

[ACHPR 64 | Panel on civic space in Africa](#)

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In the recent years, States have been using different means to stifle the voice of defenders and reduce the space they operate in. The ordinary session of the African Commission in Egypt, especially in light of the difficulties faced by local defenders, was the perfect occasion to discuss the challenges faced by civil society in Africa in reclaiming their space.



On 25 April 2019, a high-level panel moderated by Honourable Commissioners Maïga Soyata, Chair of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (the African Commission) brought together five panellists who presented the dire environment in which defenders work in Africa having to face a constricting of civic space.

Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders emphasised the restrictive environment in which defenders have to work and also commended their strong will. 'In a time when the number of assassinations is growing on the continent, so is the number of defenders' he added. He also highlighted the egregious restrictions placed on defenders and civil society during the NGO Forum and the session of the Commission.

Furthermore, Clément Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and assembly also regretted the high number of reprisals faced by defenders willing to cooperate with international and regional human rights mechanisms knowing this right is guaranteed under the UN Declaration on defenders. 'Egyptians authorities should ensure a safe environment for human rights defenders in country. Indeed, a free and vibrant civil society is an indicator of a democratic, peaceful and inclusive society', Voule said.

As for Mrs Meskerem Geset, member of the UN Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice, she highlighted the dire situation in which women human rights defenders often have to work in. 'Too often women are the targets of sexual and gender-based violence and face disproportioned obstacles to access to justice. It impacts their work, health as well as family life. There is a need to adopt a gender focused approach to the protection of defenders.'

Diana Gichengo, Programme Manager at the Kenya Human Rights Commission spoke about the disturbing trend of threatening or withdrawing passports in an attempt to silence defenders from Tanzania and South Sudan at session of the African Commission.

Finally, Rémy Ngoy Lumbu, the African Commission's Special Rapporteur on the situation of defenders, concluded the panel by noting that restrictions to civil society can take several forms whether it be by a public or private actor.

Contact: Adélaïde Etong Kame, Africa Advocacy Consultant, a.etong@ishr.ch

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