



Prisoners of Conscience

Supporting people who defend human rights

Global Report

2021/2022

Foreword

States are constantly finding new and innovative ways to suppress their critics. When I started out working in human rights over 40 years ago, there was no such thing as digital surveillance, 'doxing' or 'foreign agents' laws. Today, they are commonplace tools used to intimidate those working to defend rights into silence.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) all over the world are persecuted for their peaceful work defending the rights of others. Yet in spite of how many new ways have evolved to suppress HRDs, I have witnessed how arrest and detention have through the decades been among the most, if not the most, frequent violations committed against them.

It is effective because once behind bars, those who hold oppressive governments to account for human rights violations have no opportunity to carry out their work effectively.

Because of the continued use of detention as a tool to attack critics, and the ever changing legislative and judicial landscape that facilitates it, the work of Prisoners of Conscience is as urgent and necessary as it was when they were founded 60 years ago.

By providing small grants and support to human rights defenders and others, Prisoners of Conscience enables tangible changes in the lives of individuals, supporting them in times of adversity and helping them start their lives over when they are released or when they reach safety.

The Prisoners of Conscience Global Report 2021/22 is an important collection of research and personal anecdotes that helps us understand better the landscape that they and many of us navigate, as we try to alleviate the situation of human rights defenders and others at risk. It is both informed by and informs their meticulous work and is a solid resource that should serve any organisation or individual working or interested in human rights.



Mary Lawlor
UN Special Rapporteur
on the situation of
human rights defenders

Introduction

As Prisoners of Conscience (PoC) marks its 60th anniversary as a human rights and relief from poverty charity, we report on the state of human rights in those countries in which we are currently particularly active.

In the context of global human rights, 2020 and 2021 were pivotal years. There were, and continue to be, both encouraging signs and worrying developments.

On the positive side, around the world brave, ordinary people made a stand against authoritative regimes, the corporate world continues to gradually accept its potentially powerful role in advancing human rights, the Black Lives Matter movement demanded an end to systematic racism and police brutality and the demands to tackle climate change are being increasingly heard. From Egypt to Hong Kong to Belarus people took to the streets and social media in a mass outpouring of support for free speech and human rights.

On the negative side, we have seen the development of repressive regimes in Myanmar, Venezuela, Russia and Syria and elsewhere, and across the world we see governments cutting down free speech through social media and on the internet. Action in response has been taken by the International Criminal Court and other international bodies (Human Rights Watch, 2021) but, despite these interventions, the number of prisoners of conscience has continued to climb in almost every region, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession, and a global slide towards authoritarianism.

This report attempts to estimate the number of prisoners of conscience in 15 countries, all of which are regions of support by PoC in the last 10 years, and describes the context within which persecution of those who uphold human rights is being brought about. We set out the number of grants awarded by PoC to prisoners of conscience over the last 10 years, and a typical case study in each of these countries.

The need to support those who support human rights has never been more urgent but there is a vast disparity between the extent of human rights abuses in each country and PoC's financial resources to meet the extent of the need.

Since 1962, we have supported tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience and their family members, awarding grants across over 70 countries. These courageous men and women have participated in protests, stood up against persecution, provided humanitarian aid and called for political, social and legal reforms in the face of corruption and censorship. The findings within this report are a testament to their courage and integrity.

Abbreviations

CAT Convention against Torture	ICERD International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women	ICESCR International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CPED International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	ICMW International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
CRC Convention on the Rights of the Child	NGO Non-Governmental Organisation
CRPD Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	OHCHR Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
CPT European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	PACE Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
ECHR European Court of Human Rights	SR Special Rapporteur
HRC Human Rights Council	UN United Nations
ICCPR International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	

Methodology

This report will classify the proportion of prisoners of conscience in each state as low, medium, or high. A low status will indicate an estimated population of prisoners of conscience of 100 or less, medium means between 100 and 500 and high means over 500+. This estimate will be based upon the available data, including our assessment of the extent to which human rights protections are enshrined in domestic law (and those protections are enforced); available reports on the implementation of any human rights protections or the deficiencies of those alleged protections, testimony from former prisoners of conscience and reports from regional and international human rights organisations, UN and government agencies and NGOs. It will also include details of the UN human rights treaties these countries have ratified, to indicate the extent to which the state is upholding or erring from their legal obligations. Precise statistics regarding the number of prisoners of conscience per state are not totally reliable for a myriad of reasons, notably that defaulting states do not publicise the names of those they persecute. Our assessments have to take account of poor record

keeping from national state bodies and local authorities, state-mandated cover ups, secret or undocumented arrests, the banning of foreign journalists and human rights agencies and press censorship. In Eritrea for instance, there is a complete ban on human rights workers entering the country, leaving researchers with only the testimony of defectors and official state reports which purposely omit secret arrests and kidnappings of journalists, human rights defenders and activists. There is also the inherent problem that anyone who expresses opposition to a particular government in power can be labelled as being a “terrorist” or persecuted for anti-government activities, even where the activity is both peaceful and is upholding the interests of those whose human rights are being persecuted by the government.

This lack of precise figures also makes calculating the proportion of prisoners of conscience as a percentage of overall population impractical. Prisoners of conscience are rarely distributed evenly across a state. In the Kurdish majority areas of eastern and south-eastern Anatolia in Turkey for instance, crackdowns on Kurdish political activists, journalists and human rights defenders occur at a significantly higher rate than in the rest of the country.

For the purposes of this report the term “prisoner of conscience” will refer to a person who fulfils the criteria contained in our charitable purpose:

“People who have exercised a non-violent act of conscience to uphold their or other’s human rights, for which they have been, or are likely to be imprisoned, persecuted or subjected to suffering, or have fled from their country to avoid such imprisonment, persecution or suffering.”

One or more of the following criteria is observed: (1) the victim has been deprived of their liberty without being accorded a fair trial or any other of the rights and freedoms guaranteed to detainees by the ICCPR (2) the sentencing or arrest was based on falsified evidence or evidence procured in a manner that violates the victim’s human rights e.g. by confessions given under torture or duress (3) the person has been detained in a discriminatory manner (4) the length of the victims detention or the conditions attached to it are unreasonably disproportionate to the offence the victim is accused of (5) the person has been detained or arrested under a law or offence that violates international human rights law or norms.

AFGHANISTAN

Grants in the last 10 years:	56	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

In August 2021, Afghanistan’s government was taken over by the Taliban and the world saw the collapse of the former Afghan government. The Taliban appear to treat everyone who opposes their governmental approach as being an enemy, and hence a person against whom state enforcement action can be taken. They have radically curtailed any freedom of press, women’s rights and right to education. The rights of civilians and human rights defenders are under severe threat and it appears unlikely the situation will improve while the government remains under Taliban control.

There have been reports of gross human rights violations in Afghanistan against human rights defenders. As one example the UN has reported that on the 19th of January 2022, three women’s rights activists went missing after “...both Ms Khil and Ms Paryani had taken part in peaceful demonstrations calling for the rights of women to be respected by the Taliban.” (UN News 2022). This is an alarming violation of the right to peaceful assembly/freedom of association. It is difficult to predict the exact number of prisoners of conscience, but it is clear that the restrictions on any form of opposition, including promoting human rights of those who are affected by the current regime, will lead to a higher number of arbitrary arrests. There has been a significant and worrying roll back on women’s rights in Afghanistan, with girls’ schools remaining closed and women being banned from returning to work unless under limited exemptions (Amnesty International 2021). The restriction of women in the workplace and girls in school severely limits their rights to participate in society and there is no de facto recognition of gender equality. Furthermore, Amnesty International highlights the economic strain for women being forced out of work. (Amnesty International Nov 2021). Dr Masouda Faizi commented on her experience as a doctor in Afghanistan under Taliban control. “... Before August 2021, I was an independent medical doctor who was free to travel and do her work, but after 15 August, I was dependent on male members of my family who had to accompany me travelling and even going to work.” (Amnesty International Report 2021).

Women’s right to education, work, and to participate in society is being violated on a systemic level. Human rights defenders who have protested these violations have been subject to extreme violence, death threats and arbitrary arrests and imprisonment.

The Taliban have imposed a broad range of restrictions on the media and what can be reported, with a requirement for journalists to provide detailed reports to a regulatory body. Human Rights Watch (HRW) highlights several restrictive media regulations under the Taliban, “...media are prohibited from printing or broadcasting reports that are ‘contrary to Islam’, ‘insult national figures’, or ‘distort news content’.” (HRW Oct 2021). Journalists are also prohibited from reporting on topics that may have a “...negative impact on the public’s attitude.” (HRW Oct 2021). These restrictions essentially mean that journalists working in Afghanistan are finding it increasingly difficult to report an accurate account of news and events in Afghanistan. HRW has reported that several journalists have expressed a fear of arbitrary arrest due to these restrictions, with 32 journalists known to be detained by the government authorities. One journalist in particular said that the “...prohibition on ‘insulting national figures’ could be interpreted very broadly and curtail any reporting on corruption...” (HRW Oct 2021). The limitation on the freedom of expression for journalists and human rights defenders is a gross violation of Afghanistan’s international human rights obligations. These new regulations have and will cause a further chilling effect on the freedom of press. Journalists will be reluctant to report out of fear of arrest and detainment, and those who do risk imprisonment.

As of mid-2022, the human rights situation has not improved and, if anything, appears to be worsening. The Taliban has reversed its former decision for schools to reopen for girls, severely restricting access to education. In April 2022, Amnesty reported that “...Women and girls have all but disappeared from public life.” (Amnesty International April 2022). Human rights defenders are at significant risk of persecution from the Taliban regime, with reports of a ‘crackdown’ on human rights activists. HRW has observed, “... Women activists who fearlessly chanted, ‘work, bread, freedom,’ on the streets of Afghanistan’s cities have been abducted and beaten.” (HRW May 2022).

The instability of the Taliban controlled government in Afghanistan has led to thousands of people fleeing the country and becoming

refugees. Those left behind in the country see their rights being restricted severely, with practically no human rights guarantees for women and widespread censorship of the media. Without access to data, we can only predict that the number of prisoners of conscience in Afghanistan is high and is most likely to continue to rise under the Taliban regime.

Afghanistan PoC Case Study

Lina, a defence lawyer and women’s rights activist from Afghanistan, has been involved in activist causes since her teens. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, she continued her human rights work despite the huge risk involved. She organised events and protests mobilising women to peacefully protest against the Taliban.

“Before the Taliban I was a defence lawyer and had worked in different parts of the justice system of Afghanistan for five years. I had good experience and I was very happy to be self-sufficient. But with the arrival of the Taliban, everything fell out of place and I became unemployed.”



Lina was attending a protest to raise awareness of the Taliban’s denial of women’s rights, when the Taliban began to violently crack down on protestors and dissenters. She and other women sought refuge at what they thought was a safe house. Two days later the Taliban ambushed the house and detained all the women who were living there. They were only released after making forced confessions and made to sign statements under coercion.

Lina is now in hiding but she has continued to engage and advocate for women’s rights issues whilst in hiding, even though she must now do so online. Her imprisonment has not stopped her activism and her passion for these causes.

“We will continue to fight for our basic human rights from those who are totally alien to these words, they know nothing but suicide and corruption. Maybe the Taliban have forgotten that these women are not women from 20 years ago, they are not silent in the face of injustice.”

AZERBAIJAN

Grants in the last 10 years:	9	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	Y

PoC awarded grants to Lina in 2022, contributing towards her living expenses, medical bills and visas/passports costs. In January 2020, PACE adopted a resolution which described Azerbaijan’s detaining of political prisoners as systemic in nature, noting a troubling pattern of politically motivated manipulation of the criminal justice system in Azerbaijan (PACE, 2020). In 2020 the ECHR prosecuted five cases of wrongful imprisonment of government critics in the period 2014–2016 (ECHR, 2020).

Despite the release of a large group of over 400 political prisoners in 2019, including opposition politicians, Shia religious activists and investigative journalists, the Azerbaijani government continued to arrest and detain independent journalists and critics of the government throughout 2020. Notable cases include journalist Polad Aslanov who was sentenced to 16 years on trumped up treason charges, and journalists Aras Guliyev and Elchin Ismayilli who continue to serve bogus prison sentences for inciting religious hatred and extortion, respectively (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). In September 2020, the Azerbaijani NGO, The Working Group, released its Unified List of Political Prisoners list which registered 1035 prisoners wrongfully detained in 2019, an increase on its 2018 list (The Working Group, 2020), most of whom remain detained. The list included six journalists and seven political activists, as well as 53 persons allegedly involved in the attempted assassination of the mayor of Ganja in July 2018¹.

Azerbaijan continues to prosecute and detain opposition politicians and political activists. In March 2021, Tofig Yagublu, leader of the opposition Musaval party, was arrested on bogus charges of hooliganism and later sentenced to four years and three months imprisonment and members of the opposition APFP party were frequently harassed and detained on false charges. Hundreds of activists continue to be unlawfully detained every year for protesting amid Azerbaijan’s ban on protests in central Baku (HRW, 2021).

¹ - Many of the arrests surrounding this event have been widely condemned by human rights groups as politically motivated.

HRW has warned that the Azerbaijani government has used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to crack down on anti-government criticism. Their 2021 report cited at least 10 cases of an anti-misinformation law being used to arrest online bloggers criticising the government’s pandemic response, with most being sentenced to 10 or 30 days detention (HRW, 2021). More recently, the authorities in Azerbaijan have granted clemency to hundreds of prisoners. Among whom, 38 have been recognised to be political prisoners (RadioFreeEurope March 2021). However, the “...government has insisted that there are no such inmates in the country.” (RFE March 2021). This does not mark any significant change in the Azerbaijani authorities’ history of repressing freedom of expression, the freedom of association, and political opponents.



Azerbaijan PoC Case Study

Mahammad is an Azerbaijani blogger who lives in exile in France due to persecution by the Azerbaijani government for his blogging and videos critical of President Aliyev. Intimidation and threats followed him in his new home in France, as he continues to criticise Azerbaijan’s authoritarian regime. In 2020 Mahammad was brutally attacked and stabbed 16 times.

“Despite these all I still live on the same address and even though I asked to be placed somewhere else, French government did not do so. I live in fear every day, thinking it can be my last. Nobody wants to die, neither do I. I’m asking your help to prevent this from happening. I need a safe place to stay at even for a short span, where Azeri government can’t find me.”

PoC awarded a grant towards Mahammad’s hardship needs in 2021.

BELARUS

Grants in the last 10 years:	14	Number of prisoners of conscience:	M/H MEDIUM/HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPD:	Y	ICMW:	N

In her 2020 report the SR to Belarus, Anaïs Marin, noted that ‘criminal and administrative sanctions continue to be selectively and disproportionately enforced against human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers and other members of civil society’ (OHCHR, 2020). She observed that the ability of prosecutors to extend detention periods without the sanction of judges as well as the widespread practice of suspending or threatening to suspend licenses of lawyers representing human rights defenders was being used as a tool to unfairly charge and detain these groups (OHCHR, 2020).

This culture of censorship was on full display in the run up to and the wake of the contested re-election of President Lukashenka. Following the election, Belarusian authorities arbitrarily detained over 7000 peaceful protesters over the course of just four days (HRW, 2021). Over 500 cases of torture by state agents against protesters were recorded, with rape, electrocution, and beating of detainees (OHCHR, 2020). Many of those detained reported being denied access to a lawyer and held in overcrowded cells without access to food, water, and medication (HRW, 2021). While some of the protesters arrested were released, many were charged with administrative offences following trials described as lasting only minutes (HRW, 2021). Authorities also launched bogus criminal cases against 500 potential presidential candidates as well as against their staffers and supporters in the run up to the August presidential election, with Viktor Babaryka being held on trumped up charges of tax evasion, money laundering, and bribery. At least 118 of these people remain in pre-trial detention on fabricated charges (HRW, 2021). The Belarusian Association of Journalists recorded over 500 cases of harassment, detention, fines, and temporary arrests of journalists from January to mid-November 2020. This repression peaked in August when hundreds of journalists covering the protests over the Presidential election were stripped of their accreditation, fined, detained, tortured, and even deported.

The Belarusian authorities used misinformation laws regarding

the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretence to detain journalists and human rights defenders. Two health workers were detained for seven months for sharing concerns regarding COVID-19 during an online stream with blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski. COVID-19 safety provisions were also cited as reasons for irregularities in the detention and sentencing of journalists and human rights defenders. Detainees described how they were denied access to their lawyers and held in their detention facility during secretive closed trials, participating instead by video link (OHCHR, 2020). In 2022, the oppression of civil society organisations by Belarusian authorities has continued. Recently, the government utilised a law, Article 51.1, on the mass media to ban the HRW website (HRW April 2022). HRW reports that the “...blocking comes days after HRW published a report documenting several apparent war crimes by Russian forces in the Ukraine...” (HRW April 2022) The deliberate blocking of a civil society website that specifically reports on human rights abuses is evidence of the continuing attacks on media reporting.

Belarus PoC Case Study

Hanna has been participating in the pro-democracy Belarusian movement in many forms since 2020. She volunteered as an independent observer at the election at a time where independent observers were being persecuted, detained, fined and forced to flee the country. She worked at PEN Belarus, and was a member of the Independent Belarusian Writers Union. Both organisations were shut down by the Supreme Court in 2021 and membership of these organisations has been considered a crime.



On 8 September 2020, Hanna was detained and spent 9 days in jail for participating in a peaceful demonstration in support of Maria Kalesnikava, an opposition politician who was arrested and sentenced to 11 years in prison.

“I have been outspoken about the situation in Belarus, writing poetry and essays about it, giving interviews and speaking at international events, and am continuing to do so. I have been continuously spreading information about the regime’s atrocities and the solidarity among the people of Belarus struggling for democracy. Any of my publications can be viewed as a reason for criminal charges against me, because we know about hundreds of such cases, and people have been imprisoned even for a single comment. In London, I have been one of the organisers of support for Belarus and Ukraine. I have participated in and helped organise demonstrations, pickets, fundraising campaigns. I can be found in the footage and am likely to be on the list of the Belarusian Embassy in London, who are working for the regime.”

Hanna has completed her studies at the University of Westminster, and is going on to read for a PhD in Brighton.

PoC awarded a grant for living and visa costs in 2022.

DRC

Grants in the last 10 years:	58	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRIC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Although President Tshisekedi made progress on human rights in 2019 and 2020, pardoning many prisoners of conscience and sanctioning the return of some political exiles, human rights defenders and journalists met with intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and detainment from the Congolese authorities, particularly in the Kasai region. In the period from 1st June 2019 to 31st May 2020 alone the OHCHR recorded 687 cases of arbitrary arrests, most of these for free speech crimes and peaceful protest and assembly (OHCHR, 2020). Political assembly is highly restricted with protests in support of opposition parties banned (Freedom House, 2020). Human rights advocates, in particular those working for NGOs, are subject to harassment, arbitrary arrest, and detention, especially during election periods. Union activity is similarly restricted with civil servants and members of state security forces banned from forming unions and violations of the procedures for a legal strike being punishable with prison.

Congolese authorities used the state of emergency measures temporarily imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic as a foil to curb peaceful demonstrations (HRW, 2020), in one case detaining 10 youth activists belonging to the group Lutte pour le Changement on bogus charges following their participation in a peaceful protest in December. Public gatherings were banned between March and July, with security forces using excessive force and arrests to disperse demonstrations.

HRW reported that dozens of people who criticized government policy on social media were threatened and beaten with several being arrested and prosecuted (HRW, 2020). Although press freedom is constitutionally guaranteed in the DRC, journalists criticising the government are met with criminal defamation suits, threats, violence, detention and arbitrary arrest. Since President Tshisekedi came to power, journalists have been harassed and jailed for covering the political activities of opposition leader Martin Fayulu (Freedom House, 2020). Journalists covering political protests are also arrested and detained (Freedom House, 2020). From May 2021 and throughout 2022, the DRC has used a 'State of Siege' to suppress the rights of civilians and human rights defenders alike. Amnesty International reports "...since the state of siege was first put into place...authorities are using military courts to prosecute state critics in unfair trials." (Amnesty May 2022) This has also led to a number of civilian deaths, despite that the initial aim of the state of siege was put in place under the guise of protecting civilian lives. Furthermore, Amnesty has reported that critics of the state of siege have been routinely silenced, "...human rights activists and MPs who have criticised the measure's legality, duration or effectiveness have been labelled 'enemies of the state' and been subjected to arbitrary arrest and prosecution – and in 2 cases documented killed." (Amnesty May 2022) The use of arbitrary arrests and military prosecution is a gross violation of individual civil liberties.

While homosexuality is technically legal in the DRC, in reality, LGBTQ people are prosecuted for same-sex relationships under public decency laws, usually when reported for public displays of affection. Abortion is illegal except to save the life of a pregnant mother, and people found guilty of having an abortion can be punished with lengthy prison sentences (Freedom House, 2020).



DRC PoC Case Study

Mamie was an assistant nurse and receptionist at a small private hospital in DRC. She was asked to poison a member of the opposition by a colleague, for which she would be paid well. She refused and was then abducted, beaten and raped over a period of 3 days.

In fear for her life, Mamie decided to flee to the UK and leave everything behind. She has been trying to bring her children to the UK, but the process has been slow and tedious. She has one biological daughter and four adopted children – her sister's children whom she adopted when her sister died.

PoC helped Mamie to cover the costs of her family reunion application in 2019. Since then only her biological child has been given an entry visa. The process for the adopted children has been slower but they were recently granted visas on appeal and are about to join the family. PoC awarded an additional grant to Mamie to help with the costs associated with their arrival.

ERITREA

Grants in the last 10 years:	74	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	N	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Despite being party to the ICCPR (OCHCR, 2020) the Eritrean government has for over 20 years failed to implement the 1997 constitution guaranteeing its citizens civil rights. Consequently, freedom of expression, assembly, movement and religion is not respected, with censorship, arbitrary arrest, detention without trial and torture systematic and pervasive. Mass roundups and arbitrary arrests as well as the detention of journalists and human rights defenders without trial are commonplace in Eritrea. Prisoners are detained in unhygienic and overcrowded prisons with families rarely being informed of their whereabouts (HRW, 2021). Many victims of the September 2001 government crackdown on critics of

President Isaias Afwerki, including 16 journalists and 11 members of the G-15, remain held incommunicado in secret locations having never received trials (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). Freedom House estimates that thousands of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience remain detained without charges or trials, but the exact number is unknown due to state censorship and a ban on human rights organisations entering the country (Freedom House, 2020).

Eritrea, which only recognises four religions, regularly tortures and detains adherents of 'unrecognized' faiths if they refuse to renounce their religious beliefs. The government continues to detain 345 church leaders without trial or charge, with estimates of detained laity ranging from 800 to over 1,000 (Freedom House, 2020). This includes 52 Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors to Eritrea's compulsory military service (Freedom House, 2020).

Eritrea persecutes members of the LGBTQ community, having long criminalised homosexual relationships. The 2015 penal code established a new regulation which mandates five to seven years imprisonment for those engaging in gay sex (HRW, 2021). Abortion is illegal in Eritrea and punishable with between three months and five years' imprisonment (WHO, 2018).

Eritrean refugees who are repatriated from other countries are almost always detained without trial (Freedom House, 2020) and the organisation HRCE has reported that Eritrean refugees from Tigray, Ethiopia, have been forcibly returned and detained by Eritrean soldiers in considerable numbers (HRCE, 2020).

In 2022, Amnesty International reported that arbitrary arrests have still continued in Eritrea, which has increased with the country's involvement in the conflict in Tigray. It has been reported that the Eritrean Defence Forces, "...members of the EDF as well as Ethiopian security forces and militia, committed human rights violations, including sexual violence...and extrajudicial killings." (Amnesty International Report 2020/21).

Eritrea PoC Case Study

Hyab is a professionally trained psycho-social caseworker from Eritrea with a long list of impressive accomplishments. His problems with the regime started when he began working in the



Ministry of Education, where he was forced to work in an open-ended national service imposed by the ruling party. There, he was required to engage in the government's political propaganda against his will. Hyab, however, wasn't willing to compromise and suppress his beliefs. Instead, he criticised the government's policy towards minority groups and his critical views were interpreted as an opposition to government policy.

Following his actions he experienced excessive punishment in Sawa military camp and detention. He was consequently denied the opportunity to take up a Masters degree, lost his job, and was sent to a remote school with little pay. When he was about to be detained a second time he escaped.

For a few years Hyab lived in Sudan and then Egypt, but he was still at risk, as persecution by the authorities and intimidation by human traffickers followed him there. He was eventually safely resettled in the UK, where he received indefinite leave to remain.

“One of the main problems I encountered after being forced to flee was the lack of physical protection and lack a safe space for an emotional recovery from the trauma experienced. In addition, financial difficulties made it hard to cover basic needs such as food, water and clothes. The lack of a safe space and inability to cover basic needs leads to inability to pursue one's dreams, as surviving becomes the priority.”

Hyab received a bursary grant from PoC in 2016 which helped him pursue an MA in Migration and Diaspora Studies from SOAS University, graduating with a Distinction.

“The PoC grant made a huge difference in my life, it was a stepping stone for me to pursue my dreams. It opened for me a gate to quality education in a time of austerity against refugees. Because of the stringent policies against refugees, I found it very difficult to fully exercise my full potential and contribute to society in the best way I can. But with the bursary, I managed to circumvent these unpleasant realities...It's not only about pursuing your dreams, but the ability to be able to engage in life long ambitions

also has healing effects from the trauma that I have experienced before that, so that was one of the things that I value the most, it created a sense of self-worth, a sense of being in a safe space where I can exercise my rights as a dignified human being, so that was one of the things that empowered me the most.”

After completing his degree Hyab started working full time at the Refugee Education Training Advice Service (RETAS) until he moved to Glasgow to pursue a PhD on the plight of Eritrean refugees at the University of Glasgow. He has completed his PhD and is employed as a Research Associate and continuing his humanitarian work.

ETHIOPIA

Grants in the last 10 years:	78	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

In November 2020 the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, ordered troops to be deployed to the Tigray region as a “...targeted operation against regional leaders in Tigray after failed cease-fire operations,” (Center for Preventative Action May 2022). This marked the beginning of escalating conflict against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which has led to widespread violence and arbitrary arrests of civilians in the region (Amnesty International May 2022). HRW has reported that gross human rights violations have arisen from the conflict. The organisation reports that the Ethiopian government has “...imposed communication restriction throughout Tigray and obstructed the efforts of independent investigators, journalists, and humanitarian workers...” (HRW June 2022). This limitation on freedom of speech has been detrimental to investigations into crimes against humanity in the region. Despite this, HRW has found there has been the ethnic cleansing of civilians by the Ethiopian forces and Tigrayan militia. (HRW June 2022). The 2021/22 Amnesty International report on Ethiopia documents the atrocities committed against civilians in the region. In particular, it reports on the murder of over 40 civilians in Bora Town, Tigray, among whom included “...farmers, civil servants and students.” (Amnesty International Report 2021/2022). There has also been widespread sexual violence against women in the region, with an estimation of “hundreds of women and girls” (International Report

20/21) being subject to extreme sexual violence from the ENDF, TPLF, Amhara Police Special Forces and Fano. This evidences crimes against humanity being committed by both sides in the Tigray conflict.

In November 2021, the government announced a state of emergency (Amnesty International November 2021), which permits authorities to “...arrest and detain anyone without a warrant if there is ‘reasonable suspicion’ of cooperation with ‘terrorist groups’ and detain them.” (Amnesty International Nov 2021). This declaration means there is a very high risk of arbitrary arrests being made under the pretences of reasonable suspicion. Amnesty’s director for East and Southern Africa, Deprose Muchena, has said that individuals detained “...have not been charged or brought before a court...” (Nov 2021). The restrictions on the press as well as the increase of arbitrary arrests means there is likely a high number of prisoners of conscience currently being detained in Ethiopia. HRW reports that a number of people have been murdered while in the custody of the Amhara Security Forces, with “...hundreds, possibly thousands, of Tigrayans in overcrowded facilities, where detainees have been killed, tortured and denied adequate food and medical care.” (HRW June 2022).

It is clear that the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has led to numerous gross violations of human rights, including arbitrary arrests and detainment, extrajudicial killings and sexual violence against women and girls.

Ethiopia PoC Case Study



Sumur is a journalist, political activist and political commentator from Ethiopia, an ethnic Tigrayan. In 2016, Sumur, along with other Tigrayans, were forced to leave the Amhara region and their properties were seized. In 2021, he was arrested for writing about the civil war in Ethiopia and exercising his freedom of speech, and spent 3 months in a makeshift prison where he was physically and mentally abused.

He was accused of being a spy for the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), allegations that Sumur has denied. Upon his release,

his bank accounts were frozen, his belongings (phone, camera, laptop etc) were confiscated, and he was threatened not to post anything on any media outlets or social media platforms, as he would be arrested again.

He therefore decided to flee from Ethiopia to Uganda with financial help from his friends. Sumur is trying to obtain a refugee card and to relocate to a safe third country where he can do his job without fearing for his life. However, he has continued to suffer persecution in Uganda - including threats and intimidation.

“There is no promising change in my life. I am still worried about my safety here in Kampala. I have to still watch my back after the threats I received for the story I wrote for Mada Masr and for the interview I did with VOA about my detention. I am continuously receiving threats here in person and online. I also believe that the Ethiopian authorities learn that I have a video of the concentration camp they were holding us in and have agents here in Kampala. Consequently, I don’t feel secure here in Kampala. I am also financially struggling to survive. I also am worried about my family who I had to leave behind that were financially dependent on me. Getting hold of the refugee ID will definitely help facilitate my relocation to a third country where I can function on my full potential and be a productive member of a society without worrying about my safety.”

PoC awarded a grant in 2022 for hardship needs.

IRAN

Grants in the last 10 years:	149	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	N	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	N	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Authorities detained at least 20 people who protested against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps destruction of a Ukrainian airliner in January 2020, including particularly harsh judgements for Bahareh Hedayat and Mehdi Mahmoudian who tweeted about the protest and were sentenced to four years and eight months and five years in prison, respectively (HRW, 2021). In March 2020 four civil rights activists, who signed a 2019 letter petitioning Ayatollah Khamenei to resign, were sentenced to 16, 15, 6, and 3 years

imprisonment, respectively. In February 2020, Iran’s court of appeal handed down prison sentences ranging from 4 to 10 years for eight members of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, on the bogus charge of ‘collaborating with the hostile state of the US’.

Torture by police and prison guards is rampant in Iranian prisons and Iranian courts regularly allow the use of confessions obtained during torture as evidence against human rights defenders and routinely deny detainees’ access to lawyers. According to reports, 300 of the 7000 demonstrators arrested following the protests of November 2019 remain imprisoned and incommunicado (OCHCR, 2020). According to UN SR’s annual report, these detainees are being ‘flogged and beaten daily, by hand and with batons, while handcuffed and blindfolded’ and have been tortured into giving confessions of guilt with torture include beatings with batons and electric shocks (OCHCR, 2020). One activist, Mr. Moradi was ‘held in solitary confinement for one month, during which time he was physically abused, shocked with an electric prod, suffered broken ribs and threatened with more solitary confinement’ (OCHCR, 2020). According to the CPJ, Iran detained 15 journalists in 2021, having detained 10 in 2020 for anti-state or blasphemy crimes and 5 without charge or trial (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021).

In Iran one can be given the death penalty for insulting the prophet, apostasy, same-sex relations, adultery and drinking alcohol (HRW, 2020). Authorities regularly prosecute women for ‘morality crimes’ including not wearing Islamic dress. They have also prosecuted countless women’s rights activists including Yasaman Ariayi, Saba Kordafshari, and Farhad Meysami for participating in peaceful protests against Iran’s compulsory hijab laws. Iran has no laws in place to protect women from spousal rape and domestic violence, and consensual sexual relationships outside marriage are criminalised and punished by flogging, leaving female rape victims at risk of prosecution if they report their rapist to the police and the authorities do not believe them. As a result, hundreds of women are arrested every year for consensual sex outside of marriage as well as being raped (HRW, 2021). Iran frequently detains members of minority religions for openly practising their faith, particularly members of the Baha’i faith and those who have converted from Islam to Christianity or another faith, prosecuting them on bogus charges of endangering national security or committing propaganda against the state (HRW, 2021).

In May 2022, there were reports of arrests being made of protesters in Iran. HRW reports that the Iranian authorities have “... arrested several prominent activists on baseless accusations...” Furthermore, HRW reports, “Those arrested include a prominent sociologist and four labour rights defenders...” (HRW May 2022). This evidences that there is a real risk of human rights defenders being persecuted by the authorities for exercising their freedom of assembly to protest. There has also been a crackdown on freedom of expression in Iran, with introduction of the new and controversial “Regulatory System for Cyberspace Services Bill”. This bill has the aim to “...erode online anonymity while criminalising VPNs...essential tools for circumventing online censorship.” (Atlantic Council, April 2022). The implementation of a bill with this tight control on the usage of online spaces could cause a considerable chilling effect on freedom of expression in Iran.



Iran PoC Case Study

Sahar is an Iranian singer, music producer, writer, and activist. She focuses on themes of peace, human rights and women’s rights. In 2019, she became the first Iranian to win the international WILD sound Poetry Festival with her poem “Censorship,” which focuses on women’s rights.

Due to her work and activism, Sahar began receiving calls from a private number, which she believed to be from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. Her bank account was blocked at the same time with no warning.

In September 2021 Intelligence Services called her family and asked Sahar to appear for a summons. Her family’s bank accounts were then blocked. Sahar went into hiding and moved between safe houses for two months, seeking avenues to leave the country.

In October, fearing for her safety if she stayed in Iran, Sahar crossed the border to Iraq and began living in Erbil on a temporary visa. She has been living in a hotel but has no money since her bank accounts

are still blocked. Sahar is at risk of eviction and cannot pay for basic living expenses. PoC awarded hardship relief grants to Sahar in 2022.

“I would like to thank Prisoners of Conscience from the bottom of my heart to supporting me & also turned the light of hope for me. Your kind consideration is highly appreciated.”

KENYA

Grants in the last 10 years:	18	Number of prisoners of conscience:	L LOW	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Kenyan authorities used the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to put down protests. The authorities violently dispersed a political meeting of opposition MPs in Kakamega County in June 2020 and broke up a peaceful protest on a Sabada day (KHRC, 2020) by arresting 57 human rights defenders and throwing tear gas cannisters into the crowd. Efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 further resulted in human rights abuses by state security agencies. Authorities enforced a curfew with violence, kidnapping, arrests, and extrajudicial executions. Several bloggers and social media users were arrested for allegedly disseminating false information about the coronavirus pandemic online (Freedom House, 2020).

Amnesty’s 2021 Report highlights the arrest of activist Edwin Mutemi for “...criticising on Twitter government borrowing” (Amnesty International Report 2021/22). Mutemi was later released and not charged, but this shows the use of arbitrary arrests being made against human rights defenders.

Kenya sporadically detains LGBTQ people, with same-sex relations being punishable by up to 14 years in prison and sex between men specifically being prosecutable with 21 years’ imprisonment (UK Home Office, 2020). The Kenyan police regularly arrest LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers under public order laws. There have also been reports of harassment, blackmail, intimidation, and physical and sexual abuse of queer people by police in custody (UK Home Office, 2020). Abortion, other than in cases where the life or health of the mother is in danger, are illegal in Kenya and punishable with seven years’ imprisonment (WHO, 2017).



Kenya PoC Case Study

Herbert is a journalist and human rights defender from Kenya. He was forced to flee his home after exposing police violence and human rights violations. Some of his colleagues were killed and he was detained and tortured. He escaped to Uganda but was still being pursued until he was given permanent residency in Sweden.

Herbert has completed various short courses in journalism, development and human rights in both Sweden and Costa Rica. PoC awarded bursary grants in 2020 and 2021 to complete an online Master’s programme at University of Leicester – Human Rights and Global Ethics.

“The assistance by PoC meant that I took a big step in improving career possibilities and I still do not know how I would have achieved this without the PoC grants. Thank you very much and keep doing what you are doing. You change lives and give hope to the hopeless.”

MYANMAR/BURMA

Grants in the last 10 years: 400+ <small>Thanks to the dedicated funding from a charitable trust</small>	Number of prisoners of conscience: H <small>HIGH</small>	CAT: N	CRC: Y	ICERD: N
		CEDAW: Y	CRPD: Y	ICESCR: Y
		CPED: N	ICCPR: N	ICMW: N

In an October 2021 address to the UN General Assembly, the UN Special Rapporteur to Myanmar drew attention to the military coup in the country which has “...devastated Myanmar, plunging it into a deep human rights, humanitarian, and economic crisis.” (OHCHR 2021). In February 2021, Myanmar was subject to a military coup d’état, where the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) were deposed, and the military declared a year-long state of emergency (BBC News 2021). Already heavily restricted freedom of expression and freedom of assembly have been severely affected following the military coup. Journalists, human rights defenders and civilians

alike have been subject to extreme violence, arbitrary arrests and torture. In one case, in May 2021, the poet Khet Thi was kidnapped “...forcibly taken from his home in the Sagaing region by junta forces” and was tortured to death (PEN International 2021). The special rapporteur to Myanmar has reported that there have been an estimated 1100 civilians murdered, over 8000 people detained arbitrarily and 100 journalists detained for reporting on the events of the military coup (OHCHR 2021). There have been reports that the violence in Myanmar escalated throughout 2021, with an estimated 12,000 people killed in the conflict arising from the military coup, and increasing violence involving civilian resistance to the military powers (BBC News 2022).

Laws in Myanmar heavily restrict freedom of the press. The Special Rapporteur to Myanmar reports that misuse of section 66 (d) of the Telecommunications Act, which is intended to protect reputation, has led to the criminalisation of freedom of expression (SR Report 2017). The report also found that the law allows for arbitrary arrests to be made without warrant, which includes charges made against 18 journalists (SR Report 2017). It has also been noted multiple times by the UN that the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act is not in alignment with international standards (SR Report 2017) and thus threatens individuals’ right to assembly.

Since 1982, the Rohingya people in Myanmar have been denied citizenship (HRW 2020) and in recent years have been subject to a systemic imprisonment, exile and violence from the State. The UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights has reported that it “...appears that widespread and systemic violence against the Rohingya persists” (UN News 2018). Witnesses interviewed in the UN’s fact finding report described “...security forces shooting indiscriminately at Rohingya and conducting mass arbitrary arrests, including of Rohingya workers from non-governmental organisations” (HRC Fact Finding Report 2018). The violence against the Rohingya people by the Burmese state is systemic and a gross violation of their human rights. In Myanmar, there is active discrimination against several minority groups. The LGBTQ community in Myanmar is criminalised, with reports of LGBTQ persons being threatened with criminal prosecution for purposes of extortion (Human Dignity Trust 2017). Reports suggest that transgender women are most frequently targeted and charged under ‘shadow and disguise laws’ (Human Dignity Trust 2017).

Recently, there have been reports of the restriction of the right to peaceful protest in Myanmar. Amnesty reports, “Activists and human rights defenders...described witnessing or experiencing abuses by military forces while demonstrating, including shootings, beatings, and attempts to ram vehicles into protests.” (Amnesty International April 2022) There is a clear stifling of the right to free speech and right to assembly across Myanmar and there has been no clear evidence of improvement of the situation in 2022. PEN International’s 2021 Freedom to Write Index, found that Myanmar arrested 26 writers, the third highest on the Index. Furthermore, The Guardian reports that the majority of these writers are imprisoned without charge (The Guardian April 2022).

Through these sources we estimate that Myanmar has a high number of prisoners of conscience. Due to the current conflict and violence against civilians, journalists and human rights defenders, the number of prisoners of conscience should be presumed to be higher than usual in Myanmar.

Myanmar/Burma PoC Case Study

Yuzana (a pseudonym) is a writer, surgeon and a founding member of PEN Myanmar. She is a dedicated and committed activist who has received numerous awards in recognition of her work, including during her time in detention. She has stood out as ‘a leader of strong principles’.



In the early 1990’s, she was sentenced to 20 years in prison for ‘endangering public peace, having contact with illegal organisations and distributing unlawful literature’ in connection with her role as a campaigns assistant for the National League of Democracy (NLD).

She was detained in one of Myanmar’s most infamous prisons, during which time she was denied access to necessary medical care. After almost six years in detention, Yuzana was finally released on humanitarian grounds, because of her declining health and international pressure.

In the wake of the military coup on 1 February 2021, PEN Myanmar have been continuing to monitor and share information about developments on the ground with the international community,

despite significant risks to their own safety and liberty. Several members of PEN Myanmar are among those to have been detained in the months since the coup, and four poets are among the hundreds of unarmed civilians to have been killed.

Following concerns for her safety, Yuzana has now been forced to leave her native Myanmar and seek refuge in another country. She has been admitted as a research scholar in one of the world’s most renowned universities. Prisoners of Conscience was able to help Yuzana in 2021 to cover her flights and basic living costs while she is away from home.

PAKISTAN

Grants in the last 10 years:	113	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Article 19 of Pakistan’s constitution establishes the right to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. However, in practice, journalists, human rights defenders and political activists are heavily censored with speech or writing which criticises ‘the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan’ (Freedom House, 2020) being criminalised. In September 2020, the Federal Investigation Agency investigated at least 12 journalists and activists accused of violating the Electronic Crimes Act. Amidst this crackdown, several high-profile journalists including Bilal Farooqi, Asad Ali Toor and Absar Alam were arrested following their criticising of the government on social media, the latter two being charged for ‘sedition’ and ‘high treason’. In April 2021, the New York Times reported that Absar Alam was shot and injured in an attack that was condemned by the government. However, “...just two days before, he posted tweets accusing the country’s powerful intelligence chief, Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, of pressuring him in 2017 to feature critical coverage of the previous government.” (NYT April 2021). National and international NGOs also reported a rise in harassment and surveillance from government authorities as well as an increase in the arbitrary arrest and detainment of human rights defenders (Freedom House, 2021).

Pakistan continued its crackdown on political opposition following an alliance by leading political opponents. In September Shahbaz

Sharif, a leader of the opposition, and former President Asif Ali Zardari were indicted in Islamabad on politically motivated money laundering charges, while former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was charged the next month with sedition.

The Pakistani government continues to enforce blasphemy laws, the penalty for these being execution, which leave religious minorities, especially Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims, vulnerable to arbitrary arrest and prosecution. In September 2021, Asif Pervaiz, a Christian was sentenced to death for allegedly sending a blasphemous text and 40 people remain on death row for blasphemy offences (HRW, 2021). The Pakistani penal code criminalises ‘posing as a Muslim’, a decree widely viewed as a pretext for persecuting members of the Ahmadi community, an Islamic sect considered heretical by many mainstream Muslims. Christians, who make up 2.5% of Pakistan’s population, face arrest and conviction under the state’s blasphemy laws in addition to violence, rape, forced conversion, abduction, land seizure, assault and murder, which frequently goes unchecked by Pakistani authorities. According to an OHCHR report, around 1000 Christian and Hindu women and girls are kidnapped and forced to convert and marry Muslim men each year (OHCHR, 2020), with Pakistan’s courts in some cases overturning legal challenges to these marriages and forcing the victims to return to their families under threat of detainment (UK Home Office, 2021). Gay sex is criminalised in Pakistan. The Pakistani penal code punishes ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’, which is punishable with imprisonment for two years to life and refers to sex between two or more men (Home Office, 2019). Zina, which is punishable by death under sharia law, criminalises any type of sex outside of marriage, essentially criminalising sex between women. However, there are few cases of the law being used in practice, in part because the standard for conviction requires at least four [male] eyewitnesses or a confession (Home Office, 2019).



Pakistan PoC Case Study

Weran (a pseudonym) is from the Ahmadi community in Pakistan where they are routinely discriminated against. For Weran, being treated as a second-class citizen was part of everyday life.

“We have faced discrimination at every point – whether it is doing business or purchasing something, behaviours change once they find out that we are Ahmadi.”

However, she had no wish to leave Pakistan until her husband, a leading figure in the local Ahmadi community, came under attack. When an angry mob surrounded his office, he realised the family was in danger and made preparations to flee to the UK.

In Pakistan Weran was an architect and lecturer at the University of Punjab. The route to re-qualifying in the UK with RIBA was prohibitively expensive, so Weran decided to study Urban Design, a field that uses many of the same skills and in which it is easier to secure employment. PoC awarded a bursary grant in 2016.

“It’s never easy to start your life from scratch in a new country. The organisations like PoC are acting as a life-line for people like us helping them building their lives again.”

RWANDA

Grants in the last 10 years:	20	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT: Y	CEDAW: Y	CPED: N	CRC: Y	CRPD: Y	ICCPR: Y	ICERD: Y	ICESCR: Y	ICMW: Y
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A 2020 Human Rights Council report found that ‘civil and political rights remain severely stifled’ in Rwanda and accused the government of perpetrating ‘intimidation, torture, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances against political activists, dissidents, opposition, journalists and human rights defenders (OCHRC, 2020). Members of various opposition parties and coalitions have been arrested or disappeared, including the high profile government critic, Paul Rusesabagina. Seven members of the Dalfa-Umurinzi opposition party were arrested and handed sentences from seven to ten years’ imprisonment on trumped up charges of joining an ‘irregular armed force’ (HRW, 2021). Freedom of assembly and association is not respected in Rwanda and police have been known to violently disperse and illegally arrest demonstrators.

Journalists and bloggers are heavily censored in Rwanda, facing disappearance and arrest for speaking out against the government.

In March 2021, four bloggers reporting on rape by government security forces and the government’s pandemic response were arrested in retaliation for their criticism (HRW, 2021). In April, the Rwandan government ordered a spate of arrests on journalists critical of the government, that ended in seven of them being detained under the pretext of breaking covid restrictions (OCHRC, 2020). While the penal code revisions passed in 2018 made progress by decriminalising defamation, it also criminalised cartoons and writing that ‘humiliate’ Rwandan leaders which continue to impact freedom of speech and the press (Freedom House, 2020). Social media is also heavily censored. A 2018 cybersecurity law inflicts up to five years’ imprisonment for those publishing ‘rumours that may incite fear, insurrection, or violence... or that may make a person lose their credibility’. Moreover, anyone who ‘establishes, publishes, or uses a site of a terrorist group’ faces imprisonment of 15 to 20 years. As the government labels most exiled opposition parties as ‘terrorist groups’ this is used to further censor opposition activity (Freedom House, 2020).

Rwanda regularly illegally arrests and arbitrarily detains children and adolescents, particularly homeless youth despite being party to the CRC. A 2017 law which states that anyone displaying ‘deviant behaviours’ in public can be detained for up to two months without further legal justification is used as a pretext for authorities to arbitrarily round up and detain children in transit centres (HRW, 2020).

While Rwanda released 50 women jailed for having abortions in 2020, abortion remains illegal except in cases of underage pregnancy, rape, forced marriage, incest or where the life and health of the mother is in danger, with many people being at risk of life imprisonment for undertaking an abortion (WHO, 2019). While freedom of religion is generally respected in Rwanda, Jehovah’s Witnesses face arrest for refusing security duties or oath-taking containing the Rwandan flag (Freedom House, 2020).

In 2022, there have been renewed human rights concerns for refugees in Rwanda. In April, the United Kingdom created an asylum deal with Rwanda. This essentially means that refugees seeking asylum in the UK may be sent to Rwanda to be processed. This policy gives rise to a number of human rights concerns, with HRW condemning offshore processing as “...not only cruel and

ineffective, but also very unlikely to be unlawful.” (HRW April 2022). LGBTQ+ refugees who face processing in Rwanda are also at risk of persecution. The Independent reports that “The Home Office has admitted that LGBT+ refugees who are deported to Rwanda could be persecuted on the basis of sexual orientation – but it plans to send them there anyway.” (The Independent May 2022). This serious risk to LGBTQ+ people is a gross violation of their human rights.



Rwanda PoC Case Study

Eric is a journalist, human rights defender and a father of four from Rwanda. He was routinely harassed by state agents for critically reporting on the government’s socio-economic policies and fighting for justice, press freedom and democracy in Rwanda. When Eric was warned that his life was in danger for expressing his views, he decided to flee to neighbouring Uganda with his family.

But threats and intimidation followed them there. With no source of income, Eric was struggling to provide food, water, clothing, and medicine for his family. PoC contributed towards living costs while they were in hiding in 2016 and 2017 and towards his subsequent travel costs until he and his family reached safe refuge in Australia through UNHCR after 4 years and 2 months.

“After getting to Australia, the task was to build our life independently... I decided to start studies again from zero. It was a very hard task to combine family responsibilities with studying in the new country with the new / different culture.”

While it was a huge adjustment for them all, they are embracing their new life with optimism and determination. The children are at school and Eric was recently awarded his Diploma of Nursing, after completing his studies and a clinical placement. His next steps are to further his career prospects by obtaining a bachelor’s degree in Nursing and become a registered nurse.

SUDAN

Grants in the last 10 years:	160	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Protests opposing the slowness of the new Sudanese government to implement promised political reform are brutally repressed. On August 17th 2020, the one-year anniversary of the power-sharing deal, protesters were dispersed with tear gas and whips with many arrests taking place (HRW, 2021) and in September artists were sentenced to two months' imprisonment for shouting pro-democracy chants (HRW, 2020). Members of the resistance committees who organized the protests were detained throughout 2020 for their activism (OHCHR, 2020). In Kutum, North Darfur, government forces dispersed a peaceful protest by beating, arresting, and detaining its organisers (HRW, 2021). Opposition activists and officials of the al-Bashir's former government were held for prolonged periods of arbitrary detention (Amnesty International, 2021). The Sudanese government also passed a law which cracked down on the freedom of speech of medical workers, stipulating that 'publishing misleading or incorrect information that affects the performance of medical personnel can be punishable with imprisonment for up to 10 years' (OCHR, 2020). The government arbitrarily detained ethnic minorities and immigrants on national security charges. Throughout 2020 they detained several members of the Mahamid Arab tribe for alleged links with Musa Hilal, the former pro-government militia leader and in June they arrested 122 migrants during counter-migration operations in Darfur on bogus charges of looting, illegal migration, and illegal possession of firearms (HRW 2021).

The interim constitution settled in August 2019 guarantees freedom of the press and freedom of expression. However, the Sudanese government has continued to crack down on free speech online by revising the 2007 Cybercrimes Act, increasing the penalties for disseminating 'false news' and 'indecent materials' and appointing a special commissioner to arrest those who insult the military online (HRW, 2021). Social media users are also targeted for criticising the government online. In April 2020, Edriss Elbur was arrested and detained for two days by the RSF, a Sudanese government

paramilitary group, after he criticized them on Facebook (Freedom House, 2020).

In October 2021, Sudan was taken over by the Sudanese military in a coup. Amnesty International reports that as a result there have been a number of human rights violations. Notably, there has been reported use of "excessive, and sometimes lethal force against protesters" (Amnesty International 2021/22), with at least two protestors killed in May 2021 in Khartoum. There has also been a number of arbitrary arrests made of the opposition political party members, who were held without charge or legal representation. Members of the opposition were released as reported by Amnesty, although the impact on the freedom of expression is clear.

While the interim government removed execution and lashing as a punishment for same sex relations, LGBTQ Sudanese people are at risk of imprisonment if accused of having same sex relationships (HRW, 2021). Abortion is illegal in all cases save when a mother's life is in danger or pregnancy borne from rape or incest, and is punishable with up to six years imprisonment (WHO, 2020). Women reporting rape and sexual assault risk arrest and execution under Sudan's strict adultery laws (Freedom House, 2020).

Sudan PoC Case Study



Aliyah (a pseudonym) is a pharmacist from Sudan. She and her husband were members of a small group of medical practitioners who offered a mobile clinic in areas where there were no medical facilities. Aliyah and her husband volunteered in the clinic as they believed that everybody is entitled to healthcare, irrespective of wealth or resources.

During their work, Aliyah and her husband had contact with the main Sudanese opposition group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), but were not supporters of the group. In line with their beliefs, they did not turn away JEM members in need of assistance, as they believed that access to healthcare is a basic human right. They were health workers in an area of civil unrest, treating people under difficult circumstances. Aliyah and her husband were detained as a

result of their supposed involvement with the group and eventually forced to flee Sudan for the UK.

When they arrived in the UK in 2017, PoC contributed towards their daughter’s nursery fees, while Aliyah completed her MSc in Pharmaceutical Technology. She graduated with Distinction. With the help of PoC, she is now completing her PhD in Pharmacy.

“I feel truly grateful for the support of PoC. Without the bursary I simply couldn’t have completed my studies, so I want to say a huge thanks to the Prisoners of Conscience team and the donors. The PhD will help with my future employment. Your generosity inspired me to help other students to achieve their goals as you helped me.”

TURKEY

Grants in the last 10 years:	26	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	Y

Six years after the attempted coup in 2016, terrorism laws continue to be misused to restrict free speech and political opposition. Journalists, Kurds, opposition politicians and political activists, particularly members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, are frequently detained on bogus charges of terrorism and other sham allegations. Defence lawyers representing human rights defenders have faced arrest and prosecution on the same charges as their clients. In September 2020, the Court of Cassation upheld the sentencing of 14 lawyers for links with an outlawed leftist group, one of whom, Ebru Timtik, died following a prolonged hunger strike protesting his unfair trial (HRW, 2020). In July 2021, Turkey’s Ministry of Justice opened investigations against members of both the Izmir and Istanbul Bar Association for “insulting religious values” (Amnesty International Report 2021/22). Confessions extracted by torture are also frequently presented as evidence in court (Council of Europe, 2020). In July 2020, the Ministry of Justice and Interior released figures that revealed that 58,409 people were on trial and 132,954 still under criminal investigation on terrorism cases related to the 2016 coup, including human rights defenders Taner Kılıç, Özlem Dalkıran and Günal Kurşun. Of those under investigation, 25,912 were still being held in pre-trial detention (HRW, 2021)

including Osman Kavala, despite the ECHR ordering his release (HRW, 2020). The Kurdish opposition politician, Selahattin Demirtaş, continues to be held in detention on politically motivated charges and HDP members and leaders, whom the government has accused of being in cahoots with the militant Kurdistan Workers Party, continued to be arrested throughout 2020 (Freedom House, 2021).

The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that 37 journalists and media workers were held in pre-trial detention or were serving sentences for terrorism offence, a disproportionate number of these being Kurdish (HRW, 2021). Meanwhile thousands of ordinary Turkish citizens are arrested and prosecuted on defamation charges, in particular for insulting President Erdoğan on social media (HRW, 2020).

Although freedom of assembly is guaranteed in Turkish law, in reality gatherings of government critics and other political activists are heavily restricted with police using violence and the arrest of organisers to break up protests. In 2020, a group of 20 students from Boğaziçi University were sentenced to 10 months in prison for a campus protest against Turkey’s military actions in Syria and meetings held by Saturday Mothers, a group that protests forced disappearances, were dispersed by police and participants arrested (Freedom House, 2021). Trade union and NGO leaders face routine harassment, arrest, and prosecutions for carrying out their work, most notably former Amnesty International Turkey chair Taner Kılıç, who was falsely charged with aiding a terrorist organization in July (Freedom House, 2021).

As the Covid-19 crisis threatened the government’s reputation, authorities launched criminal investigations against medical professionals who released information about the pandemic or criticised the government’s response (Freedom House, 2020). Hundreds of social media users were investigated or arrested for spreading ‘fear and panic’ about the pandemic online, in particular for criticising the government’s pandemic response (HRW, 2020).

Turkey PoC Case Study

Aysegul is a judge from Turkey, who has degrees in law and economics and dedicated her life to education and building her career from an early age. After the failed coup in 2016 – which killed 250 people

and left more than 2,000 injured, she felt she had no option but to leave the country and make a new, safe life elsewhere. More than 100,000 public officials were sacked, suspended or arrested, following the coup, including judges.

Aysegul and her husband, who was also a judge, were on a list uncovered by the Turkish regime. Arrest warrants were issued for all on the list – leaving the family with a huge decision to make – surrender to the authorities or flee overseas. Although there was no evidence of wrongdoing on their part, Aysegul and her family decided to run. But that meant they lost their home, car and possessions, their bank accounts were frozen and their passports seized, leaving them with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

But as they started their escape, Aysegul’s husband was stopped and arrested. The rest of the family were travelling separately, and managed to escape. Aysegul’s husband was sentenced to eight years in prison simply for being an opponent to the ruling government. That was when their long journey began, starting out without documents, but with a conviction that the UK would be a safe place to rebuild the family’s life. As the family began to settle in the UK, Aysegul felt that she needed assistance to requalify and pursue her ambition in law. PoC helped her transfer her legal qualification by partly funding the Graduate Diploma in Law in 2020 and subsequently an LLM.

Now on the journey to being qualified as a solicitor, Aysegul is determined to stand on her own feet. She wants to be able to make a contribution to the UK and help those in need – showing gratitude to the country she now calls home.

“I have always believed that if you want something, you need to work for it as it won’t just be handed to you. I am very proud of what I have achieved so far and still will work very, and to be a judge in the future. I am totally sure that I have the dedication required to succeed and get back on my feet. That’s why I am extremely honoured to get the opportunity PoC has given me to study my course to be qualified as a lawyer.”



UZBEKISTAN

Grants in the last 10 years:	7	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	Y	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	N	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	N	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

The Uzbek government announced it intended to decriminalise defamation and insult in January 2020. However, according to HRW, activists and journalists continue to be detained on these charges. Journalist Vladimir Kaloshin was sentenced to 12 years in prison on bogus treason charges and subjected to psychological torture including threats against his family while security services also continue to threaten and detain perceived government critics on treason charges (HRW, 2020). While over 50 prisoners held on politically motivated charges, including human rights defender, Chuyan Mamatkulov, and hundreds of people held for practising Islam outside of state guidelines have been freed since 2016, many of these former prisoners have yet to be legally rehabilitated, meaning they retain criminal records. In November 2019, the United Nations Committee Against Torture found torture to be widespread in Uzbekistan, with confessions extracted by torture routinely used as evidence in court, a situation that did not improve in 2020, with the OCHCR concluding that ‘torture and ill-treatment of people deprived of liberty, as well as restrictions on the freedom of conscience and religious belief, freedom of expression’ was still a grave problem in its April 2020 review (OCHCR, 2020).

Despite provisions for freedom of assembly and association in Uzbekistan’s constitution, authorities restrict political gatherings in practice, dispersing virtually all unsanctioned demonstrations and gatherings and detaining the participants (Freedom House, 2020). This was further cemented in law in August 2020 when new legislation on public meetings further restricted the right to freedom of peaceful assembly by barring NGOs without official registration from organising or holding public meetings, demanding organisers apply for permission 15 days in advance and restricting public meetings to two-hour slots during the day (Amnesty International, 2020).

Thousands of peaceful religious believers remain in prison on false charges, held on indictments of religious ‘extremism’ and other politically motivated charges (HRW, 2020). Religious freedom is

harshly limited in Uzbekistan. While the Uzbek government permits some approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations to operate in the country, unregistered religious activity is criminalised (Freedom House, 2020). Members of these illegal denominations have faced arrest, and even torture, usually accused of belonging to or founding religious organisations, the trials for these offenses being secretive and closed to the public. Muslims outwardly expressing religious belief by wearing hijab or growing beards are monitored by police. Freedom House estimates that there are between 1,500 to 5,000 religious’ prisoners in Uzbekistan.

Same-sex relations between men are criminalised in Uzbekistan, carrying a sentence of one to three years. A HRW report found that gay men in Uzbekistan were vulnerable to ‘arbitrary arrests, threats, extortion, psychological pressure, and physical attacks’ by police (HRW, 2021).

Uzbekistan PoC Case Study



Nafosat is a blogger from Uzbekistan. Her blogs were critical of public authorities, including allegations of corruption and illegal demolitions. Because of her work, Nafosat was detained and charged with violations including petty hooliganism and participating in unauthorized assemblies. The prosecutor’s office alleged that Nafosat was exhibiting abnormal psychiatric behaviour, claiming that she has a mental disorder, and asked

the court to place her under psychiatric care. She was detained in a psychiatric facility for over 3 months, where she was subjected to cruel and degrading treatment. Government officials attempted to coerce her into testifying against dissidents and warned if she spoke out against her mistreatment she would be confined to the psychiatric facility for life.

Fearing for her life, Nafosat fled to Ukraine in 2020. PoC contributed towards relocation costs and helped her reunite with her 4 years old twin daughters. However, in early 2022, because of the situation in Ukraine, she was forced to make a swift departure with her two

daughters. Nafosat is now in Turkey waiting to be resettled in another country and is still unable to return to Uzbekistan. In Turkey, she has faced detention and witnessed human rights abuses. Nafosat and her family currently have no permanent home and they’re experiencing severe hardship. PoC awarded an additional grant, contributing towards the family’s living costs.

“Because I don’t have official documents, I can’t demand proper payment for my labour. I have seen noticeable price increases, including basic food and public transport and I dream of being able to afford to buy toys for my children.”

ZIMBABWE

Grants in the last 10 years:	49	Number of prisoners of conscience:	H HIGH	CAT:	N	CRC:	Y	ICERD:	Y
				CEDAW:	Y	CRPD:	Y	ICESCR:	Y
				CPED:	Y	ICCPR:	Y	ICMW:	N

Unknown assailants, likely to be state agents, kidnapped and tortured over 70 government critics in 2020 while state authorities continue to detain opposition politicians, journalists and activists, including renowned journalist Hopewell Chin’ono, and the leader of the Transform Zimbabwe Party, Jacob Ngarivhume (HRW, 2020). The SR to Zimbabwe expressed concern over the exercise of civil and political rights and emphasised the need to align legislation and policies with Zimbabwe’s constitution which contains legal safeguards for the rights to assembly and association (OHCHR, 2020). Legal due process for those detained is rarely enforced, especially in politically motivated arrests, with detainees often facing police brutality, at times resulting in death in custody (Freedom House, 2020). Political prisoners are frequently held and interrogated for hours without access to a lawyer or an explanation for their arrest (Freedom House, 2020). Lawyers who represent journalists and human rights defenders also face detention and arrest on bogus charges (Freedom House, 2020).

The Maintenance of Peace and Order Act overly regulates peaceful protest to the extent that protesters can be arrested for not giving advance notice of gatherings and correctly anticipating the exact number of participants and route of the protest. This bureaucracy prevents spontaneous protests in response to matters of

immediate public concern and extends even to small gatherings of activists – if 2 or more people demonstrate in public or if more than 15 people hold a meeting in public, they are legally required to notify the authorities. One such crackdown occurred in July 2020 when authorities violently dispersed an anti-government protest in Harare, attacking and arresting protesters (Freedom House, 2020). The SR noted that ‘threats, harassment, physical abuse and torture, disproportionate and excessive use of force, illegal dispersals and arbitrary arrests, detentions and even disappearances’ were a real risk for peaceful protesters (OHCHR, 2020).

Journalists and media workers are extremely vulnerable to violence, harassment and arbitrary arrest, especially when covering demonstrations, criticizing the government or covering the opposition (OHCHR, 2020). Section 33 of the Criminal Law Act holds the act of ‘undermining [the] authority of or insulting [the] President’ in any printed or electronic medium as a crime punishable by up to one year in prison and a fine. The existence of this Act and the passing of a repressive law restricting the spreading of ‘fake news’ around COVID-19 or those involved in the public health campaign in 2020 with a penalty of up to 20 years imprisonment, continues to restrict and endanger journalists, bloggers and social media users (Freedom House, 2020). Two journalists were arrested in May 2020 on the pretext of violating COVID-19 lockdown rules while trying to interview two members of the MDC opposition party, despite being classified as essential workers (Freedom House, 2020) and in July, Hopewell Chin’ono, a journalist reporting on corruption within the Ministry of Health, was arrested in Harare. At least nine Zimbabweans were arrested for posts made on social media and/or private messaging apps such as WhatsApp that criticised the government for its handling of COVID-19 (Freedom House, 2020). In their 2021/2022 Report, Amnesty International estimates that at least 15 journalists have been arrested due to their coverage of events.

Sexual relations between men are criminalised and punishable with a fine and up to one year in prison (Freedom House, 2020). Abortion in Zimbabwe is illegal with few exceptions under the Termination of Pregnancy Act, with people facing 5 years in prison for the procedure (Freedom House, 2020).



Zimbabwe PoC Case Study

Veronica was a high school teacher and an activist for one of the opposition parties in Zimbabwe. She decided to organise meetings with the UK leadership of the party, with the aim of creating more consciousness about the dire social and political situation in Zimbabwe at the time.

When news about the meetings reached Zimbabwe, the government retaliated by harassing her family and subjecting them to unending questioning. She was forced to stay in the UK and seek asylum after being advised to do so for her own safety. Her family later joined her in the UK.

As her teaching qualifications were not recognised, Veronica got a job as a domiciliary care worker on a zero-hour contract where no qualifications were required. With the help of PoC in 2015 and 2016, she went on to pursue a Master’s in Public Health, and subsequently started working as a staff nurse in a surgical ward at a university hospital.

“If it were not for your organisation, I would not be who I am today because I was able to undertake studies without worrying about fees. I am a mother of three boys. Life would have been incredibly tough without your support. Your support also enabled me to focus on studies and to forget about my having been banished from Zimbabwe. Prisoners of Conscience gave me a new life and I will forever be grateful. My life and achievement are a testament to the amazing work you do to change lives, offer hope where there is hopelessness, and enable and empower people like me with knowledge and skills which they can use to impact the UK society and beyond.”



Conclusion

Notwithstanding the lack of verifiable data, the number of prisoners of conscience in these fifteen nations is estimated to be at least 5000 people, but this number is likely much higher. From secret arrests by military police and militia groups to the arresting of undocumented persons, it is impossible to ascertain the true number of prisoners of conscience in these regions and world-wide. What we know unequivocally is that the number of prisoners of conscience continues to climb globally with every passing year as more and more authoritarian regimes sweep into power, with Freedom House currently rating 127 countries in the world as unfree or only partly free (Freedom House, 2021).

The country profiles in this report should not be taken as a comprehensive analysis of the politics of these regions but a concise summary of the extent to which they respect human rights and respond to those who seek to uphold the rights of others. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the pandemic-induced economic recession laid bare the existing inequalities and systems of oppression outlined in this report. Gender-based and domestic violence skyrocketed during the pandemic with many women confined with abusers under lockdown without legal recourse (Amnesty International, 2020). Governments used COVID-19 restrictions as a pretext to censor journalists, criminalising the spreading of 'misinformation' and the criticising of the pandemic response. Peaceful protests were violently dispersed, and political activists restricted under the guise of enforcing social distancing rules and lockdowns. However, the global incarceration of prisoners of conscience is not and should not be viewed as a symptom of the COVID-19 pandemic. When free speech is censored, the outspoken will be arrested, when political opposition is forbidden, political activists and opposition will be detained and when the rights of women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ persons are curtailed, those who speak out or live openly will be imprisoned. PoC will maintain the monitoring of all these and other countries as we continue to serve the needs of those who protect their and, in turn, our human rights.

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