

The new repertoire of repression and how movements resist. Introduction.

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Simin Fadaee and Geoffrey Pleyers 21 November 2018 (2018-11-21T20:07:46+00:00)

Social control and repression of social movements and dissent now bypasses the borders between liberal democracies, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. For the next three days, openMovements takes stock.



The ***openMovements*** series invites leading social scientists to share their research results and perspectives on contemporary social struggles.



Marielle Franco, August, 2016. The sociologist was assassinated in Brazil in March this year. Wikicommons. Some rights reserved.

Within the last decade, a new repertoire of repression has emerged and consolidated at a global level. It affects all regions of the world, albeit on a different scale, bypassing the borders between liberal democracies, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes.

Social control and repression against social movements and dissent has a long history. However, in the past few years we have entered a new era characterised by the intensification of policing protest events; the development of diverse methods of surveillance and infiltration both in social movement actual and virtual mobilisations, with the help of information technology; and criminalisation of activists through enforcement of laws and regulations.

A new repertoire of repression

The recent harsh response to protesters as well as violent clashes between protesters and the police in international summits such as G8 and [G20 meetings](#) in liberal democracies has turned out not very different from the violence and the repression that affected democratic movements in the early 2010s within the authoritarian/semi-authoritarian regimes of Syria, Egypt or Turkey.

Syria was certainly the most extreme. The peaceful democratic revolution was crushed by the regime, leading to thousands of deaths and displacements which eventually left the country in the ruins of a never-ending civil war. In Egypt – the country that hosted the largest Arab revolution in 2011 – two years after the revolution, over 1000 citizens who occupied the Rab'a square in central Cairo were killed by the security forces a few weeks after the coup d'état that brought the military regime of El-Sisi to power. After a one-year long investigation, [Human Rights Watch](#) reported on the massacre with the unequivocal title: "[All according to plan](#)". After five years no one has been brought to trial for the massacre which was the result of a well-established plan and El-Sisi remains in control of the country without facing any international ban.

The right to peaceful assembly in Turkey was brutally denied during the Gezi Park demonstrations of 2013. According to [Amnesty International](#) in about a month over 8000 people had been injured and while thousands of demonstrators were eventually detained, little investigation has been made into the police violence.

Moreover, the new repertoire of repression has witnessed states adapting their mechanisms of control to the innovative forms of protest and resistance of the early twenty first century, notably by massive investment in the virtual world. The use of mainstream and social media to destroy the reputation of activists and their causes by Donald Trump and during the [recent election in Brazil](#), provides strong instances of how internet and new social media have become a platform for taking repressive measures. The Internet and social networks are no longer that free space for activism where ideas, demands and strategies can be discussed: they have been turned into spaces of surveillance and infiltration.

In his [analysis of China](#), Rui Hou shows how the online control and surveillance of the population and of activists has become a core element in this repertoire to the extent that it has become a multi-millionaire industry. However, such mechanisms of surveillance are global now and performing on several different levels and scales.

The criminalization of activists through the rule of law and regulations is another important element in this new palette of repression. [Sarah Pickard's article](#) demonstrates how the number of laws that criminalize and penalize dissent has increased over recent years, significantly strengthening policing methods in Britain. Earlier this year, Graeme Hayes, Steven Cammiss and Brian Doherty published an [article](#) on the legal penalties, threats and trials against activists who conducted a non-violent action to prevent deportation at London Stansted airport. In the US and amid widespread protests under Donald Trump more than 50 such bills [have been introduced](#) into Republican-controlled state legislatures to restrict possibilities of protest and demonstration. The introduction of these repressive measures have been happening in a context where fundamental aspects of human rights, such as restricting the right to vote for minorities, have until today remained unresolved. [Meghan Tinsley's](#) piece demonstrates the tragedy of how a systematic suppression of voters have been in play over the years and how this continues.

The impact of this new repertoire of repression is not confined to activists, but encompasses journalists and social scientists who have paid a heavy prize for remaining a counter-power to an increasingly repressive world.

In many instances they have been arrested, dismissed from their jobs for writing and conducting research or have been assassinated and murdered. One of the most dramatic instances of repression against academics was the case of Giulio Regeni, a PhD student at Cambridge University who was tortured and murdered by the Egyptian police while conducting research on autonomous unions in the country. In March 2018, another sociologist, [Marielle Franco](#) was assassinated in one of the main avenues of Rio de Janeiro. She was a city councillor, activist and a sociologist and had just been charged with writing a report on military police exaction in the favelas. Her murder was only a beginning of a dark period for social scientists and proponents of progressive politics in Brazil, since the newly elected president Bolsonaro has asked the leftist activists "to leave the country or to end up in jail" and has referred to social scientists as "communist indoctrinators".

[Ian Lamond's article](#) makes a revelatory connection between the past, and the present, reminding us of the lessons we must learn from history in our struggle for a better world. [Helena Roux and José Luis Rocha](#) provide an accurate report and analysis of how the situation has degenerated under the same leader in Nicaragua, a Latin American country which was a global reference for an alternative left and a revolution for the people in the 1980s. [Jannis Grimm](#) highlights the growing difficulties of researchers in a post-Arab Spring Middle East and beyond, encouraging us to take seriously the consequences of the policing of research and researchers. In 2018, Nicaragua has become one of the most dramatic spots of repression, from a regime that claims to be on the side of the people.

Activists have had to adapt to the new environment. This series of articles shows that creative forms of resistance and dissent have emerged within the past years. In his piece [Nadim Mirshak explains](#) how civil society organisations and social movements have been negotiating the terrain of what he calls 'resilient authoritarianism' in Egypt by developing 'hidden' methods of resistance. In a similar manner [Susann Pham Thi's article](#) demonstrates how activists circumvent repression in Vietnam by using four tactics of hiding, fleeing, creating and merging.

Tales of struggles under the increasingly repressive Hindu Nationalist regime of Narendra Modi are shared by [Alf Gunvald Nilsen](#) who emphasises an existing dialectic between counterhegemonic forces at the level of the national polity and local communities.

Ongoing resistance

The creative and evolving forms of struggle and resistance which have emerged in recent years show that regardless of growing hostilities and risks the 'people' still resist and the voiceless continue to struggle for their voices to be heard. These struggles may appear fragmented, focused on local issues and disconnected from each other. But a closer look at these new forms reveals interconnections made on many different levels albeit in a gradual and subtle way.

A new repertoire of resistance is in the making. It involves a variety of social groups, strategies and alliances which are local and global, particular and universal at the same time. The existence of anti-repression initiatives and solidarity networks are just examples of such growing connectivity. For example, [Scholars at Risk](#) is an international network which protects threatened scholars and promotes academic freedom around the world. In 2016 the Research Committee on Social Classes and Social Movements (RC 47) of the International Sociological Association launched its [initiative against repression of academics](#) with particular attention to social movement scholars. International NGOs such as Human Right Watch and Amnesty remain particularly active in the defence of human rights and have become themselves the targets of repressive regimes and nationalist militants.

It is crucial to emphasise the role social scientists can play in the development of a repertoire of resistance. Beyond the fact that some social scientists are activists themselves, one important aspect of social scientists' work consists in contributing to a better understanding of the new repertoire of repression and of resistance, as well as "visibilizing"^[1] emerging alternatives to authoritarian regimes and repressive trends around the world while they analyse the local, national and international forces, supports and mechanisms that have led to emergence of the new repertoire of repression on the global scale.

The rise of a new repertoire of repression and of new forms of resistances are crucial issues for social movements and democracy in our times. This week's series of articles on openDemocracy provides an overview of the way the new repertory of repression is implemented in countries from all continents and how people resist it. It aims at opening a broad platform for exchange on these topics among citizens, activists and scholars from different continents and it encourages further research, discussions, series and conferences on these urgent topics. [Watch this space](#).

[1] Sousa Santos (2014) *Epistemologies of the South*, London: Routledge

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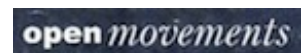
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