the world, Indonesia has been regressing back to a more totalitarian state since President Joko Widodo's leadership. During the 10 years of his presidency between 2014 to 2024, numerous draconian laws that threaten artistic freedom were passed, including: a revised Criminal Code that imposes criminal penalties for insulting the president, vice president, state institutions, and public authority both offline and online; the Electronic Information and Transaction (EIT) Law with its ambiguous provisions that grant the government the authority to block access to electronic information deemed disruptive to public order; the Mass Organisations Law, which removed judicial

procedures that were in place before authorities could ban a mass organisation^{3 4}; and the Omnibus Law on Job Creation that further reduces the opportunity for art workers' ideal working conditions in an industry where economic and social protection is already scarce⁵. Meanwhile, existing laws, such as the Law on Film, the Pornography Law, and provincial regulations on public order, have been used to censor, limit, and criminalise gender diverse groups.

Obstructions to civil and political rights are also carried out through economic means. Government Regulation Number 58 and 59 of 2016 stipulates obligations for foreign NGOs in order to be able to work in Indonesia, which include having to sign a Memorandum of Understanding that allows the government to closely monitor their programmes. As a consequence, arts organisations, which receive foreign funding, are obliged by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the State Intelligence Agency to follow a rigorous screening procedure. Not passing the screening process will result in the withdrawal of funding. These organisations need to censor any programme that might be considered to be attacking "national interests".

These repressive regulations instill fear and self-censorship among arts communities – and feed into concerns that artists already carry given the country's history. This history has been marked by erasure and even a massacre of members of the left-leaning art communities in 1965⁶ [during the

Impacted Rights (2023-2024)



Koalisi Seni Artistic Freedom Database, 2024.

¹ F. Mao, 'Prabowo Subianto: The tainted ex-military chief who will be Indonesia's next leader', BBC, 15 February 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68237141>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

² C. Nash, 'In Indonesia, Prabowo's dark past casts a pall towards his presidency', World Politics Review, 24 October 2024, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/indonesia-prabowo-human-rights/>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

³ Amnesty International, [website], 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa21/6722/2017/en/>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

⁴ D. Nurita, 'FPI Dilarang, Pakar Hukum Kritik UU Ormas yang Khas Orde Baru', Tempo, 30 December 2020, <https://www.tempo.co/hukum/fpi-dilarang-pakar-hukum-kritik-uu-ormas-yang-khas-orde-baru-552332>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

⁵ R. Ninditya and H. Paramasatya, *Merawat Seni dengan Hati*, Jakarta, Koalisi Seni, 2021, pp.118-126.

⁶ Also see W. Herlambang, *Cultural Violence: Its Practice and Challenge in Indonesia*, Riga, VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2011.

anti-communist purge]. Since that time there has been no reparation, nor any acknowledgement to the victims' families. Subsequently, many artists have internalised a cautiousness and adopt less risky - if not apolitical - approaches.

Censorship and intimidation against any form of artistic expression that refers to the 1965 massacres⁷ still persist. On 19 June 2024, a screening of the documentary film *Eksil* had to be cancelled because the film theatre management demanded that the organiser obtain a "crowd permit" (required for events in public spaces that might attract more than 200 people). However, there was no regulation that requires such a permit for a screening in a privately-owned film theatre. *Eksil* documents the lives of Indonesian students who were exiled and unable to return to their homes for decades after the 1965 mass killings.⁸

Koalisi Seni – an organisation that monitors artistic freedom and art policy in Indonesia – recorded 60 cases of violations of artistic freedom in 2024, a total of 110 cases since 2023, with 153 individuals and groups being targeted. 62.5 percent of these violations were carried out by government entities, most of which were police acting under official regulations and orders. Of these victims, only 21 of the targeted individuals received partial compensation. The music sector was impacted in 70 cases.⁹

From 2023 to 2024, there were three violations of freedom of movement, four violations of social and economic rights, 86 violations of the right to create without censorship and intimidation, 59 violations of the right to have artistic work supported, distributed, and remunerated, and 42 violations of the right to participate in cultural life. Moreover, more than one right may have been violated in each case.

Blue Alert: Dissent is increasingly censored

On 21 August 2024, the national symbol Garuda,¹⁰ pictured on a blue background with the words "Emergency Alert", went viral on social media. The

icon was used as a protest against the revision of certain clauses in the Regional Election Law, about the threshold requirement (minimum number of votes) for political parties and the minimum age of regional leaders, such as governors and regents. The public protested that the amendment was intended to benefit certain parties, limiting the rights of smaller parties, and demanded a fairer election. The movement that started online culminated in demonstrations over the next few days as numerous massive protests took place in several cities. The Blue Garuda icon became a symbol of resistance as the protest also reflected people's wider disappointment and concern about the erosion of democracy in the nation.

Musicians joined the protests by including the icon as a background during their live concerts on stage, between 21 to 25 August. However, some event organisers banned the Blue Garuda, including "any songs, narratives, speech, and visuals" referring to it, from being included in the performances, in an attempt to keep concerts "free from political interests".¹¹

A couple of visual artists reported receiving threats of doxing¹² by anonymous sources after they posted artworks with a blue background (that was associated with the Blue Garuda movement) on Instagram.



Event featuring the Blue Garuda. Image: [ArriverDolphin_](#).

These two cases point to the lack of sufficient protection by digital platforms to protect artists from threats.

⁷ Large-scale killings by the army, primarily targeting members and supposed sympathisers of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). Other affected groups included the feminist group Gerwani, trade unionists, ethnic Chinese, and the leftist art group Lekra. This purge was followed by three decades of Soeharto's authoritarian regime.

⁸ FFD Film Review, [website], 2022, <https://ffd.or.id/en/film-review-en/the-exiles-2022/>, (accessed 18 December 2024).

⁹ Koalisi Seni Artistic Freedom Database, [website], 2024, <https://kebebasanberkesenian.uwazi.io>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

¹⁰ 'Garuda' is an eagle-type mythical figure of Hindu and Buddhist origin and the national emblem of Thailand and Indonesia.

¹¹ Koalisi Seni Artistic Freedom Database, [website], 2024, <https://kebebasanberkesenian.uwazi.io/in/entity/cngxz9idceo>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

¹² Doxing is the intentional revelation of a person's private information online without their consent, often with malicious intent.

Other types of artworks expressing dissent will be more likely to be censored in the future. On 19 December 2024, an exhibition by a renowned painter **Yos Suprpto** in the National Gallery was cancelled after Suprpto rejected the curator's request to take out five of his paintings. In the exhibition themed 'Revival: Land for Food Sovereignty', Suprpto depicted the state's oppression against the farmers. The censorship was endorsed by the Minister of Culture who stated that the five paintings were vulgar, contained nudity and inappropriate, thus did not fit the exhibition's theme¹³.



Yos Suprpto's painting 'Niscaya' via [kumparanNews](https://www.kumparanNews.com).

Music as collateral damage in the “war on drugs” policy

The criminalisation of electronic keyboardists playing electronic “remix music”¹⁴ has been ongoing since 2022, having manifested in a number of raids and confiscations of musical instruments by district police. This criminalisation is based on

an assumption that this music genre triggers drug use. These are simplistic policies that punish musicians and music enthusiasts, who end up becoming collateral damage for “the good of the public.” The stigma against electronic music is associated with a fight resulting in the murder of an 18-year-old teenager in October 2022. The fight was allegedly triggered by drug use. In January 2023, the South Sumatra Provincial Police Chief issued an official statement banning electronic keyboardists from playing remix or electronic music. After this official statement was issued, banning of music events in this genre became more frequent in many regions as similar regulations were implemented. Violations can result in penalties of up to 6 months' imprisonment or a fine of 50 million rupiahs (c. €3,000) for artists and event organisers. Because of the ambiguity of the legislation, it has been applied in some instances to other art events, even those that do not involve any electronic keyboard or electronic music. One incident involved a police gunshot to the air as a form of intimidation during a raid.

Anti-LGBTQ+ policy as a tool for electability

Gender diverse expressions have been part of traditional culture in many parts of Indonesia since before Western colonisation. For example, the Torajan third gender¹⁵ *burake* leads spiritual ceremonies, the southeastern Papuans practice ritualised homosexuality, a dance performance Reog Ponorogo in East Java depicts same-sex relationships, and many other cultural performances are played by men dressing as women. However, the number of anti-LGBTQ+ regulations has increased significantly since 2015. Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is particularly prominent during regional and national elections.¹⁶ These gestures attract support from conservative groups. Thus, many candidates utilise policies against gender diverse groups as a powerful tool for electability.

¹³ <https://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/news/2024-12-20/jakarta-exhibition-canceled-last-minute-senior-artist-yos-suprpto-its-censorship.html> (accessed 10 april 2025).

¹⁴ This terminology is used in the regulations. However, authorities commonly use this term to refer to funk and electronic dance music.

¹⁵ 'Third gender' refers to individuals who are categorised, either by themselves or by society, as neither a man nor a woman.

¹⁶ L.M.Adhari, 'Ragam gender dihajar perda diskriminatif dan jadi sasaran elite di tengah pusaran politik', Konde, 23 September 2024, <https://www.konde.co/2024/09/ragam-gender-dihajar-perda-diskriminatif-dan-jadi-sasaran-elite-di-tengah-pusaran-politik/>, (accessed 5 December 2024).

Restrictions preventing *Bissu* people—one of the five genders recognised by the Bugis ethnic group—from engaging in artistic expression repeatedly occurred in South Sulawesi Province. Bugis art festivals have been subject to bans since 2017, and in 2023 there were cancellations of events, resulting in organisers suffering significant losses. Local police and regional officials maintained that the organisers needed yet another permit – and the cancellations occurred under this pretext – despite having obtained multiple permits from the village head, district head, Sector Police, and the Department of Environment.



Bissu ritual (Image via [Tempo](#)).

Restrictions on the movement of the *Bissu* have made regeneration of the group difficult, resulting in a drop in their number due to the economic pressures. The *Bissu* have lost income sources because they are no longer included in anniversary celebrations and are rarely invited to officiate weddings, as has been tradition. Currently, there is only one imam and ten *Bissu* dancers in the Bone district of South Sulawesi.

With the threat of authoritarianism looming, it is urgent for human rights defenders and arts communities to open a dialogue with the police and local government on the importance of the arts for society's wellbeing. Safety, legal, and risk mitigation training for artists is more urgent than ever. There is also an opportunity to advocate for the Law on the Elimination of Discrimination to be drafted and passed soon. Human rights groups, including the Indonesian Judicial Research Society (IJRS) and the National Coalition of Vulnerable Groups (KAIN), have been strongly advocating for this since 2022 and released a policy brief in 2024¹⁷. However, as of the end of the year, it has not been included in the current National Legislation Program. The law would overrule all discriminatory regulations that are in place today, including those that hinder the fulfillment of artistic freedom of marginalised groups.

¹⁷ IJRS Publications Database, [website], 2024, <https://ijrs.or.id/publikasi-ijrs/kertas-advokasi-atas-usulan-regulasi-penghapusan-diskriminasi-di-indonesia/>, (accessed 9 January 2025)

AFGHANISTAN: "NO FORCE; NO PERSON; NO SYSTEM CAN SILENCE ITS SOUND"

ARTISTS PUSH BACK AND THE HARSH SILENCING OF WOMEN'S VOICES

Sara Whyatt

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- *The state of artistic freedom, already dire, worsened in 2024 with the introduction of the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Vice. Confusion surrounds the new law, even in government circles.*
 - *Edicts dictate that women must be fully veiled and forbid them from singing, thus isolating them completely from the outside world, and banning them from being artists or taking part in cultural activities.*
 - *There are attempts to ban images of "living beings," while musical instruments are destroyed.*
 - *Yet artists continue to create behind closed doors and in exile.*
-

In August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power after the US and NATO withdrawal, a period of relative freedoms came to a sudden and dramatic halt. The Afghan arts scene that had flourished for 20 years after the first Taliban rule (1996-2001) ended, found itself once again under the heel of the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islamic law. Over the next couple of years, music performances were banned, music schools shut down, and musicians threatened, attacked and lost their jobs. Similarly, public art and statues depicting cultural and historical figures were defaced or destroyed, as were artworks celebrating women and promoting human rights. The regime stopped short of banning arts but used threats and intimidation to send a clear message forcing artists underground causing many to abandon art altogether.¹

An already dire situation for artistic freedom worsened in 2024, and especially so for female artists and women's participation in cultural and public life.

Women in the grip of the ministry for the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice

Soon after the 2021 takeover, the Taliban established the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, known as the Ministry of Virtue and Vice, working alongside the General Directive of Intelligence, to police morality and dictate public standards. In August 2024, it announced the adoption of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law (Virtue and Vice Law), a set of rules laid out in a 114-page, 35-article document. Among the new regulations were articles targeting women and the arts. Article 13, for example, demands that women must be veiled in public and not wear tight-fitting clothes. Even more shocking, women must not be heard singing or reading aloud in public. Article 17 bans images of all living beings, including animals or, as described by one Afghan official, "anything with a soul", while Article 19 prohibits the playing of all music.²

Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law

Article 13

1. A woman is required to cover her entire body.
2. A woman should cover her face in order to prevent some *fitna* [social disorder or chaos, which can itself facilitate sin] taking place.
3. Women's voices (in a song, a hymn, or a recital out loud in a gathering) are also something that should be concealed.
4. A woman's clothes should not be thin, short or tight.
5. It is the responsibility of women to hide their body and their face from men who are not their *mahram* – close relatives.
6. It is obligatory for Muslim and righteous women to cover themselves in front of non-believing or loose women, so that no *fitna* may ensue.³

In October, after further banning women from hearing each other's voices in public or private settings, Mohammad Khalid Hanafi, Taliban Minister for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, was quoted as saying: "*When women are not permitted to call takbir or athan [Islamic call to prayer], they certainly cannot sing songs or music* ..."⁴

In July, the UN Mission in Afghanistan had reported that it had documented at least 1,033 instances between August 2021 and March 2024 where force had been applied by the ministry's employees in the implementation of various Taliban decrees "*The punishments attached to non-compliance with instructions and decrees are often arbitrary, severe and disproportionate,*" the UN report said. It further added: "*Sweeping bans with a discrim-*

¹ T. Davison, "Afghanistan's Art Scene Weighs in On Taliban Move to Ban Images of Living Things", Observer, 21 January 2025, <https://observer.com/2025/01/afghanistan-art-scene-taliban-ban-images-of-living-things/> (accessed 8 March 2025)

² "Taliban-run media stops showing images of living beings in some Afghan provinces", Associated Press, 15 October 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-media-morality-laws-images-baf2dd860fd9c16af765faa6ea9bf8d9> (accessed 8 March 2025)

³ From a translation by Afghanistan Analytics available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/08/Law-on-Virtue-and-Vice-Basic.pdf>

⁴ A. Rai, "Afghan women 'banned from hearing each other' in bizarre new Taliban rule Prohibition comes two months after the Taliban banned women's voices in public spaces", Independent, 30 October 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-taliban-women-hearing-speak-b2637984.html> (accessed 8 March 2025)

inatory effect on women have been introduced. Human rights violations, as well as the unpredictability of enforcement measures, contribute to a climate of fear and intimidation among segments of the population."

The attempts at isolation of women from the public sphere, led to one woman speaking anonymously to declare, *"They do not want us to exist!"* Referring to the ban on women hearing each other's voices, Nazifa Haqbal, a former Afghan diplomat, added, *"This surpasses misogyny. It exemplifies an extreme level of control and absurdity."*⁵

Women could still practice their art in private, and can show their work, be it limited. In August, one woman spoke of painting at home and exhibiting locally, although she was restricting herself to landscapes⁶.



Afghan woman painting. Image: Twitter/X – @Omaid-Sharifi.

Radio stations attacked for violating the music ban

Following the edict banning music broadcasts, radio stations have been forced to stop playing music. In October and November, two radio stations were temporarily shut down in the southeastern Khost region. Representatives of the Virtue and Vice Ministry raided the premises of Gharghasht

Radio on 31 October and Zhman Radio on 6 November. Both were able to resume broadcasting a few days later, on condition that they would no longer play music. An anonymous source said that his station had played only "soft music"⁷ as background accompaniment to a programme. A third radio station, Lawang Educational Radio, was also closed. It served as an educational platform for schoolgirls deprived of schooling beyond the sixth grade who were studying at home, and provided them with a space to call in with questions about their lessons.⁸ Officials did not specify whether the ban on girls calling media outlets was also a reason for the station's closure, in addition to violating the music ban.⁹ Raided on 6 November, at this time of writing it is not known whether it has been able to resume its broadcasts.

Earlier, in April, three radio journalists were briefly detained in Khost province after an order that there be no broadcasts of phone calls from female listeners. They were held for six days before being released.¹⁰

Musical instruments destroyed while in contrast UNESCO recognises the rubab as intangible cultural heritage

In December 2024, UNESCO recognised the art of crafting and playing the rubab as intangible cultural heritage in Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The rubab is one of the oldest instruments of the region, played at celebrations – weddings, funerals and other gatherings – and its masters are respected as community elders.¹¹ Yet the rubab is among the instruments banned in Afghanistan and police have entered workshops and smashed the instruments. Still, rubab players cherish their instruments, and occasionally play to small audiences despite the risk. As one rubab player says: *"People don't play for money now, they play to bring joy to others and so the music survives ... No force, no person, no system can silence its sound."*¹²

⁵ E. Ward, "Afghan women banned from 'hearing each other' as Taliban's latest rule 'surpasses misogyny' and silences women's voices", LBC news, 29 October 2024, <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/taliban-ban-women-from-speaking-to-each-other/> (accessed 8 March 2025)

⁶ S. Geranpayah, "Three years on: how the Taliban has impacted Afghanistan's culture", The Art Newspaper, 30 August 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/08/30/three-years-on-how-the-taliban-has-impacted-culture-in-afghanistan> (accessed 8 March 2025)

⁷ "Third Radio Station Shut Down in Khost for Violating Taliban's Virtue and Vice Law", Afghanistan Journalists' Center, 8 November 2024, <https://afjc.media/english/index.php/news/souht-east/khoost/third-radio-station-shut-down-in-khost-for-violating-taliban-s-virtue-and-vice-law> (accessed 8 March 2025)

⁸ "Afghanistan: three radio stations in Khost targeted by local authorities as the persecution of journalism intensifies", Reporters sans frontières, 14 November 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan-three-radio-stations-khost-targeted-local-authorities-persecution-journalism> (accessed 8 March 2025)

⁹ See footnote 8

¹⁰ "Journalists in Khost arrested for music publication and communicating with female listeners, freed after 6 days", Afghanistan Journalists' Center, 28 April 2024, <https://afjc.media/english/index.php/news/souht-east/khoost/journalists-in-khost-arrested-for-music-publication-and-communicating-with-female-listeners-freed-after-6-days> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹¹ "Art of crafting and playing rubab/rabab", UNESCO, n.d. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-crafting-and-playing-rubab-rabab-02143> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹² "UNESCO-listed musical instrument stifled in Afghanistan", France24, 29 December 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241229-unesco-listed-musical-instrument-stifled-in-afghanistan> (accessed 8 March 2025)

In a continuing campaign to silence the music in August 2024, the Taliban announced that it had destroyed 21,000 musical instruments in the previous 12 months and urged once again that none be played, even at weddings.¹³



Images of piles of instruments set alight in the Bada-khshan region were shown on the US-based KabulNow Afghan news site.¹⁴

Even government ministries seem unclear and ignore edicts against images of living beings

In August, the Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada announced that all images of living beings were banned, as decreed under Article 17 of the Virtue and Vice law. Yet this has not been entirely adopted, even within government Ministries. While the Ministries of Higher Education, Justice, and Morality have removed representations of people, replacing them with their Ministries' logos, photographs of buildings or scenes without people, other Ministries have not done so. Website and social media accounts of the Prime Minister's office, and the Ministries of Finance, Defence, and Interior, for example, continue to feature people on their sites, indicating that the image restriction may not be universally welcomed, and even the Ministry of Culture had reportedly sought clarification about the law's application. As of November, only four out of 34 regions had adopted these measures.¹⁵

It is difficult to assess the extent of and how widely the implementation of these edicts has been adopted as independent information is hard to obtain. This is accentuated by the decentralised Taliban government structure, where local leaderships may apply these regulations differently. However, the growing restrictions have reportedly led to divisions within the Taliban itself, with some officials said to be concerned about the impacts on public tolerance.¹⁶

Artistic resistance in exile

Since 2021, around 6.4 million Afghans have been forced into exile, most of whom emigrated to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.¹⁷ Among them, inevitably, are artists. A smaller number of artists aided by NGOs and activists have been granted short or long-term visas to stay in Europe and North America. Among them are 1,100 who were assisted by the Artistic Freedom Initiative, whose 2024 report details the challenges faced by refugee artists.¹⁸

Among the exiled artists are members of the ArtLords, a collective of street artists established in 2014, many of whom have fled Afghanistan. ArtLords continues to promote Afghan artists inside and outside the country.¹⁹ Its founder and president, Omaid Sharifi, among those in exile, speaks of Afghan artists' defiance: *"We will never censor the work, but we will go underground; it will become more sacred ... When there is oppression like this ... when there's apartheid like this, artists and creatives become more creative and more courageous. We will continue painting. People will paint in their homes and basements, people will make movies, they will make pictures, they will do exhibitions, and we will find ways to get those works out of Afghanistan and show the world what's happening."*²⁰

¹³ A. Gul, "Taliban's 'reforms' lead to 21,000 musical instruments destroyed in Afghanistan", VoA News, 20 August 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-s-reforms-lead-to-21-000-musical-instruments-destroyed-in-afghanistan-/7749486.html> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹⁴ "Taliban Sets Fire Large Pile of Musical Instruments, Deeming as 'Evil'", KabulNow, 21 July 2024, <https://kabulnow.com/2024/07/taliban-set-fire-large-pile-of-musical-instruments-deeming-as-evil/> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹⁵ "Analysis: Afghan Taliban ministers show signs of resistance to image ban," BBC Monitoring, 7 November 2024 <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002p8b> (access 8 March 2025)

¹⁶ E. Ward "Afghan women banned from 'hearing each other' as Taliban's latest rule 'surpasses misogyny' and silences women's voices", LBC, 29 October 2024 <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/taliban-ban-women-from-speaking-to-each-other/> (accessed 8 March 2024)

¹⁷ "Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained", UNHCR, 29 July 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹⁸ Read the Artistic Freedom Initiative's report on Afghanistan: "Artistic Exodus: Afghan Artists Fleeing Taliban Rule" here: <https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Artistic-Exodus-HR.pdf>

¹⁹ ArtLords website: <https://artlords.co/>

²⁰ T. Davison, "Afghanistan's Art Scene Weighs in On Taliban Move to Ban Images of Living Things", Observer, 21 January 2025, <https://observer.com/2025/01/afghanistan-art-scene-taliban-ban-images-of-living-things/> (accessed 8 March 2025)

"We women in Afghanistan are like human beings walking in the dark, nobody should see us ... " (Artist interviewee)

In late 2024, Freemuse interviewed two Afghan women artists working inside the country who, under anonymity, described how they continue to produce art.

Speaking of the period of the 20 years between 2001 up to 2021, one interviewee told us, "It was like a new sunrise in the country for all women and girls because for the first time they also suspended [the bans on] women from working, going to schools and university. ... Afghan women were very enthusiastic to work in that time and had the privilege of all the freedoms that [were] available to them."

Then the situation changed. One interviewee described how, "Friends I knew who played music had to hide or break their instruments. Friends that were making paintings of women, they too had to hide their paintings, or writers like me had to stop even thinking of being creative and just think about our own safety and survival of ourselves and our family."

Yet women continue to create art in secret, forming online networks. Extreme care needs to be taken working under surveillance. One interviewee spoke of how working under such scrutiny engenders lack of trust between the women, with fears that someone in the group may reveal their identities, causing tensions and fracturing relations. Their continued commitment to creativity can result in their families having acute fears for their safety, because we "are fighting against this government with pens, by words and by action.."

An interviewee who works in broadcasting said, "After the Taliban took over, I was able to go out to work for a year but after then they also banned us from going to offices and working outside. So now, like me, thousands and thousands of women are sitting at home. I am able to work online from home, [but] I'm not allowed to go to my office." Working from home in isolation has practical impacts. "Being an Afghan woman, it makes me a full-time housewife ... I have to be in the service of the whole family all the time." Having read Virginia Woolf, she empathised with the writer's advice that women need to have a room of their own. "I don't have the space to sit down alone and think ... I am just begging to have room to sit alone and have a silent space." She adds that she is missing other benefits of working in an office environment, such as the interaction with her other colleagues, having a good internet connection, access to training and other benefits enjoyed by male colleagues. I feel less privileged than my male colleagues, and I feel like I'm a second-degree human being." She adds that having to do household chores is exhausting and leaves her little room to think about her creative work. She describes the situation as "gender apartheid."

Yet these women remain hopeful and speak of how the stories they hear through their networks of other Afghan women sharing of their work for freedom give them power and inspiration.

When she was asked what message she had for other women artists in Afghanistan, one interviewee advised: "I say that they should not forget about art. It is a kind of therapy. If they can just do one hour of writing or painting that's alright. It is doing something to forget about the cruelty of the world and I encourage them to do that with family members, their siblings and with their mothers. Art is something of beauty and releases us from the situation of the world. Art, music, painting whatever form of art it is."

PAKISTAN: RELIGION, CENSORSHIP, AND RESISTANCE

CREATIVES CONFRONT BLASPHEMY LAWS AND ANTI-STATE SENTIMENTS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR ARTISTIC FREEDOM

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- *Religion is instrumentalised to censor cultural expression and social interaction, with the Blasphemy Law being the most feared law in the land.*
 - *Protests and criticism of government policies, its leadership and military, are seen as anti-state.*
 - *Creatives are trying to resist the censorship and expand the space for artistic freedom by understanding the forms of indirect censorship and its mode of implementation.*
-

Artists, filmmakers, dancers and writers and other creatives in Pakistan work and live in an environment of fear and oppression as freedom of expression and artistic rights are under threat, from State and non-state players acting with impunity. To understand Pakistan's current record on censorship, freedom of expression and artistic freedom, it is also important to understand the three turning points of the last five decades that set a country, that was once on track to being a modern, liberal and progressive democracy, to become a security state with no room for public dialogue on issues of concern.

First is the late 1970s coup carried out by General Zia-ul-Haq, which overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Bhutto, introduced orthodox Islamic policies to control and oppress citizens. This propelled religion from the private to the public sphere and in turn it was turned into a divisive tool to polarise society and disrupt the legal system with parallel Islamic Sharia laws. For example, the Hudood Ordinances a set of laws enacted in 1979 to bring the country's legal system into compliance with Sharia, directly attacked women's rights.¹ Religious fundamentalism permeated mainstream culture, public dance performances were banned and State patronage of mainly calligraphic art and non-figurative visual expression, among other forms of censorship, shaped the policies of the national cultural institutions in the 1980s. Exhibitions by dissident artists were shut down as a result.

Secondly, this situation was also exacerbated by factors emerging in the aftermath of the 1979 Russian invasion of neighboring Afghanistan that led to the CIA covert "Operation Cyclone", aimed at supporting resistance by Afghan mujahideen (religious warriors) against the Russian invaders. International Mujahideen were recruited and seminaries in Pakistan were turned into a nursery for extremists. These seminaries were supported by extremist members within the establishment, and bases for Mujahideen forces were set up in Northern Pakistan. After the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the culture of militancy and extremism created in the seminaries moved to spread their interpretation of ortho-

dox Islam within Pakistan. Throughout the 1990s, a weak political leadership gradually allowed extremist elements to enter mainstream politics and influence policies on human rights, artistic rights, and civil rights.

Thirdly, the aftermath of the Afghan War and the rise of the Mujahideen, along with the American invasion of Afghanistan—following the 9/11 attacks and lasting from 2001 to 2021—had significant consequences. This prolonged conflict led to a new era of oppression and control, as Pakistan's northern region became an extension of the war zone, marked by drone strikes, killings, and disappearances.

"The official focus on what leaders saw as the national interest seemed to be a part of the militarization of society with security issues taking priority over concerns of welfare of citizens." (Pakistan Human Rights Commission Report 2025)²

The Pakistan State and its people were polarised under the widespread impact of the war. This led to extensive violations of civil liberties, human rights and censorship. Freedom of expression in the media and culture was controlled and public protests brutally suppressed in the name of national security. NGOs, many of them connected to cultural activity faced new restrictive policies and heavy scrutiny of the funds they received from abroad. Elections and democratic rights were manipulated to keep the troika of the military, extremists, and patriarchal politicians in power. Society faced political, ethnic and sectarian violence and citizens were left without recourse with the weakened administrative and legal system. Even in this conservative and repressive atmosphere, the creative sector, whenever possible, continued to carry out cultural and artistic activities.

Today the situation remains dire. According to a report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *"The year 2023 was marked by seemingly irreparable political divisions, spilling over into public acts of violence, and a state that had no compunction in using every tool at its disposal to check dissent. The crackdown on civilians [...] has created an atmosphere of fear."*³

¹ "Pakistan: Reform Hudood Laws Now", Human Rights Watch, 14 November 2006, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/11/14/pakistan-reform-hudood-laws-now> (accessed 8 March 2025)

² "Harsh Sentences: The State of Freedom of Expression 2022-2024", Human rights Commission of Pakistan pub. 2025, hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2025-Harsh-sentences.pdf (accessed 18 March 2025)

³ "State of Human Rights in 2023" Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, pub. 2024, hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-State-of-human-rights-in-2023-EN.pdf (accessed 8 March 2025)

The silencing effect of the Blasphemy Law

The current form of the Blasphemy Law has been used to disenfranchise religious, ethnic, and sectarian minorities, as well as to silence dissenters. These laws were inherited from the British Colonial rulers in an attempt to deal with religious violence. Little used until the 1970s, these laws were strengthened under Zia al-Huq's military dictatorship.⁴ The Law provides heavy penalties for acts including defiling a place of worship, defacing the Quran and "wounding religious feeling". The most extreme penalty, that of death is provided under Section 295-C: "derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet [Muhammad] either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine"⁵. These sections of the Penal Code can be widely interpreted and manipulated to place pressure used by religious extremists.

The space for artistic expression has narrowed, and this has particularly impacted the discourse on gender justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and civil rights, which are always viewed through the lens of Sharia Laws interpreted by right-wing extremists. This is supported by the establishment and has narrowed the social, cultural and political space in the country. These religious elements have encouraged attacks on artistic freedom by both government and non-state actors and are a significant factor resulting in artists' self-censorship.

Social and religious values that are subject to interpretation are also used by government authorities to censor cultural events, including fashion shows, musical evenings, concerts, dramas, and cultural shows. This is controlled by a mandatory NOC (No Objection Certificate), which must be obtained by all organisers. This is granted by the Information Department (Film Branch), as required under the Dramatic Performance Act 1870.

Recently, in October 2024, there was intimidation aimed at shutting down sound and videos during Azaan (the call to prayer) from Mosques, near the exhibition venues of the Fourth Karachi Biennale. The sound of the works was considered by some as disrespectful to the Azaan. Visitors to the Biennale asked exhibition attendants at two venues, one a public sector university and the other a public park, to pause video and sound works each time an Azaan was taking place as a mark of respect. This came as a surprise to the organisers as films in cinema, lectures at colleges and television programs are not turned off during Azaan, so it seemed like an arbitrary request. Initially the Biennale management decided to comply while assessing the situation. They were concerned about the effect this would have in light of the extreme penalties that can be applied under the Blasphemy Law to anyone seen to hurt religious sentiments⁶.

Pressures on the Aurat March (Women's Day Marches)

Patriarchal dominance can flare into attempts to quash women's rights, as has occurred during the annual Aurat Marches (Women's Day Marches) that take place on 8 March, International Women's Day. In 2018, 2019 and 2020 marchers in Lahore and Islamabad who were carrying posters came under attack physically, as well as through the mainstream media and on social media. Organisers of the Aurat Marches were intimidated and harassed through smear campaigns. These marches are organised by campaigners and alliances between women's rights organisations, joined by activists, women laborers, home-based workers, students, and professionals who endorse gender justice.

⁴ "Pakistan's blasphemy law: All you need to know", Al-Jazeera, 18 August 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/18/all-you-need-to-know-about-pakistans-blasphemy-law> (accessed 8 March 2025)

⁵ Pakistan Penal Code available at: <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html>

⁶ As told to Freemuse by a Karachi Biennale organiser.



Woman holding placard at an Aurat March.

The placards and posters carried at the Aurat Marches challenge the existing cultural codes with slogans and images using satire and humor to question and critique gender stereotypes. Sometimes the participants carry placards with witty sayings, like “paratha rolls (a popular street food), not gender roles.”⁷ There were also references to experiences of sectarian and ethnic violence, and child and sexual abuse. There was a selective targeting of placards by the attackers, who labeled them as obscene, against society and anti-religious. These were joined by an unprecedented backlash and outrage from conservative politicians and religious leaders on mainstream media. On social media, some images were doctored as part of dis/misinformation campaigns aimed at whipping up anger. This led to a ban on Aurat March gatherings after 2020.

As of today, the annual Aurat March is refused by the NOC (No Objection Certificate) to hold rallies and the excuse given is that it could be a danger to law and order. Meanwhile, police took no action against the mobs that attacked the rallies in Is-

lamabad and Lahore, and the attackers remain unpunished. These days, the Aurat March is limited to gatherings and meetings, but a street procession is not allowed. This has lessened its impact, but the organisers feel that their work, however watered down, should continue and their voices heard.

Historical censorship of criticism of police violence

Reports of attacks on artists and artworks in recent years have been relatively few. The repercussions of past censorship of artworks generates self-censorship with artists fearing to touch on sensitive topics, and in particular criticism of police brutality. Two examples are of a 2019 installation highlighting police killings in 2019 and a show in 2016 referring to an assassinated human rights activist.

A work by **Adeela Suleman**, titled *The Killing Fields of Karachi*, consisting of a video piece and an installation of graves, was forced to shut down during the Second Karachi Biennale in 2019. The work referred to the extrajudicial killing by law-enforcing personnel in Karachi, in police “encounter killings.”⁸ On the first day of the Biennale, the video was confiscated. Over the next two days, after a public protest and acts of vandalism, the installation was dismantled and removed. There was speculation that as there were judicial proceedings against the extra-judicial killings and public discussion on it was sub-judice, the censorship was aimed at preventing public influence on the outcome of the trial. There was no official indication of who had ordered the closure, nor who had dismantled the exhibition and where it had been taken. However, it is understood that that it was a combined censorship action by law-enforcing personnel, city government and non-state players. This lack of clarity and accountability around the orders to close art exhibitions contributes to the fears and uncertainty and ultimately leads to self-censorship.

In another case of attempted censorship, ‘*The Exhausted Geography*’, a show curated by the now defunct **Tentative Collective** was cancelled by the gallery of a major art school in 2016. This followed the assassination of human rights activist Sabeen

⁷ “These posters from the Aurat March say everything you wish you could”, Dawn, 9 March 2018, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1179620/these-posters-from-the-aurat-march-say-everything-you-wish-you-could> (accessed 8 March 2025)

⁸ “Encounter killings” are extra judicial killings carried out by police forces usually during shootouts, incidents that are often criticised as being staged by police officers to cover up killings of those they already have in custody, or who were unarmed.

Mahmud, just after she had hosted a panel discussion on the Baloch Missing Persons Movement at the T2F (The Second Floor) cultural space, which she founded and ran.⁹

As the exhibition had references on the same topic, the institution cancelled the exhibition. However, the show was held later at the VM Art Gallery founded by Riffat Zuberi, a respected member of the art community who had defended artistic rights in the 1980s and 1990s. The exhibition ran without incident. This highlighted two important points: one is the arbitrary nature of censorship, the other the unwillingness of institutions to take a chance in an environment of fear.



Demonstration after the murder of Sabeen Mahmud, April 2015 ([Wikimedia Commons](#)).

Satire as criticism banned: Censorship of Mohsin Shafi

In 2015, artwork by artist **Mohsin Shafi** was removed shortly after the private preview of his show and banned from the official opening. The cause was a satirical portrayal of the influential political leader of MQM, a political party that had a strong hold in Karachi for several decades. Shafi's practice is to use satirical images to highlight the abuse of power by individuals. He had created a series of images of people in power titled "Sa'ada'atism" (cronyism), underlining nepotism in politics and society in general. To avoid an escalation of the threat, the gallery decided to exclude the pieces,

most of which had already been sold, from the show. The MQM political party while in power enjoyed impunity and often held the city hostage by staging strikes and other actions and were widely feared. For fear of reprisal, the mainstream media did not report on this incident; only the independent magazine *Newsline* dared to highlight it.¹⁰

Until the late 1990s, Pakistan had a strong history of political cartoons and satire in its mainstream print media and TV shows, which was reflected in Mohsin Shafi's work. Gradually these critical voices have been weakened by self-censorship and lack of strong support for freedom of expression within the editorial leadership and management of media houses.

More exceptions to artistic freedom than protections in Pakistan's Constitution

Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right, stating that: "Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press".

However, the law lists a number of circumstances where freedom of expression can be excluded:

- To maintain public order, decency, and morality
- In the interest of the glory of Islam
- In the interest of the integrity, security, and defense of Pakistan
- In relation to contempt of court
- Incitement to an offense
- Friendly relations with foreign states¹¹

This wide range of exclusions undermines the promise of freedom of expression, and by extension artistic freedom. This alongside indirect censorship by state and non-state actors and a range of tools of oppression, from overt forms such as legislation, to threats by individuals, through mainstream and social media, creates a climate of fear, and ultimately results in self-censorship.

⁹ J. Boone, "Sabeen Mahmud, Pakistani rights activist, shot dead", *The Guardian*, 25 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/25/sabeen-mahmud-pakistani-womens-rights-activist-shot-dead> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹⁰ N. Farrukh, "The Culture of Silence", *Newsline Magazine*, March 2015, <https://newsline magazine.com/magazine/the-culture-of-silence/> (accessed 8 March 2025)

¹¹ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973 [modified 2012] https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf

Some signs of hope

In 2024, there were some important developments that provided some hope, despite the oppressive environment. Human rights activists won a case in the Lahore High Court against an EAD (Economic Affairs Division) policy, a mechanism used by the State to control foreign grants for art and cultural organisations among other NGOs. In their petition to the court, lawyers representing the activists argued that the Policy for Local NGOs/NPOs Receiving Foreign Contributions-2022 would limit their right to receive and utilise foreign funds. This, they noted, contravened their legal right to be free from such restrictions, and therefore, they argued, the Policy was unlawful.¹²



“Celebrate Diversity. Celebrate Difference.” Clip from Shehri Pakistan video via Sheripakistan Instagram.

Artists have begun to build alliances across disciplines to continue to speak out. These are grassroots organisations like the Climate Action Center¹³, whose director Yasir Darya is an artist who merges art, technology, and advocacy towards tackling climate change. The Center collaborates with artists on projects to highlight climate justice, gender, and urban rights.

Another example is Shehri Pakistan, an initiative to bring civic, legal, and constitutional education to Pakistani citizens through audiovisual content.¹⁴ Its groundbreaking animation film on the Blasphemy Law has opened a space for informed dialogue and subverted the narrative of fear for this law, with rational analysis.

¹² Judgement Sheet, Lahore High Court, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan v. Ministry of Economic Affairs, Islamabad, 28 June 2024, <https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Lahore-High-Court-Decision-on-EAD-Policy.pdf> (accessed 31 January 2025)

¹³ For more on the Climate Action Centre see <https://cackarachi.com>

¹⁴ Shehri Pakistan's audio-visual materials can be found on its YouTube channel www.youtube.com/@ShehriPakistan

RECOMMENDATIONS

The right to artistic freedom requires protection from multiple actors: from states to regional and international bodies, to non-governmental and civil society organisations, to the cultural and creative industries and to the artists' self-censorship. There are a range of actions that can be taken by governments, civil society and cultural organisations and artists to protect and promote artistic freedom: from changes to legislation and administrative practice, to networking and sharing of ideas and experience on how artists can persevere when under pressure of censorship.

Freemuse recommends that:

ALL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Should uphold the full array of states' obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the right of every person to freedom of artistic expression and creativity and access to cultural rights without discrimination on any grounds. This principle should be taken as the core driver of all developments of law, policies and measures related to freedom of artistic expression and creativity.
2. Should abolish and amend legislation, executive orders, and by-laws that prohibit and restrict artists from taking part in any dimension of artistic life and the performance of their respective art forms.
3. Must harmonise national legislation on freedom of expression and cultural rights with international human rights standards. States should ensure that any restrictions imposed on artistic expression are in accordance with Article 19(3) of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Restrictions must be provided by the law, serve a legitimate aim, be proven proportionate against the benefits of the restriction and necessary for the protection of the legitimate aim.
4. Should abolish censorship boards and other prior censorship mechanisms. Classification bodies should be independent, include representatives from the cultural sector in their membership, their terms of reference, rules of procedure and activities should be made public, and effective appeal mechanisms should be put in place.
5. Should ensure that artist syndicates and other professional bodies are strongly encouraged to actively apply human rights principles when adopting and implementing their internal policies, aiming to protect the rights of their members, instead of imposing undue restrictions.
6. Should ensure that state officials and non-state actors—including political organisations, religious groups, private individuals—which are found to have used hate speech, issued online and offline threats or committed acts of violence (including acts of vandalism or destruction targeting artwork) in an attempt to instigate acts of censorship, must face prompt, impartial and effective investigations in accordance with international standards.
7. Should avoid the criminalisation of expressions—artistic and otherwise—and apply criminal law only in cases of severe breaches of regulations governing free speech.
8. Should ensure the immediate release of all artists in administrative or arbitrary detention, those serving unlawfully rendered prisons sentences, and drop all charges brought against them on illegitimate grounds.

9. At times of war and conflict to take measures to: protect cultural property; refrain from using such properties in a manner that may expose them to destruction or taking acts of hostility against them; levy sanctions for destruction of cultural heritage, and; promote the need to protect cultural heritage among the public, cultural and arts professionals, military and law enforcement agencies.

ON THE RATIFICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

10. Should ratify and fully implement the following international human rights instruments so that they can strengthen the promotion and protection of rights to artistic expression and creativity:
 - The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its Optional Protocol, without reservations.
 - The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and its Optional Protocol, without reservations.
 - The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.
 - The UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol, without reservations.
 - The UNESCO 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954 Hague Convention).

ON LAWS PENALISING INSULT

11. Must ensure that artists be able to freely participate in public debates about the way authorities run the state, national security, public morality, and other issues of public importance. Artists, especially visual and performing artists who use humour, satire, and parody, should not be subject to undue or arbitrary restrictions on the right to freedom of expression on these grounds.
12. Must review and repeal laws or provisions penalising insult to heads of states (including foreign heads of states), other state officials (including military and law enforcement), and political figures, national institutions, and emblems.
13. Should abolish blasphemy laws, which often prescribe heavy sanctions, including death penalties, for insulting religion and religious figures. States should not allow that the offence of insult to religious feelings be used as a vehicle for repressing freedom of expression.

ON THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

14. Should respect the right of artists to dissent, and to use political, religious, economic, and national symbols as a counter-discourse to dominant powers and to express their own beliefs and world visions.
15. Must review and amend all legislation that imposes undue restrictions on peaceful freedom of assembly, resulting in preventing artists from exercising the unhindered right to stage and take part in protests, demonstrations, and other public actions.

ON COUNTERTERROR MEASURES

16. Must ensure that the measures primarily intended to counter terrorism are not used to suppress forms of artistic expression, including peaceful political commentary.
17. Must ensure that no provisions within domestic counterterrorism legislation violate state obligations under international human rights law, specifically Article 19 of the ICCPR protecting freedom of expression.
18. Should repeal or amend legislation that includes vaguely worded terms such as 'glorifying terrorism,' 'insult to victims of terrorisms,' and other phrases that can be interpreted in such manner as to deny the right to freedom of expression.

ON SEXUAL, GENDER AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

19. Must review and repeal laws and discriminatory provisions criminalising same sex relations, which place undue restrictions on freedom of expression, including artistic expression.
20. Must urgently review and repeal laws that impose undue restrictions on women's equal participation in cultural life and ensure that principles of gender equality and non-discrimination are consistently applied in all laws and policies governing the cultural sector.
21. Should conduct prompt, effective, and impartial investigations in cases of violence exerted against artists based on their sex, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

ON DIGITAL RIGHTS GOVERNING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

22. Must apply human rights protections as stipulated under Article 19 of the ICCPR equally in the offline and online context. When applying cybercrime laws to penalise expressions posted online, governments should uphold international standards governing freedom of expression and refrain from unlawfully criminalising artists' dissenting voices expressed in the digital space.
23. Should refrain from initiating legal prosecution cases against online streaming platforms and policing content available on these platforms in a manner that denies the right to freedom of expression.
24. Must treat threats of violence and sexual abuse in the online context equally to those in offline spaces. Specialised units within law enforcement tasked to combat cybercrime should investigate those threats promptly, effectively, and impartially, and relevant prosecution and judiciary bodies should ensure that perpetrators are identified and sanctioned in line with national laws.
25. Should hold social media companies accountable for implementing policies that respect the right to free expression, especially through: (a) revising community guidelines so that they are consistent with relevant international human rights standards; (b) granting artists whose content has been removed the right to appeal through a fair and transparent process in which they are provided with easy access to information about appeals, as well as timely responses to appeals and complaints in line with international human rights standards; (c) publicly disclosing information on the number of incidents in which social media companies remove content and their reasons for this removal.

ON STRENGTHENING OF ARTS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

26. Should ensure a plural and diverse environment for exercising artistic freedom by strengthening the mandates of relevant arts and culture institutions and entities. These institutions should maintain their independence and ensure transparency in all decision making (including programmatic, operational, funding and recruitment of senior positions).
27. Should consult with civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders (including artists focused on expression containing LGBTQ+ and feminist themes) working in the field of freedom of expression and artistic freedom—through a transparent, enabling and fully informed process, when engaging with and reporting to the United Nations and regional human rights mechanisms and to other bodies such as UNESCO.
28. In cooperation with relevant national human rights bodies, governments should establish mechanisms through which artists can report unlawful restrictions of artistic freedom of expression. These mechanisms should have the mandate to examine complaints and the mandatory power to refer the cases to relevant agencies for legal and other appropriate actions. The number and nature of these complaints should be made public for further policy analysis and development.

THE UNITED NATIONS AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL INTERGOVERNMENTAL MECHANISMS:

29. Should include freedom of artistic expression in all relevant debates, mechanisms and formulations focusing on freedom of expression.
30. Should play a convening role, bringing member states together to develop international and regional strategies and action plans to protect artists and freedom of artistic expression. They should use available international and regional mechanisms to influence member states to refrain from subjecting artists to legal prosecution and arbitrary arrests.
31. Should provide technical assistance to member states in which legal frameworks governing freedom of expression and artistic expression need strengthening. They should encourage that member states be able to bring their legislation in line with international standards and in cooperation with relevant implementing bodies, including UNESCO and regional intergovernmental organisations.
32. Regional inter-governmental bodies, such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and others should create platforms for dialogue and exchange among member states on good practise relating to the promotion and protection of artistic freedom.
33. UNESCO should support and ensure that States Parties to the 2005 Convention on the Promotion and Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions report on violations of artistic freedom committed by both state and non-state actors.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CULTURAL BODIES:

34. Should continue to systematically monitor, document, and raise awareness about different forms of interference in the cultural sector and artistic expression, including focusing on undue restrictions imposed through national laws and practices.
35. Should strengthen their engagement with relevant authorities at the international, regional, and national level to expose illegitimate restrictions on artistic freedom.
36. Should engage with and support individual artists and representatives of the cultural sector to share expertise and joint action in support of artistic freedom.

ARTISTS AND ARTS INSTITUTIONS:

37. Should work together to monitor attacks on artistic freedom in their own countries, take collective action and provide moral support.
38. Should work with other local, regional and international networks working in the fields of culture, freedom of expression and other fundamental rights to share experiences and ideas for action.
39. Should collaborate with regional and international freedom of expression and human rights groups to inform, monitor and advocate for artistic freedom and for those facing repression in their home countries and abroad.
40. Should work to create public understanding of the importance of artistic freedom, and its role in strengthening society and its part in a healthy democracy, through all available means, including awareness raising in schools, public events, cultural centres, national media, exhibitions, and more.

AUTHORS

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Ghias Aljundi is an experienced researcher and trainer with over twenty years of experience working on freedom of expression, artistic freedoms and press issues in the MENA region. Ghias worked for major international organisations such as Amnesty International, PEN International, IFEX, Article 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and The World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). Ghias is the co-founder of independent fact-checking Fareq.net Platform.

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Parvin Ardalan is a freelance journalist, feminist activist, and writer. Ardalan began her journalism career in the early 1990s in Iran and worked with various independent publications. She sought to connect journalism with activism and collective action, with a focus on women's rights and freedom of expression in Iran. She received the Olof Palme Prize in 2007. Parvin became an ICORN resident in Malmö, Sweden, in 2010 and has been living there since. In Malmö, she combined her interest in freedom of expression, gender, social movements, and migration, and launched two interdisciplinary and intersectional initiatives in collaboration with civil society and numerous cultural institutions. Since 2021, Parvin has served on the PEN Sweden board and participated in research at the Dawit Isaak Library, a free speech library inaugurated in Malmö in 2020.

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Diana Arévalo is a consultant and researcher specialising in artistic freedom of expression and cultural rights in Latin America. With over six years of experience in human rights, she has coordinated relocation processes for at-risk defenders and developed research, monitoring, advocacy, and campaign strategies. Her work also involves building the capacity of local cultural organisations. She holds a MA in International Relations from the University of CEMA (Buenos Aires) and a BA in Government and International Relations from Externado de Colombia University. She also completed specialized studies in human rights, memory, and cultural policies at the Henry Dunant Latin America Foundation (Santiago de Chile) and in cultural management and communication at FLACSO Argentina.

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Małgorzata Kaźmierczak holds a PhD in History. Since 2004 she has been an independent curator of art projects in Poland and USA, especially performance art events. She is a researcher and author of many essays and reviews. From 2014 to 2016, she served as the director of the City Art Gallery of Kalisz, Poland. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the KEN University of Kraków and the President of AICA International.

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Svetlana Mintcheva is a writer, academic, and consultant in the area of free speech. Based in Europe (Bulgaria and Greece) and she works internationally. Before becoming a freelance consultant, she was a long-time staff member and director of programs at the National Coalition Against Censorship, an alliance of U.S. national organisations protecting freedom of speech. She founded the NCAC Arts Advocacy Program (now Arts and Culture Program), the only U.S. national initiative devoted to the arts and free expression. Dr. Mintcheva co-edited *Censoring Culture: Contemporary Threats to Free Expression* (The New Press, 2006) and *Curating Under Pressure: International Perspectives on Negotiating Conflict and Upholding Integrity* (Routledge, 2020). An academic as well as an activist, she previously taught literature and critical theory at the University of Sofia, Bulgaria and at Duke University, NC from where she received her PhD in critical theory in 1999. More recently, she has taught at New York University.

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Polina Sadovskaya is an expert and researcher in cultural advocacy, human rights and media resilience. She has over 10 years of leadership experience in international organisations and nonprofits protecting culture and freedom of expression such as PEN America and UNESCO. Her work spans cultural diplomacy, crisis management, and policy development, aiming to safeguard artistic freedoms and cultural expression in countries like Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and beyond. She holds a PhD in Philology from South Urals State University and has contributed to numerous international publications on cultural rights.

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Eric Wear is a historian, critic, and curator, with thirty-five years of experience working with museums, galleries and local authorities, focused on the interpretation and social contexts of Chinese art and design. From 1989 to 2007 he was Associate Head and Associate Professor at the School of Design of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, leading the MA in Design programme, and the Innovation and Design Management concentration of the MBA of the Graduate School of Business. Wear was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and Goldsmiths College, London, and received a PhD in art history from the University of Hong Kong. He lived in Shanghai 2008–2014, and currently resides in Lisbon and Paris. He is a member of the Freedom of Expression and Censorship Committee of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) since 2024 and served as President of AICA Hong Kong from 1999 to 2001.

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Freemuse is immensely grateful to our partners in the Building Bridges network for their input and advice.

MOBILE

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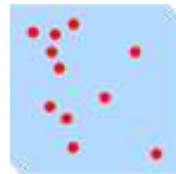


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