VOLUME 7

D-HUB

INSTITUTIONS & CIVIC SPACE

AATK

ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT

Greatest hits to defend and renew democracies

D-HUB

VOLUME 7

INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIC SPACE

CURATION OF PLAYS: Ricken Patel, Nika Kovač, Agustín Frizzera and Umanzor López-Baltodano

EDITION: Agustín Frizzera and Umanzor López-Baltodano

DESIGN AND COVER: Kalany Ballardin | Foresti Design Studio

D-HUB THANKS THE MEMBERS OF ITS COMMUNITY FOR THEIR FEEDBACK AND COMMENTS, WHICH HELPED IMPROVE THIS VOLUME.

D-HUB © 2026

D-HUB.ORG

ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT © 2026 BY DEMOCRACY HUB (D-HUB) IS LICENSED UNDER CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-NODERIVATIVES 4.0 INTERNATIONAL. TO VIEW A COPY OF THIS LICENSE, VISIT HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC-ND/4.0/

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Twenty-first-century authoritarian leaders follow a clear playbook. It's not a formula or a recipe but a dynamic set of strategies and tactics deployed across different contexts.

In response, we've started to crack open their playbook and crafted something of our own: an ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT. Developed with insight from hundreds of frontline democracy defenders, scholars, and strategists, this 10-volume series is packed with the most effective plays to counter elected authoritarianism and safeguard our democracies.

This Toolkit is not a silver bullet. It's a catalyst designed to ignite your vision and creativity as you confront the challenges ahead. Its plays are archetypal but open to innovation and adaptation to the local context of those who use them.

We hope you use it and share it. Maybe the next big play, we'll learn from you.

Ricken Patel

CO-CHAIR, D-HUB

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION 6

by Nika Kovač

FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY

11

KEEP AUTHORI-TARIANS PLAYING DEFENSE

DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM:

Free Courts (Poland) - Brothers and Sisters in Arms (Israel) - Kenya Legal Ecosystem (Kenya) - Democracy Forward (USA) - Protect Our Election (Senegal) - Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy (Slovenia) - #ResignNow (Guatemala) - Bloody Hands (Serbia) - Rappler (Philippines) - The Lighthouse (El Salvador) - Confidential (Nicaragua) - Federal Health Officials (Brazil) - Civil Disobedience Movement (Myanmar) - Pact for Democracy (Brazil) - Indivisible (USA) - Poland's Civic Front (Poland)

VOLUME 7

INSTITUTIONS & CIVIC SPACE

6 PLAYS

1 15 **PROTECT JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE**
Keeping courts free from authoritarian control

2 31 **CHALLENGE THEM IN COURT**
Using strategic litigation to fight back

3 47 **TURN CORRUPTION AGAINST THEM**
Using exposure to create political costs

4 61 **SHIELD INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM**
Protecting the truth-tellers to keep power in check

5 75 **CULTIVATE CIVIL SERVICE RESISTANCE AND WHISTLEBLOWING**
Turning insiders into quiet democracy defenders

6 89 **BUILD A BIG-TENT CIVIL SOCIETY COALITION**
Turning civic power into democratic pressure and institutional renewal

INTRODUCTION

HOW DO WE RECLAIM DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS?

by Nika Kovač

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, D-HUB

Institutions play a central role in democratic life: they hold power, distribute resources, and shape how justice, rights, and public goods are delivered. Institutions however, even within a democratic framework, are not neutral arenas. They are the product of political choices, and not always the best ones.

There is widespread discontent with democratic institutions. In many countries, they are not the well-functioning bodies that serve the public and deliver justice as they should. In many cases, public institutions are weak and legitimately distrusted because they serve the interests of particular groups of people.

Authoritarians understand this quite well and exploit it. That is why they often use seemingly reasonable arguments when they seek to capture institutions from within. Yet, their goal is not to make them more effective or accountable, but to bend them to their will and turn them into tools to consolidate power.

When authoritarians start eroding democracy, their playbook is standard: capture independent bodies, pack them with loyalists, defund watchdogs, harass journalists, and pressure civil servants to comply or stay silent. However, even under increasing pressure, not everything is lost.

This volume of the **ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT** focuses on Institutions and Civic Space. It is about using the parts of the system that still hold, alongside the broader civic ecosystem, to resist authoritarian capture, create friction, and keep democratic resistance alive.

Whether it is challenging authoritarian decrees in court, exposing stolen wealth, protecting truth-tellers, or building a big tent civic coalition, each play here uses the democratic institutions that still hold to stop authoritarian overreach or, at least, to slow it down and harden the cost of its actions.

These plays are designed to help you use the cracks in the regime as points of pressure, disruption, and exposure. In doing so, remember that any effort to defend institutions must be guided by a clear vision of what they should be: independent, functional, and accountable to the public.

The goal is not to go back and restore the old status quo, but to keep enough space open for democratic institutions to move forward and win back the space needed to transform them.

With love,
Nika Kovač

HOW THIS PUBLICATION WORKS

Democracy defenders are busy and practical people. That is why we designed this publication to be concise and engaging.

This volume includes **ONE GRAND STRATEGY** and **SIX PLAYS.**

GRAND STRATEGY

A Grand Strategy is a guiding framework that aligns all actions and tactics with the long-term goals of safeguarding democracy. The foundation of the grand strategy provides coherence and effectiveness to individual plays.

PLAY

An action that can be adapted to different moments and contexts. It may be a strategy, tactic, or tool. The key criteria for its inclusion are its deployment, effectiveness, and relevance in the fight for democracy.

FOR EACH, YOU WILL FIND THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION →

THE PLAY

Describes the strategy, tactic or move

WHY IT WORKS

Explains the core reasons the tactic is effective and impactful

HOW IT WORKS

A more detailed depiction of the play, with basic steps of implementation

TIPS

Recommendations and aspects to avoid

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

Examples of how the play has been deployed in real life

LEARN MORE

Links to resources

The concluding section, **"WE CAN HELP YOU,"** provides contact details for those needing help confronting elected authoritarian politics.

FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY

KEEP AUTHORI-TARIANS PLAYING DEFENSE

USING INSTITUTIONS AS PRESSURE POINTS

Elected authoritarians rely on the slow and steady erosion of democracy. They advance one appointment, one decree, or one institutional compromise at a time, often while dismissing anyone who raises the alarm as "hysterical", "partisan", or "out of touch". When they control the tempo, they shape the terrain. And yet, when they are forced to explain, justify, or delay, they lose ground.

So our job is clear: flip the script and keep them reacting. Turning institutions into sites of friction and resistance can disrupt authoritarian consolidation. A court ruling that slows their agenda. A bureaucrat who stalls a corrupt contract. A journalist who exposes their allies. A civil society alliance that blocks a crony appointment. None of these acts win the fight on their own. But together, they change the rhythm, buy time, and force mistakes.

Together, these actions keep institutional muscles alive, sustain resistance, preserve memory inside institutions, and bring oxygen to the civic space. In some cases, they can even raise the political, institutional,

or reputational cost of authoritarian overreach. But even when they don't, they still signal to citizens, allies, and the regime itself that authoritarian capture is not inevitable.

This strategy should not depend on one heroic act or one institution still standing, but on sustained pressure across the many fronts of the institutional landscape. To be effective, this pressure must be unified by a shared narrative that makes sense of what is happening and what is at stake. Each act of resistance should help reveal the broader pattern and expose how power is being abused.

At the same time, it should point toward an alternative: what institutions should look like, how they should function, and who they should serve. In that sense, every delay, every exposure, and every institutional pushback can mean more than a tactical win. They can become a way of holding up a mirror and showing both what is wrong and what could be different.

Over time, this pressure does more than defend democracy. Achieving small but meaningful wins lays the groundwork for rebuilding institutions when the tide turns. It creates openings for reformers to gain ground and for civil society to regroup, while preventing authoritarians from monopolizing the language of change, reform, or anti-corruption to justify capture.

At the end of the day, this strategy is an attitude: it is not about reacting, but about forcing a reaction. Democracy defenders must take control of the tempo, turn every move into a cost, and push authoritarians into overreach, exposure, and eventual loss.

1

PROTECT JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

Keeping courts free from authoritarian control

THE PLAY

Authoritarians almost always target the judiciary early. Concentrating power requires bringing the courts to heel and dismantling constitutional checks. But as long as some courts or judges retain room to operate independently, they can remain as a line of defense for democracy and a battleground for mounting a democratic counteroffensive.

This play is about protecting judicial independence where it still exists and transforming that defense into a public cause. Judicial independence is not only a matter of personal virtue. Courts protect fundamental rights, enforce anti-corruption laws, and constrain executive overreach, and still do so under pressure, incentives, and scrutiny.

In practice, defending judicial independence means more than acting within the courts alone. It means tracking and contesting both legal reforms that reshape the judicial framework and the appointments that fill

it, activating watchdog networks, elevating professional voices, and engaging the public clearly and often on why an independent judiciary matters in their everyday lives.

A captured court is an emergency. A court that still retains some independence is not just something to defend, it is still a live battleground. When that space exists, public pressure can help protect judges from isolation, raise the political cost of capture, and preserve rulings that still disrupt authoritarian power.

WHY IT WORKS

- **AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION IS BLOCKED.** Defending the courts early can derail or slow down a broader authoritarian project.
- **THE RULE OF LAW IS TURNED INTO A PUBLIC CAUSE.** Exposing corrupt appointments reframes judicial independence as something people can defend, it is not just about lawyers in robes.
- **THE COST OF CAPTURE IS RAISED.** Authoritarian court-packing thrives in silence. Public exposure turns it into a fight and makes it politically expensive.
- **LEGAL SPACE FOR RESISTANCE IS PROTECTED.** Even partially independent courts can enable key democratic plays, from strategic litigation to protest protection.
- **LAYERED PRESSURE IS MOBILIZED.** When civic, legal, and global actors align, they create multi-front resistance that is harder to crush and costlier to ignore.

HOW IT WORKS

1 TRACK AND EXPOSE ATTEMPTS AT JUDICIAL CAPTURE

Authoritarians don't announce court takeovers. They rely on procedural tricks and opaque reforms. Build teams to track and contest nominations, vet candidates, and scrutinize changes to judicial governance. Watch for amendments, council reshuffles, and disciplinary threats. Use public dashboards, briefings, or rapid-response reports to make these moves visible. Transparency must speak to people, not just to experts.

2 TURN JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE INTO SOMETHING THAT MATTERS

Authoritarians often justify capture by pointing to real or perceived flaws. If these claims go unanswered, they can erode public support for judicial independence. So, first, acknowledge where the system has failed or is perceived as biased, and address those concerns directly.

Besides, make the stakes visible. Show how judicial independence affects people's lives: whether contracts are enforced, elections are fair, corruption is punished, or rights are protected. Without that connection, the defense of the courts risks sounding abstract and distant. Anchoring the judicial system in people's daily experience requires new narratives that can often meet resistance.

Many of the examples in this volume show that this can be done. Use symbolic actions, such as vigils, courthouse circles, or silent marches, to break the silence, confront indifference, and force public attention on institutional collapse and its consequences. Bring in trusted messengers who can clearly translate legal language into simple terms and arguments that resonate beyond the courtroom.

3 ANCHOR JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

Ground it in lived experiences. Organize coalitions of ordinary court users, citizens who interact with courts for family, labor, or small business cases. Gathered through surveys or personal testimonies, their experiences can highlight fairness concerns in a way that is relatable and hard to dismiss as elite or partisan.

This approach also helps distinguish between legitimate grievances and politically motivated attacks, showing that reform and independence are not opposing goals.

4 MOBILIZE LEGAL PROFESSIONALS AND HELP THEM SPEAK OUT

Lawyers, judges, and legal bodies can defend the courts, but often fear isolation or retaliation. This fight is not only public. It is also internal to the judiciary itself. Support collective statements, coordinated public action and media work, but also pay attention to the internal arenas where judicial independence is often won or lost: judicial councils, disciplinary bodies, leadership appointments, case allocation systems, and professional associations.

Retired judges and bar associations can bring symbolic authority, while sitting judges and insiders are often best placed to organize quietly, identify pressure points, and resist capture from within. Regional and international networks can also offer legitimacy and protection. Solidarity groups that bring these actors together can reduce isolation, defend judicial norms, and shield those who speak out.

5 USE ALL LEVERS OF INSTITUTIONAL DEFENSE

Different legal systems offer different tools. Map the formal and informal levers available in your context and use them all. Do not be afraid to be creative. Sometimes, rarely used procedures, overlooked oversight mechanisms, or unconventional combinations of tools can create friction, delay capture, or disrupt authoritarian plans.

Use whatever tools are available to challenge illegal reforms or appointments, even in semi-captured courts. Activate oversight bodies, audits, or ombudsman offices. Make use of the media to expose abuses or crony ties. Apply pressure on key appointments through letters, petitions, and mobilizations. Engage all channels in parallel, including courts, hearings, media, and legal forums. Multiplying the venues increases visibility, slows momentum, and creates space for resistance.

6 BUILD PUBLIC WATCHDOG CAMPAIGNS

Monitoring the courts isn't just for lawyers. Train activists and journalists to track, interpret, and explain judicial decisions and governance. Pair legal analysis with public pressure. Celebrate principled judges and call out enablers. Give civil society tools to explain what is happening. Actively challenge narratives that frame judicial capture as reform and expose how power grabs are disguised as anti-corruption or system "clean-ups". Use creativity and satire to turn judicial capture into a public issue, one contested in the streets and across online spaces.

TIPS

A ACT EARLY, BE LOUD

Judicial capture often begins quietly, through a low-profile appointment, a small change to court procedures or a reform buried in a budget bill. By the time the consequences are visible, it may be too late. That's why early warning systems matter. Track threats, mobilize coalitions quickly, and make noise before momentum builds. Delaying or derailing even a single appointment or reform can buy crucial time and signal that the courts are being watched.

B BUILD BROAD-BASED DEFENSES

Don't rely on a single form of resistance. Legal arguments alone can be ignored, civic protest dismissed, and international support resisted. But when legal, civic, and international spheres align, regimes struggle to suppress them all. Coordinate across sectors to raise the cost of judicial capture —and build coalitions that show that courts matter to everyone. Bring in doctors, students, veterans, or tech leaders who can frame judicial independence as a shared, not partisan, concern.

C USE EVERYDAY JUSTICE TO EXPOSE CAPTURED JUDGES

When judicial capture advances, its effects often surface in everyday justice. Use patterns of arbitrariness, delay, or political alignment in routine cases to expose judges who enable corruption and executive abuse. Connect these practices to their broader institutional role and make clear that they are not neutral arbiters but actors who weaken democratic controls at every level. The goal is to erode their public legitimacy and reduce their ability to shield authoritarian projects.

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

FREE COURTS

Lighting up the resistance

POLAND

When Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party began restructuring the judiciary after 2015, paralyzing the Constitutional Tribunal, reshaping the National Council of the Judiciary, lowering the retirement age of Supreme Court judges, and introducing disciplinary mechanisms against critical judges, many feared that judicial independence would collapse quietly. Instead, a broad civic and legal ecosystem mobilized to make judicial capture visible, costly, and politically contested.

Founded in 2017 by lawyers and legal scholars such as Sylwia Gregorczyk-Abram, and Michał Wawrykiewicz, among others, *Wolne Sądy* ("Free Courts") became a public-facing anchor within that ecosystem. Working alongside judges' associations, and other civil society organizations, they helped monitor proposed reforms, explain changes to judicial governance, and translate technical legal developments into accessible public briefings and media interventions. Rather than allowing

procedural amendments to pass unnoticed, they exposed how new disciplinary chambers, appointment processes, and court restructurings threatened constitutional checks and the rights of ordinary citizens.

Crucially, they turned judicial independence into a civic issue. Through short explanatory videos, digital campaigns, town-hall discussions, and partnerships with independent media, they reframed the courts as institutions that protect everyday fairness—from labor disputes to family cases—not just abstract constitutional principles. Their most visible actions, the "Chain of Light" protests, saw thousands of citizens holding candles in silent vigils outside courthouses and parliament buildings across more than 200 towns. The imagery transformed a technical institutional crisis into a moral and cultural cause, signaling to judges that they were not alone.

At the same time, the broader legal community pursued institutional resistance on multiple fronts. Disciplinary actions against independent judges were publicized domestically and internationally, reducing isolation and raising reputational costs. Strategic litigation was brought before Polish courts and the Court of Justice of the European Union, leading to rulings that challenged elements of the new disciplinary regime and judicial reforms. The initiative also contributed to documentation and advocacy that informed European Commission proceedings under Article 7 and debates over linking EU funds to rule-of-law compliance.

Not all reforms were stopped. But sustained civic visibility, coordinated legal defense, and multi-level pressure slowed consolidation, preserved space for principled judges, and kept judicial independence in the public conversation. When elections in 2023 brought a pro-rule-of-law coalition to power, restoration efforts did not begin from zero.

> "When the courts stood up, we stood with them. And when they were silenced, we lit the streets until they were heard again."

BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN ARMS

Veterans defending the balance of power

ISRAEL

In early 2023, Israel entered one of the most serious constitutional crises in its history. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition introduced sweeping judicial reforms aimed at limiting the Supreme Court's power to review government actions and reshaping judicial appointments. Critics warned that the changes would weaken one of the last institutional checks on executive authority. What followed was the largest sustained protest movement in the country's history, while an unexpected constituency stood at its forefront: military reservists and veterans.

Organized under the banner of Brothers and Sisters in Arms (BSA), thousands of reservists from elite units—including Air Force pilots, intelligence officers, and special forces veterans—publicly opposed the overhaul. Their intervention was strategic. Rather than framing the crisis in partisan terms, they presented judicial independence as essential to Israel's democratic character and long-term security. Hundreds of reservists announced that they would suspend voluntary reserve service if the reforms advanced. Former senior security officials warned that weakening judicial oversight could damage military cohesion, economic stability, and Israel's international standing.

Because the military plays a central role in Israeli public life, BSA's stance carried unusual credibility. It reframed judicial independence as a patriotic obligation as opposed to a legal dispute. Their intervention lowered the political cost of opposition and emboldened other sectors to act. High-tech workers organized strikes and warned of capital flight;

medical professionals signaled work stoppages; business leaders and economists raised concerns about market instability; former judges and legal scholars issued public statements defending the Court. The debate moved from technical reform to a broad civic defense of institutional balance.

They were loud. Sustained protests and cross-sector mobilization increased pressure on the government and signaled that resistance extended well beyond partisan lines. In January 2024, Israel's Supreme Court struck down a key element of the overhaul, invalidating a Basic Law amendment that had limited the Court's use of the "reasonableness" doctrine —the first time it nullified a Basic Law provision. While the decision rested on legal reasoning, it occurred in a context of intense public scrutiny and national debate over judicial independence.

Not all reform efforts were abandoned, and institutional tensions remain. Nevertheless, the reservists' intervention demonstrated a crucial democratic defense mechanism: when respected national actors link judicial independence to security, economic stability, and civic identity, they raise the political cost of court capture and widen the space for institutional resistance.

> "Democracy is not just voting every four years. It's the rule of law. It's the independence of the courts. And it's our duty –just like on the battlefield– to defend it."

KENYAN LEGAL ECOSYSTEM

Shielding Kenya's supreme court from political retaliation

KENYA

When the Supreme Court of Kenya annulled the 2017 presidential election and later upheld rulings that blocked the government's Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), it became a political target. Senior leaders publicly attacked the judiciary, judicial appointments were delayed, and pressure on the courts became increasingly visible. The message was clear: rulings against the executive could carry consequences.

The Court did not stand entirely alone. A wider legal and civic ecosystem moved to defend judicial independence. Public-interest litigation challenged executive interference in judicial appointments, especially delays in gazetting judges who had already been recommended through constitutional procedures. At the same time, the Law Society of Kenya issued statements, threatened legal action, and helped keep those procedural violations in public view, turning what might have seemed like technical delays into visible constitutional breaches.

Pressure was also layered beyond Kenya. Regional and international legal bodies, including the East Africa Law Society and later Commonwealth legal associations, publicly raised concerns about attacks on judicial independence. This outer scrutiny reinforced the Court's legitimacy and increased the reputational cost of retaliation.

Civil society also helped frame the BBI conflict in terms broader than legal doctrine. Advocates emphasized that constitutional change could not bypass participation, procedure, and limits on centralized power. Through media engagement and civic education, judicial independence was presented not simply as an elite concern, but as a safeguard for electoral integrity, constitutional order, and citizens' rights.

The strategy did not eliminate pressure against the Court. It made retaliation harder to normalize. Litigation enforced procedures, professional solidarity reduced judicial isolation, and external visibility raised the political cost of attacking the courts.

> "Ultimately, the strength of judicial independence depends not only on bold judges, but on public pressure and civic support to back them."

YOU CAN ACCESS THE "LEARN MORE" RESOURCES BY CLICKING ON THEM

LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES

D-Hub. 2024. “Poland Beats Backsliding.” *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 1.

OTHER RESOURCES

1823 Magazine. “How an elite Israeli commando built a protest movement to save his country.”

CEELI Institute. 2025. “Judicial Independence under pressure: A Guide for Civil Society.”

Center for American Progress. 2025. “How Democracies Defend Themselves Against Authoritarianism.”

Duke Law. 2025. “How to Respond to Attacks on Judges and the Judiciary.”

Gamboa, Laura. 2022. “Resisting Backsliding.”

50+ Millions Kenyans. “www.50plusmillionkenyans.org.” *Web page*

Wolne Sądy (Free Courts). “https://wolnesady.org/en/.” *Web page*

Zambrano, Diego et al. 2024. “How Latin America's Judges are Defending Democracy.”

2

CHALLENGE THEM IN COURT

Using strategic litigation to fight back

THE PLAY

If some courts or judges have not yet been fully captured and still retain room to act independently, don't wait. Use them. Take authoritarian overreach to court. This play is about strategic litigation, and about using the law beyond the courtroom, making legal norms visible and relevant to people's everyday lives.

Legal challenges aren't just about getting a favorable verdict. Whether you win or lose the case, public exposure can raise reputational costs and inspire civic resistance. Above all, it can help preserve space for future democratic action.

Strategic litigation can delay or block abuse of power, and in these contexts, buying time is a win. It can also trigger scrutiny and force authoritarians onto the legal and moral defensive. Paired with civic mobilization, smart communications, and coalition building, litigation becomes a powerful tool for democratic defense.

In order to make this strategy work, not every case is equally useful. This play works best when litigation is used selectively: either in cases with strong moral clarity and broad public resonance, or in institutional fights essential to protecting democratic guardrails.

It takes courage to take an authoritarian government to court. That is why every case filed, every hearing covered, every legal argument made in public view sends a message: abuse will not be normalized, the law is not just ink on paper, and people are still listening.

WHY IT WORKS

- **SOMETIMES, YOU CAN STILL WIN.** If not all courts are captured, litigation can still protect rights, overturn abuses, or block authoritarian laws.
- **THEIR MOMENTUM IS SLOWED DOWN.** Authoritarians thrive on speed. Legal actions can force delays and trigger public scrutiny, buying time for resistance to organize.
- **THE STAKES ARE MADE MUCH CLEARER.** Some cases can reframe political conflicts in terms of fairness and abuse of power, helping people understand what is really at stake.
- **PEOPLE ARE DRAWN TO LOCAL AND GLOBAL SCRUTINY.** High-profile litigation attracts public attention, media coverage, and international pressure, even when the case is lost.
- **A RECORD THAT CAN OUTLAST THE REGIME IS CREATED.** Cases document abuses, preserve evidence, and build arguments that may support future accountability efforts, at home and in international forums.

HOW IT WORKS

1 BUILD A LEGAL BRAIN TRUST

Litigation under authoritarianism takes legitimacy, expertise, and collective strength. Map lawyers, clinics, NGOs, scholars, and rights defenders. Bring them together to operate as a coordinated team, tracking threats, drafting strategies, and sharing resources. Also involve junior lawyers and civic allies to expand capacity and continuity. Link the coalition to international networks to amplify pressure, add legitimacy, and protect those involved.

Building coordinated legal capacity should lead to a consistent strategy. The core task of this team is to think creatively and map all the available legal avenues to throw a wrench into authoritarian plans, delay implementation, or force public scrutiny: from constitutional challenges to rarely used regulatory reviews and overlooked oversight mechanisms. Whatever works.

2 PICK YOUR BATTLES, AIM FOR THE MOMENT

Not all legal fights are equal. Avoid flooding the courts with weak, overly technical, or politically isolating cases that drain capacity, fail to mobilize support, or allow authoritarians to portray the judiciary as an obstacle to their popular mandate.

Prioritize cases that are symbolic and likely to spark civic momentum. The strongest cases are often those with clear moral stakes and broad public resonance, such as corruption, abuse of power, censorship, mass surveillance, attacks on voting rights, or policies that clearly harm ordinary people.

At the same time, don't ignore quieter institutional cases that may attract less public attention but are critical to protecting democratic guardrails.

Launch these cases when impact is highest, including moments of public outrage, elections, or major political summits. Align such cases with broader civic strategies, and make sure your team can sustain a long fight through appeals, delays, and procedural obstruction.

3 USE COURTS, SHAPE PUBLIC DEBATE

A case may be won in court, but the political objective is to help shift public debate. To do so, treat legal action as a form of public pressure, not just courtroom procedure. Use each case to tell a story over time, where each hearing, ruling, appeal, or delay becomes a new chapter that keeps public attention alive and reinforces all that is at stake. Pair filings with communications: use clear, resonant language, share summaries, produce short videos, and launch petitions. Even in hostile media environments, if the narrative is clear and well framed, there are always ways to get the story out.

Inside the courtroom, respect rules and etiquette. For public communication, keep the language simple and non-legal. Explain what is at stake before the court, why it matters, and how it affects people's lives, without appearing to instruct judges on how to rule.

4 BUILD LEGITIMACY ACROSS SPECIALIZED INSTITUTIONS

A single ruling can be dismissed. However, when legal arguments are repeated and reinforced across bar associations, academia, civil society organizations, and international allies, they gain moral weight and legitimacy. Within the legal field, legitimacy is built by engaging with its own norms, associations, procedures, and professional culture. Ignoring these dynamics can weaken even the strongest legal arguments.

Use each case to create coordinated reactions beyond the courtroom: publish op-eds, host legal roundtables, issue joint statements, and cite precedents. Repetition and resonance matter. Legal claims become harder to ignore when they circulate across multiple specialized and trusted institutions. This kind of validation inside the legal ecosystem complements public pressure and is often a necessary step in building credibility within expert circles.

5 EXPECT RETALIATION AND PLAN FOR IT

Litigating under elected authoritarianism carries risks. Judges will be pressured, lawyers harassed, and those bringing cases targeted. Set up security early: assess risks, encrypt communications, and secure data. Build a support network that includes legal aid and mental health care.

Public visibility also helps. So don't treat potential retaliation only as a private security issue. Build it into your communications plan from the start. When repression or intimidation happens, document it, name it, and use it to expose the regime's authoritarian behavior in real time. These instances can become a way to engage respected institutions abroad and international observers, encouraging them to follow events closely and raise the cost of interference.

TIPS

A BE PREPARED FOR LONG FIGHTS

Authoritarian regimes count on exhaustion, and litigation under pressure can take years. Expect this from the start, and be ready to keep going when coverage fades, hearings stall, or setbacks hit. Build flexible teams, secure long-term funding or a plan to get it, and map out who can step in if others burn out or face threats. Set realistic timelines and align them with broader civic strategies. Don't just prepare the case, prepare the campaign. Staying ready is staying strong.

B DEFINE YOUR WINS BEYOND THE VERDICT

A court ruling isn't the only measure of success. Did the case trigger media coverage, delay a harmful policy, shift the narrative, or create a public record for future justice? Frame your litigation strategy with layered goals: legal outcomes, civic awareness, institutional accountability, and historical memory. Celebrate small wins —an interim ruling, a press headline, or a public statement— as part of the broader democratic struggle.

C EXPLORE MULTIPLE VENUES AND LEGAL PATHWAYS

Always keep international arenas in mind. Regional courts, such as the Inter-American, African, or European Court of Human Rights, can issue rulings and protective measures. UN Special Rapporteurs and treaty bodies can spotlight abuses and add pressure. Even when a case cannot win at home, litigation abroad can still protect rights, build solidarity, and put authoritarian actors on notice.

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

DEMOCRACY FORWARD

DEMOCRACY FORWARD

Challenging executive overreach

UNITED STATES

When Donald Trump returned to office in 2025, his administration moved fast. Sweeping funding freezes, mass firings, ideological directives, and pressure on independent institutions came in waves, all designed to overwhelm opponents before they could organize. In that context, Democracy Forward emerged as one of the clearest examples of how strategic litigation can slow authoritarian momentum. It paired lawsuits with investigations, records demands, public education, and coalition-building, while also helping launch Democracy 2025, a broader legal coordination hub. In 2025 alone, it filed more than 150 lawsuits, launched more than 250 investigations, submitted more than 1,500 records demands, and secured nearly 100 positive court rulings.

One major front was the defense of essential services. Democracy Forward helped block the White House's nationwide funding freeze, which would have affected trillions in services and program funding across the country. It also stopped efforts to cut food assistance for more than 42 million recipients and challenged unlawful restrictions on health, housing, and violence-prevention grants. These cases did more than just secure rulings. They prevented executive overreach from becoming a fait accompli before communities could react.

Democracy Forward did not rely on litigation alone. It also invested in civic infrastructure: convening cross-sector allies through Together for Democracy, supporting local gatherings through Dinners for Democracy and Coffees for Change, and translating constitutional values into accessible public language through We Hold These Truths. In other words, to this day, it uses the law not just to win cases, but to build legitimacy, public understanding, and democratic resilience around the fight.

> "We met the Trump-Vance administration's harmful 'shock and awe' with the power of people in courts and communities."

AAR SUNU ELECTION

PROTECT OUR ELECTION

The legal fight that brought back the ballot

SENEGAL

In February 2024, just weeks before Senegal's scheduled presidential election, President Macky Sall announced a sudden postponement of the vote, citing institutional concerns. Most observers viewed the move as an attempt to extend executive power beyond its mandate. Rather than responding solely through street protest, civil society moved quickly to shift the battle into the courts.

At the center of this effort was *Aar Sunu Election* ("Protect Our Election"), a coalition of more than 100 civic organizations focused on electoral integrity. While opposition actors filed formal petitions before Senegal's Constitutional Council, Aar Sunu and allied coalitions helped transform the case into a broader civic defense of constitutional order. Legal experts within the coalition provided technical analysis, clarified constitutional timelines, and supported the framing of the postponement as a violation of electoral rights and democracy, rather than a political dispute.

Timing was critical. The legal challenge was launched immediately, before postponement could be normalized or electoral uncertainty deepened. Civil society paired the filings with coordinated communications: press conferences, public statements, legal explainers, and social media messaging that translated constitutional arguments into accessible language. The message was consistent and the goal clear: the issue was not who would win the election, but whether citizens would be allowed to vote at all.

Other networks, including *Forces Vives*, amplified the litigation through mobilizations and public education campaigns. By combining courtroom action with civic pressure, the coalitions ensured that the Constitutional Council's review unfolded under intense public scrutiny. Legal arguments were echoed by academics, rights advocates, and international observers, reinforcing the legitimacy of the constitutional claim across multiple arenas.

The Constitutional Council ultimately ruled the postponement unconstitutional and ordered elections to be held "as soon as possible." The decision did not emerge in isolation. It followed weeks of coordinated legal filings, public messaging, and sustained mobilization that reframed the crisis as a defense of constitutional and democratic continuity. Elections were subsequently held, leading to a peaceful transfer of power and restoring confidence in Senegal's democratic process.

> "We were not defending a candidate. We were defending the people's right to choose. That's what the Constitutional Council affirmed."

LEGAL NETWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY

Lawfare for the public good

SLOVENIA

In January 2021, as Prime Minister Janez Janša's government intensified pressure on democratic standards, freedom of expression, and the right to protest, four Slovenian NGOs joined with lawyers, legal experts, and concerned citizens to form the Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy (LNPD). Its purpose was clear: to provide coordinated legal support to individuals and organizations facing human rights violations, abuses of power, and restrictions on civic space.

The network emerged in response to severe restrictions on freedom of assembly imposed under the guise of anti-COVID measures. While shopping malls reopened, open-air protests remained prohibited, even for solo protesters. The crackdown had tangible consequences. Thousands of people joining the Friday protests against the government were fined, many repeatedly, and by March 2022 one prominent protest figure had accumulated more than €40,000 in penalties.

LNPD responded by reducing the gap between the state's legal power and the resources of ordinary citizens. It offered legal support to more than 1,100 individuals in its first year and direct legal representation in around 200 cases, helping

ensure that the misuse of law would not simply intimidate critics into silence. At the same time, it went beyond case-by-case defense. The network launched a landmark challenge before the Constitutional Court, which ruled the government's restrictions on freedom of assembly unconstitutional.

This combination of individual defense, strategic litigation, and public communication became the network's strength. LNPD monitored protests, drafted proposals for legislative reform, and translated complex legal concepts into clear public language. That clarity, combined with legal expertise and a wide support network of lawyers and experts, helped the initiative build credibility and broad public backing.

Since 2023, LNPD has expanded its work to support individuals and organizations facing wider human rights violations and restrictions on civic space. It now also publishes legal opinions, public appeals, and educational materials, and invests in legal literacy through trainings and public events. In doing so, it has shown how a coordinated legal network can do more than defend people in court: it can help turn legal resistance into a broader defense of democratic space.

> "We protect the constitutional foundations of democracy where others stay silent. We bring legal certainty where confusion is used as a weapon."

LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES

D-Hub. 2024. "Democracy on the Edge." *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 5.

D-Hub. 2025. "A Surprise Comeback!" *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 4

OTHER RESOURCES

Democracy2025. “https://www.democracy2025.org/”. *Web page*

Democracy Forward. “https://democracyforward.org/”. *Web page*

Digital Freedom Fund. 2025. “Strategic Litigation Toolkit.”

Gamboa, Laura. 2022. “Resisting Backsliding.”

Grassroots Justice Network. “The Playbook of Justice.”

Just Security. 2025. “Litigation Tracker: Legal Challenges to Trump Administration Actions.”

Yan-ho Lai. 2025. “Legal Resistance under Authoritarianism.”

3

TURN CORRUPTION AGAINST THEM

Using exposure to create political costs

THE PLAY

Authoritarians often project strength by bending courts, media, and wills. But behind that image lies a core vulnerability: their need to distribute spoils. Corruption is often how they reward allies, co-opt institutions, and concentrate power, turning public office into a tool for personal and political gain rather than serving the public interest.

This play turns anti-corruption into a strategic weapon. As such, it does not rely on abstract calls for transparency, but on targeted exposure: tracing stolen public funds, linking embezzlement to everyday suffering, and showing how attacks on oversight bodies, watchdogs, or public institutions serve to protect theft, favoritism, and impunity.

This play works on two fronts. On the institutional side, it means using oversight bodies, audits, prosecutors, legal networks,

and whistleblowers to expose webs of theft and favoritism. On the civic side, it means turning those revelations into public outrage, making the cost of corruption impossible to ignore.

Illicit enrichment is often the thread that unravels authoritarian power. Unlike ideological critiques, anti-corruption is a unifier. When exposed and mobilized strategically, it can fracture alliances, force resignations, delay the authoritarian agenda, and reopen space for resistance.

WHY IT WORKS

- **THE REAL MOTIVE IS EXPOSED.** Authoritarians strive to weaken institutions so as to enable corruption. Exposing this link makes broader abuse easier to identify and resist.
- **CORRUPTION HITS HOME.** When the exposed corruption is connected to crowded hospitals, empty schools, or broken roads, it becomes easier to mobilize against.
- **SCANDALS BREAK THE INNER CIRCLE.** Corruption cases unsettle insiders. Exposure weakens cohesion from within. Some may defect, others may turn on each other.
- **A COMMON CAUSE FOR UNLIKELY ALLIES.** Anti-corruption cuts across ideologies. It gives civil society, politicians, and citizens a shared banner to rally behind.

HOW IT WORKS

1 STRENGTHEN OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIVE CAPACITY

Authoritarian regimes often try to hollow out the very institutions meant to oversee them. But even semi-captured bodies can still create leverage. Start by identifying where corruption is most vulnerable to exposure and which institutional tools can be activated to surface it.

Then, focus on protecting and empowering anti-corruption prosecutors, public auditors, ombuds offices, and financial crime units. Strategic support to these actors can be decisive in exposing systemic theft. Equip them with legal protections, technical support, and investigative training. Even a single credible report can trigger public outcry, international pressure, or elite panic.

2 LINK INSTITUTIONAL INSIDERS AND CIVIC WATCHDOGS

Anti-corruption efforts gain real power when inside knowledge meets outside amplification. Encourage collaboration between principled public servants, journalists, and civic oversight groups. These connections rarely happen on their own. They need to be actively built, coordinated, and protected. Alliances like these help break the isolation of institutional actors who want to act but fear retribution. Civil society can serve as both a shield and a megaphone, protecting insiders while sustaining pressure and amplifying impact.

3 SHOW WHAT CORRUPTION COSTS AND WHO IT SERVES

Corruption is not just about missing funds. It is also about broken promises, damaged lives, and stolen futures. Frame it with a simple question: who are those in power working for, the public or themselves?

Choose cases strategically: not all corruption resonates equally. Focus on stories that clearly link abuse of power to visible harm. Then, translate complex investigations into compelling stories that show how corruption affects people's safety, livelihoods, and rights. When the cost becomes clear and certain, the demand for accountability becomes urgent.

Use photos, testimonies, or symbolic objects such as tax receipts or hospital bills to make it tangible. Forensic reporting that links stolen funds to visible damage, like a collapsed school, delayed medicines, or a failed irrigation system, is far more powerful than a spreadsheet. Also show that institutional abuse is often not just the backdrop to corruption but part of the scandal itself: watchdogs are removed, auditors sidelined, and oversight rules bent precisely to enable theft, favoritism, or impunity.

4 USE LEGAL PATHWAYS TO TRIGGER ACCOUNTABILITY

Legal mechanisms may be slow, but they can still create records and force regimes to respond. Use legal tools proactively, not just reactively: file complaints in national courts, ethics bodies, or international institutions, even when success is uncertain.

Use strategic litigation to challenge not only the corrupt act itself, but also the institutional abuse that enables or conceals it: irregular dismissals, weakened oversight rules, captured appointments, or efforts to block scrutiny. Strategic litigation can also delay corrupt appointments, force public hearings, freeze assets, or introduce new evidence into the public domain. Push for audits of questionable deals, expose asset

declarations, and use budget oversight to challenge spending. Where possible, also push for reforms such as open data laws, procurement transparency, and conflict-of-interest monitoring.

In the face of legal setbacks, remember that those moments of perceived impunity can also become moments of mobilization. When individuals widely seen as guilty walk free, use that outcome to expose how the system is being bent and also to trigger public outrage and renewed pressure.

5 SHIELD ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTORS

Regimes know credible anti-corruption actors can seriously threaten their stability, so they retaliate. Prosecutors are smeared, journalists harassed, auditors sidelined, and whistleblowers jailed or exiled. Defenders must anticipate retaliation and build protection in advance. This means emergency legal defense, secure digital systems, international visibility, and mental health support. Form coalitions that can respond rapidly when retaliation occurs by issuing statements, launching media campaigns, and mobilizing diplomatic and human rights networks. If retaliation carries a visible cost, regimes will hesitate, and others may feel safer stepping forward.

TIPS

A SHOW WHAT WAS STOLEN... AND WHO PAID THE PRICE

Audits and investigations mean little if no one understands them. Show not just what was stolen, but what that theft cost: empty schools, delayed surgeries, collapsed roads. Also show what had to be broken, silenced, or captured to make that theft possible: the watchdog removed, the audit buried, the rule bent, the official pushed aside. Pair forensic analysis with storytelling, design, and local voices. Collaborate with journalists, editors, and campaigners who can translate findings into plain language, striking visuals, and mobilizing messages. When theft feels personal, outrage consolidates and becomes harder to dismiss.

B PROTECT THE FIGHTERS BEFORE THE BACKLASH

The most dangerous work often comes right before a breakthrough. Prosecutors, auditors, journalists, and whistleblowers need protection before they are attacked, not after. Build safety nets in advance: secure digital tools, legal aid, rapid response teams, and ties to international watchdogs. You may not be able to guarantee safety, but you can often reduce exposure, harden the cost of retaliation, and protect people from the worst. If attacks do happen, don't only respond defensively: use those attacks to show the public exactly what those in power are trying to hide, silence, or protect. The more visible, connected, and supported they are, the harder they are to silence.

C TIME YOUR STRIKES FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

A revelation is only as powerful as its timing. Release key findings when pressure is high and attention is focused: during elections, budget votes, international summits, or aid negotiations.

In some cases, it may be smarter to release findings in stages: expose the corruption, let the cover-up or denial emerge, and then follow with new evidence that discredits the regime's response. When corruption is exposed at the right moment and with the right pacing, it becomes much harder to ignore, and even regimes accustomed to surviving scandals may be forced to respond.

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

#RESIGNNOW

Turning outrage into power

GUATEMALA

In 2015, Guatemala's ruling elite was shaken when the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Public Prosecutor's Office uncovered *La Línea* ("The Line"), a customs fraud network that siphoned millions in public funds and implicated senior officials, including President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti.

The exposure did not remain a legal matter. It was made political. Investigators released detailed evidence of how the scheme operated, linking stolen customs revenues to everyday hardship in one of Latin America's most unequal countries. Young civil society actors seized that moment. The hashtag *#RenunciaYa* ("Resign Now") became a national rallying cry, turning forensic findings into a moral indictment. Protesters brought pots, tax receipts, and homemade signs declaring,

"I paid, they stole," reframing corruption not as technical fraud but as theft from citizens.

As evidence mounted, and mobilizations escalated, institutional consequences followed. Congress voted to strip Pérez Molina of immunity, prosecutors issued arrest warrants, and both the President and Vice President resigned and were detained. Business elites, initially cautious, withdrew support as the political cost of association rose. The combination of prosecutorial independence, international backing, and sustained civic pressure fractured the ruling coalition and made protection politically untenable.

The protests did much more than remove officials. They demonstrated that corruption, when exposed strategically and amplified publicly, could break the aura of untouchability surrounding authoritarian networks.

Out of these protests, *Movimiento Semilla* ("Seed Movement") emerged, first as a platform for political renewal, then as a formal party. Eight years after the protests, Semilla's candidate Bernardo Arévalo won the presidency in 2023. Semilla didn't just ride the wave of indignation; it institutionalized it, offering a political vehicle for those demanding dignity and justice. Its rise shows that anti-corruption mobilization, when sustained and channeled, can reshape political opportunity structures.

> "In that historic moment, the elites finally realized that the people won't tolerate any more corruption. But the struggle was just beginning... We were young, connected, angry, and we became the generation that turned indignation into a government committed to dignity and democracy."

BLOODY HANDS

Linking corruption to a tragedy

SERBIA

> "They built a monument to corruption – and it crushed our people. That's why we marched."

In November 2024, a concrete canopy collapsed at the recently renovated railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia, killing at least 14 people. The tragedy quickly moved beyond engineering failure. Public anger focused on how the project had been contracted and supervised, raising concerns about opaque procurement, rushed timelines, and political favoritism in public infrastructure.

Within days, university students organized silent vigils at the exact time of the collapse. Their message was stark: "Corruption kills." Mourning became accusation. What began in Novi Sad spread rapidly: protests and vigils were coordinated in hundreds of towns and cities across Serbia, turning local tragedy into a nationwide indictment.

Scrutiny intensified. Prosecutors opened inquiries into the project and political pressure mounted as demonstrations continued across the country. The Minister of Construction resigned. By January 2025, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević stepped down amid sustained anti-corruption mobilization.

What made this moment so powerful was not outrage alone, but the convergence of visible human loss, institutional investigation, and coordinated civic action. "Corruption kills" translated technical procurement failures into a moral charge that resonated widely.

The collapse did not dismantle Serbia's ruling system. However, it did shatter the aura of inevitability and forced tangible concessions. By tying corruption directly to lost lives and scaling that message nationally, civic actors and social movements turned exposure into leverage, raising the cost of impunity and showing how patronage networks can fracture under pressure.

LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES

D-Hub. 2025. "Clash of Dynasties." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 3.

D-Hub. 2025. "A Surprise Comeback!" *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 4.

OTHER RESOURCES

Global Investigative Journalism Network. 2024. “Follow the Money: Investigating Shell Companies.”

Maksimović, Breza & Srđa Popović. 2025. “How Serbian Students Created the Largest Protest Movement in Decades.”

Transparency International. 2025. “Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres.”

Transparency International. 2019. “Five Principles for Engaging Citizens in Anti-Corruption Mechanisms.”

Tsao, Chip. 2024. “Satirical strategies: exposing corruption with humour.” YouTube

4

SHIELD INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Protecting the truth-tellers
to keep power in check

THE PLAY

Authoritarians fear exposure. They systematically flood the information space with propaganda to control the conversation. They also go after those who uncover the truth. In their playbook, attacking journalists is not a side effect: it is always a strategy. They sue, smear, surveil, and sometimes jail the people who investigate them. As this pressure intensifies, independent journalism becomes harder to sustain and much easier to isolate.

They also know that journalists never operate alone. Their work depends on media organizations that provide resources, protection, and platforms for publication. That is why they seek to capture or neutralize media outlets: buying private media to control editorial lines, starving critical voices financially, or taking over public broadcasters through loyal appointments and funding cuts.

This play is about building shields as early as possible around both journalists and the media organizations that sustain their work. These shields must be legal, digital,

emotional, financial, and political. This means being prepared in advance for fast legal responses, emergency relocation, financial lifelines, solidarity campaigns, and long-term institutional support.

But this is not only about protection. It is also about connection. Protection must go hand in hand with amplification, ensuring that investigative work reaches wider audiences and won't be easily buried or ignored. It also means building a distribution machine that helps stories travel through civic networks and trusted messengers, carrying the findings much further.

WHY IT WORKS

- **WHAT POWER WORKS TO HIDE IS EXPOSED.** Investigative journalism surfaces documents and testimonies that authoritarian actors try to keep out of courts and public view.
- **AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES ARE DISRUPTED.** Investigative journalism can puncture official stories, expose contradictions, and help citizens see through manipulation.
- **THE RESISTANCE ECOSYSTEM IS STRENGTHENED.** Its findings may feed legal action, inform civic mobilization, and equip watchdog institutions with evidence.
- **THE COST OF REPRESSION IS RAISED.** When journalists are backed by solidarity networks, legal defense, and public attention, repression can backfire.
- **BRIDGES FROM INFORMATION TO ACTION ARE BUILT.** When connected to civic engagement, journalism does more than inform, it helps turn exposure into social pressure.

HOW IT WORKS

1 ACTIVATE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

Set up or support rapid alert systems that track threats to journalists, including legal harassment, arrests, doxxing, and physical attacks. Civil society organizations are often best placed to run or support these systems, helping to verify threats, publicize them, and respond early before risks escalate. Platforms like the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ) and *Reporters Without Borders* offer models for alerts, advocacy, and international pressure. Where possible, strengthen domestic alert mechanisms and connect them to international networks.

2 PREPARE LEGAL SHIELDS AND RAPID RESPONSE CAPACITY

Authoritarian regimes use defamation suits, anti-terrorism laws, and tax audits to cripple journalism. Preparation is essential for organizations and networks working to defend investigative journalism. Speed matters, as it depends on systems that are already in place. Set up legal rapid response teams that can act immediately when the attacks begin. Establish standing alliances between lawyers, media organizations, and rights defenders so protection is automatic, not improvised. In high-risk contexts, be ready to activate measures such as temporary relocation, safe housing, or protective accompaniment.

Legal defense should not stop at damage control. When conditions allow, use the law offensively. Challenge bans, contest censorship, and bring abusive actions before courts in order to expose overreach.

3 AIM FOR RESILIENCE AND CONTINUITY

Assume disruption is inevitable. Train journalists in digital security, source protection, and encrypted communications. Secure backups of sensitive material and establish clear protocols for rapid recovery if newsrooms or equipment are seized.

Resilience is also financial and organizational. Outlets that diversify their income reduce exposure to political or corporate pressure. In high-risk contexts, embed investigations in cross-border networks so that reporting continues even if one outlet is shut down. The focus here is not emergency response, but long-term continuity. The objective is simple: to protect continuity. If one newsroom is silenced, the story must survive, keep moving, and still reach the public.

4 GROW PUBLIC LEGITIMACY ECOSYSTEMS FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

Protection is inefficient if no one sees, trusts, or shares the reporting. Authoritarians often try to discredit investigative outlets by framing them as elites, traitors, or foreign agents. For the broader democracy defense ecosystem, public legitimacy for investigative journalism is a critical form of protection, especially when legal safeguards are weak.

Nevertheless, legitimacy does not travel on its own. It must be built through visibility and distribution. Actively elevate and legitimize independent outlets, especially in media environments that are concentrated, captured, or monopolized.

At the same time, build decentralized distribution networks made up of multiple channels and formats: civic groups, digital platforms, partner media, influencers, and trusted messengers who can carry investigations beyond their original audience. The goal is to turn visibility into protection, ensuring that people can recognize who is producing the information, why it matters, and why those journalists deserve to be defended.

5 LEVERAGE CROSS-BORDER PROTECTION AND AMPLIFICATION

Local journalism becomes harder to silence when it is embedded in international networks. Networks like #HoldTheLine, ICORN, and international legal groups can raise pressure and trigger coordinated responses when journalists are targeted. International visibility will not prevent attacks, but it can raise their cost and limit their effectiveness.

Cross-border networks also matter because they can keep investigations alive when domestic space begins to close. Foreign media, diaspora outlets, and global platforms can help ensure that important stories are not buried when local publication becomes risky, blocked, or ineffective. In that sense, cross-border networks are not only protection systems, but also publication and amplification infrastructure.

What's more, they can reinforce legitimacy. In some contexts, an investigation published or amplified by a respected foreign outlet can strengthen its credibility at home and make dismissal, denial, or smearing more difficult.

TIPS

A PREVENT ISOLATION

Authoritarian attacks are easier when journalists are isolated and framed as elites or enemies. Counter this viewpoint by reducing distance with the community: make investigations understandable, visible, and socially anchored. Ensure that findings are spread beyond newsrooms and, even before they are published, reach actors who can react: civic groups, professionals, unions, or local leaders. The goal is insulation. Journalists who are socially embedded are harder to target quietly.

B BUILD PROTECTION BEFORE IT'S URGENT

Most defenses for investigative journalism are activated too late, usually after a journalist is sued, arrested, or forced into exile. By then, the damage is already done. The key is to front-load protection. Design legal, digital, financial, and emotional safeguards before the first attack, not in response to it. Early preparation reduces panic, shortens response time, and prevents isolated incidents from escalating into systemic collapse.

The most effective protection systems are boring by design: pre-agreed protocols, standing legal teams, trusted contacts, and clear escalation paths. Resilience is not built in emergencies, it is built in advance when there is still room to think, plan, coordinate, and train.

C DESIGN INVESTIGATIONS TO SURVIVE ATTACKS

Repression often succeeds not by disproving a story, but by stopping it. To counter this, investigative work should be designed from the start to survive disruption. Avoid investigations that depend on a single newsroom, country, or journalist. Build redundancy so that if one actor is silenced, the reporting continues elsewhere.

Networks like the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) or the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) ensure that if one journalist or outlet is targeted, others can continue the work. In extreme cases, exile may be the only safe option, but exile does not mean silence. Outlets like *El Faro* ("The Lighthouse" - El Salvador) and *Confidencial* (Nicaragua) have remained active from abroad. What matters is not where the journalist is, but whether the investigation can still move forward.

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

RAPPLER

RAPPLER

Building shields and communities

PHILIPPINES

During Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, the Philippines experienced a sharp authoritarian turn, marked by institutional erosion, a violent "war on drugs," and escalating attacks on independent media. Among the regime's primary targets was Rappler, the investigative outlet co-founded by María Ressa. As it exposed disinformation networks, human rights abuses, and corruption, the government responded with tax investigations, cyber-libel charges, regulatory action, and sustained online harassment. Rappler did not treat these attacks as isolated incidents. It treated them as an authoritarian strategy, and built shields in advance.

Each legal charge and arrest was immediately documented, explained in clear language, and amplified domestically and internationally. Court hearings became moments of public scrutiny rather than quiet intimidation. By ensuring that harassment was visible both at home and abroad, Rappler reduced the regime's ability to isolate journalists without consequence. International

watchdogs, advocacy groups, and media partners helped raise the reputational cost of repression.

Legal defense was structured, not improvised. A standing legal team responded rapidly to cases and challenged restrictions in court, turning proceedings into platforms to clarify constitutional protections for press freedom. Litigation functioned as both shield and spotlight. Campaigns such as #HoldTheLine mobilized global solidarity, reinforcing that attacks on Rappler would draw sustained international attention.

Resilience was embedded in the newsroom. Journalists were trained in digital security and used secure communication protocols to protect sources and materials. Investigations were linked to cross-border networks, including partnerships with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and Forbidden Stories, ensuring that if domestic operations were constrained, reporting could continue elsewhere. The objective was continuity: if one journalist was targeted, the story would survive.

Protection also depended on public legitimacy. Through its MovePH initiative, Rappler built "communities of action" by organizing fact-checking coalitions, media literacy programs, and civic engagement efforts. Investigative findings were tied to everyday concerns, transforming audiences into participants. Visibility became insulation: journalists seen as essential to public life are harder to discredit or silence quietly.

In 2021, Maria Ressa received the Nobel Peace Prize, amplifying international scrutiny of the government's actions. But Rappler's deeper achievement was structural. By combining rapid alerts, prepared legal defense, cross-border redundancy, and strong public engagement, it proved how investigative journalism can remain operational and politically consequential under sustained authoritarian pressure.

> "We build communities of action. And the food we feed our communities is journalism.

elfaro C

THE LIGHTHOUSE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Exile is not silence

EL SALVADOR AND NICARAGUA

When authoritarians move to silence investigative journalism, exile often becomes the final pressure point. In Central America, however, exile has also become a strategy of continuity. Rather than shutting down under repression, *Confidencial* in Nicaragua and *El Faro* ("The Lighthouse") in El Salvador rebuilt their operations abroad, transforming displacement into a shield that allowed investigations to survive.

In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega's government raided Confidential's newsroom twice, confiscated equipment, forced its television programs off the air, and criminalized independent journalism. Facing escalating threats, the outlet relocated to Costa Rica and rebuilt as a fully digital operation. With support from international press freedom networks, legal aid groups, and donor alliances, the newsroom secured its archives, protected communications, and ensured reporting could continue across borders. Distribution expanded through diaspora networks, and a voluntary subscription model invited readers to become sustaining members —replacing advertising revenue with community-backed resilience. Cross-border collaborations helped maintain investigative capacity even as space inside Nicaragua collapsed.

El Faro confronted mounting pressure in El Salvador, including tax audits, coordinated smear campaigns, and confirmed Pegasus spyware surveillance under President Nayib Bukele. As legal risks intensified, the outlet transferred its legal and financial registration to Costa Rica, limiting the government's leverage while continuing to publish investigations into corruption, gang negotiations, and the militarization of public life. International journalism

alliances and pro bono legal assistance reinforced protective visibility, ensuring that attempts at intimidation would trigger scrutiny beyond national borders.

In both cases, exile was not retreat but redesign. Legal relocation reduced exposure to domestic harassment. Digital security and cross-border partnerships safeguarded sources and sensitive reporting. International amplification raised the cost of repression. Most importantly, investigations were structured to survive disruption: if one newsroom was shut down, publication would continue elsewhere.

> "By continuing with our work, we make life a little bit more difficult for those bastards, and I think that's good enough."

LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES

D-Hub. 2025. "Clash of Dynasties." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 3.

OTHER RESOURCES

Frontline. 2021. "A Thousand Cuts." *YouTube*

Global Investigative Journalism Network. 2025. "Building Memory, Documenting the Truth: The Case of Nicaragua's Confidencial."

Global Investigative Journalism Network. 2024. "Introduction to Investigative Journalism: Following the Money"

Global Investigative Journalism Network. 2022. "Media Defense Guide for Investigative Journalists."

Media Development Investment Fund. 2025. "Uncovering dark deals with El Salvador's gangs."

IDA. 2021. "A Conversation with Rappler Reporters."

Reporters Without Borders. "Safety Guide for Journalists."

5

CULTIVATE CIVIL SERVICE RESISTANCE & WHISTLEBLOWING

Turning insiders into quiet democracy defenders

THE PLAY

When authoritarians come to power, they do not take over the state all at once. Complete control is rarely immediate or total. At least for a while, they must govern through existing rules and institutions that carry their own inertia, professional norms, and institutional memory. And inside those institutions, there are often people ready to resist.

This play focuses on civil servants and public officials who have retained their position but may be troubled by repression, corruption, or the erosion of professional standards. It leverages insider knowledge and access to expose wrongdoing, delay authoritarian initiatives, and introduce friction inside the state itself.

It is not a call for heroism or public confrontation. It is about creating conditions that make disciplined and principled resistance possible: secure communications, legal and psychological protection, and coordination with actors outside the state.

When these conditions exist, insiders can act without being isolated or immediately destroyed.

Across different contexts, internal dissenters and whistleblowers have revealed corruption, electoral manipulation, illegal surveillance, public health abuses, and covert deals. In some cases, a single well-timed internal action has been enough to stall an authoritarian move or trigger broader accountability.

However, this does not happen on its own. This play only works when a permission environment is in place, with safeguards that make resisting or disclosing wrongdoing thinkable, legitimate, and less isolating. This means not only protecting allies, but making their actions count and turning leaks or acts of dissent into stories that have consequences.

WHY IT WORKS

- **AUTHORITARIAN TIMING IS DISRUPTED.** Internal resistance can slow, interrupt, or derail authoritarian plans from within.
- **THE ROOT IS INSIDER KNOWLEDGE.** When civil servants resist, the evidence they bring can expose abuses and shift public debate.
- **DISCREDITING WON'T SUCCEED.** Insiders are difficult to dismiss. Their position gives them credibility with the public, media, and international actors.
- **RIPPLE EFFECTS ARE TRIGGERED.** Authoritarian control depends on loyalty. When insiders push back, it reveals cracks in the system and gives others permission to dissent.
- **INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY IS PROTECTED.** Ethical civil servants do not just resist. They help preserve democratic know-how and prevent the erosion of state capacity.

HOW IT WORKS

1 IDENTIFY OPENINGS INSIDE THE STATE

Pay attention to where resistance is still possible within the state. Disillusioned civil servants, agency staff, or public officials often reveal themselves through past reform efforts, professional integrity, or informal ties to civil society. Look for patterns and signals: departments that push back on irregular orders, teams that defend professional standards, or officials who quietly slow down harmful initiatives. These “integrity islands” often emerge informally and can become points of contact over time.

2 BUILD TRUST AND LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

Civil servants often remain silent out of fear. Breaking that silence starts by reducing isolation. Build consistent and confidential channels of communication through trusted intermediaries or informal peer networks. Any outreach should be discreet and indirect, first focused on understanding constraints, incentives, and risks.

Trust develops over time. Relationships grounded in shared concerns, professional values, and realistic assessments can gradually lower the cost of dissent. When ethical civil servants feel seen, supported, and protected, hesitation may turn into action.

3 CREATE SAFE AND STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR ACTION AND DISCLOSURE

Internal resistance only matters if it is handled with care and purpose. Not every insider act needs to begin with a public leak. Sometimes the first step is preserving records, documenting irregular actions, slowing harmful decisions, or quietly moving information to participants who can act on it. Work with investigative journalists, legal clinics, and watchdog organizations to verify information, protect sources, and decide when and how to act.

Designing safe and strategic pathways is what allows isolated acts to turn into real consequences. Secure channels are essential, but so is judgment: anonymity, sequencing, and context can determine whether insider action leads to accountability or retaliation. Timing is not technical, it is political. Coordinated and well-timed disclosures or internal acts of resistance can trigger investigations, shift public debate, or force institutional responses.

4 MAKE INSIDER RESISTANCE SURVIVABLE

Whistleblowers risk job loss, legal harassment, financial collapse, and forced exile. If insiders are expected to act, support must be specific, precise, and available in advance. Build support systems that combine legal defense, psychological care, emergency funding, and relocation options.

Where possible, connect insiders to international protection networks that can provide visibility, legal backing, and long-term cover. Organizations such as the Whistleblower Protection Defense Fund or Transparência Brasil show how coordinated legal and civic support can turn a vulnerable individual into someone far harder to isolate or target alone.

5 THINK BEYOND EXPOSURE

What makes insider resistance effective is its ability to trigger consequences: investigations, policy reversals, or real political costs. The role of the democracy defense ecosystem is to actively shape what comes next. Disclosures should be joined by clear calls to action: investigations to open, officials to be held accountable, decisions to be reversed, or protections to be put in place. Without a path forward, even powerful revelations can dissipate.

At the same time, insider resistance can be encouraged, not just received. Public signals, narratives, and visible cases can help create a permission environment inside the state, making resistance feel more possible, legitimate, and less isolating for others who may be watching. In that sense, each act of resistance is not only an intervention, but an invitation.

TIPS

A START WITH QUIET ACTS OF RESISTANCE

In many contexts, premature exposure is suicidal. Early resistance is often quieter and more procedural: slowing down approvals, insisting on compliance, documenting irregularities or preserving data. These actions can buy time, preserve evidence, and create points of leverage.

Quiet resistance also tests limits. It reveals where pressure comes from, who enforces it, and how far power is willing to go. That knowledge is strategic. It allows insiders and external allies to assess risks, build morale, prepare protections, and decide when escalation is possible.

B BUILD THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT WHISTLEBLOWERS

Whistleblowing rarely starts with a brave individual. It starts when a safe channel is put into place. Anonymous dropboxes are necessary, but not sufficient. What enables disclosures is a trusted infrastructure: secure technical systems, clear legal protocols, and known actors who can receive, verify, and act on sensitive information.

Effective leak platforms combine three elements: secure submission tools, pre-established legal and editorial processes, and a visible support network behind them. When insiders know where to go, what will happen to the information, and who will protect them, the threshold for action drops dramatically.

C CREATE PATHWAYS TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Leaks do not produce accountability on their own. Truth alone rarely produces accountability unless timing forces a response. What matters is not only what is revealed, but when and into which arena it lands. A disclosure released at the wrong moment becomes noise. Released at the right one, it becomes a crisis.

Time disclosures to moments of vulnerability: before key votes, budget debates, elections, international summits, or judicial decisions. These are the moments when attention is concentrated and costs may multiply.

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

FEDERAL HEALTH OFFICIALS

Breaking the silence from within

BRAZIL

During Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, Brazil's Ministry of Health became a central arena in the government's denial of scientific guidance during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet inside the bureaucracy, many career civil servants and public health professionals continued to operate according to professional standards. Internal records that later surfaced included warnings about looming oxygen shortages in Manaus and evidence of policy choices that clashed with scientific guidance, as well as signs of delays and controversies surrounding vaccine negotiations.

Before going public, some officials preserved documentation and raised concerns through institutional channels. As political appointees overrode technical guidance, information began reaching investigative journalists and watchdog actors able to

verify and contextualize sensitive material. Major outlets, including *Folha de São Paulo* and *The Intercept Brasil*, published investigations based on documentary records and reporting, helping make internal contradictions visible beyond the ministry.

Timing proved decisive. In early 2021, as Manaus hospitals collapsed amid oxygen shortages, disclosures showing advance warnings intensified public scrutiny. Media investigations fed into formal accountability arenas, including the Senate's Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) on the pandemic, where evidence and testimony were examined. Political actors also filed complaints with the Supreme Federal Court over pandemic-related allegations, keeping legal pressure alongside public exposure.

The impact depended on an ecosystem prepared to receive and act on insider information: investigative journalists, civil society advocates, congressional investigators, and judicial pathways. While Bolsonaro remained in office, the disclosures disrupted official narratives, exposed contradictions between public messaging and internal records, and preserved evidence later used in accountability processes.

> "I couldn't stay silent while people died. The numbers were being buried. We had to show the truth."

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

Bureaucratic resistance against the coup

MYANMAR

After Myanmar's military seized power in February 2021, resistance emerged not only in the streets but inside the state. Tens of thousands of civil servants — including doctors, nurses, teachers, and officials — refused to serve under the junta, joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). By withdrawing their labor, they disrupted administration and made it harder for the regime to project normal governance.

The impact was structural. Public hospitals struggled, transport and banking systems were disrupted, and ministries faced staffing shortages. Authoritarian consolidation depended on compliance; the CDM introduced friction at the bureaucratic core. The junta responded with arrests and intimidation, but the scale of non-cooperation showed it had not secured full loyalty inside the state.

Internal information about administrative strain also surfaced. Leaked documents published by outlets like Myanmar Now signaled efforts to address staffing shortages and stabilize institutions. Other reports revealed concerns about expanding resistance and financial pressures. With oversight subordinated to military rule, these disclosures did not trigger domestic accountability, but they contributed to international scrutiny of the junta's vulnerabilities.

The movement didn't reverse the coup, but it delayed consolidation, exposed fissures within the state, and inspired a resistance that continues today.

> "We may not have weapons, but we have our refusal."

LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES

D-Hub. 2025. "A Surprise Comeback!" *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 4.

OTHER RESOURCES

Blueprint for Free Speech. “https://www.blueprintforfreespeech.net/.” *Web page*

Government Accountability Project. “https://whistleblower.org/.” *Web page*

NPR. 2019. “Whistleblower Complaint On Trump-Ukraine Call.”

Transparency International. 2025. “Whistleblowing.”

6

BUILD A BIG-TENT CIVIL SOCIETY COALITION

Turning civic power into democratic pressure and institutional renewal

THE PLAY

When the civic ecosystem is weakened or disconnected from the political arena, authoritarians gain ground more easily. Authoritarian power is not exercised only through narratives or elections; it operates through institutions. Defending civic space therefore requires connecting civic energy with institutional political action.

This play is about how civic actors can engage in the political struggle without becoming partisan or subordinated to party politics. If grassroots groups, organizations, movements, independent media, cultural networks, and mobilized citizens come together and organize efforts, they can play a political role of their own.

Broad, big-tent civil society coalitions operating outside party structures can challenge authoritarian narratives by pushing for solutions rooted in everyday life: cost of living, public safety, affordable housing, civic freedoms, and community-based care.

Their independence is their strength. It allows them to criticize, propose, and mobilize without being dismissed as partisan. When connected to political actors, these coalitions can pressure them to respond and help shape a political offer that is more grounded in people's real demands and concerns.

At a time when political parties are in crisis in many democracies, a big-tent civic coalition can become a lasting democratic force, capable of shaping agendas, raising demands, and helping renew the democratic political offer by influencing how power would be exercised if democratic forces hold institutional control.

WHY IT WORKS

- **SUPPRESSING OR DISCREDITING BECOMES HARDER.** A broad civic front raises the cost of repression. Targeting one actor is no longer enough, because pressure disperses.
- **SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR DEMOCRACY IS BUILT.** These coalitions create channels for participation and engagement beyond elections, regenerating civic fabric and strengthening accountability and oversight over time.
- **SPACES THAT AUTHORITARIANS SEEK TO CLOSE ARE RECLAIMED.** When formal institutions are captured and political parties are discredited or paralyzed, civil society can step in to sustain democratic presence.
- **INSTITUTIONAL AND POPULAR LEGITIMACY ARE BLENDED TOGETHER.** Bringing together parties and grassroots actors combines political power with social credibility.

HOW IT WORKS

1 SET THE TENT EARLY, AND ON PURPOSE

Agree on a shared democratic mission that transcends partisan divides, rooted in universal values like dignity, fairness, and safety. Build demands around this purpose, pairing them with clear, winnable objectives that connect to everyday concerns, such as cost of living, corruption, or safer streets. Make it clear that this mission is about sustaining and renewing a shared way of life over time, and about defending democratic space both in society and inside institutions.

2 ORGANIZE AROUND SHARED GOALS, NOT TOTAL UNITY

Acknowledge the fact that members of a big-tent coalition will surely disagree on many issues. Focus the energy on those goals everyone can commit to, defending elections, protecting freedoms, fighting corruption, and advancing substantial causes that improve people's lives. Don't try to align every ideology. Keeping goals concrete and well shared makes collaboration realistic and momentum strong. This also helps the coalition stay politically relevant without collapsing into programmatic or partisan disputes. This logic allows a wide range of civic actors to coordinate action without forcing full consensus.

3 BUILD A TRULY BIG TENT

Recruit a wide range of civic actors: grassroots movements, unions, cultural organizations, professional associations, faith networks, volunteers, and everyday people. Create channels of dialogue with political parties and institutional actors that can carry demands into institutions. Maintain independence so the coalition retains its credibility, but build strong enough ties to influence policy, shape political alternatives, and even elections.

4 BET ON DISTRIBUTED ORGANIZING

Instead of building a single centralized structure, it is often more effective to build a networked model where different groups act autonomously but toward a shared purpose. A small coordination hub can provide common tools, messaging guides, visuals, and calls to action, so everyone can adapt them to their own context and audience. This distributed model should not only operate across regions, but also across different kinds of actors, voices, and approaches. Not every part of the coalition needs to sound or operate in the same way: unions, youth groups, faith communities, cultural networks, and local organizers can all carry the same mission in ways that fit their own style, role, and history.

This organizational model only works when the many groups involved take real ownership and carry the work in their own spaces, day after day. It might not be easy to achieve, but when it happens, it allows coalitions to scale quickly, fuel creativity, and keep civic energy alive around key moments, while making the coalition harder to isolate, capture, or dismantle.

5 BUILD INFRASTRUCTURE THAT CAN WITHSTAND PRESSURE

Usually, civil society coalitions fail not because of disagreements, but because they lack structure when pressure escalates. Coordination cannot rely on goodwill alone. It needs a minimal and yet robust infrastructure that allows the alliance to function under stress, while preserving the autonomy and distributed nature of the coalition.

Build lean coordination capacity for three moments: normal operation, crisis, and attack. This includes shared communication channels, rapid response protocols, legal support capacity, and basic operational coordination. The goal is not bureaucracy, but continuity.

Structure should be visible enough to build trust, and yet light enough to avoid capture. When infrastructure works, coordination becomes routine, responses become faster, and fragmentation becomes harder to trigger.

6 COORDINATE PRESSURE ACROSS MULTIPLE FRONTS

Civic power can be expressed in the streets, online, and in the media. It can also engage with formal politics. Opening channels of dialogue with political parties and institutional actors can help turn civic demands into reforms, shape public debate, and, at times, even influence elections. This multi-track approach, which includes but does not depend entirely on formal politics, limits authoritarian control over the political agenda and reduces their room to maneuver. Synchronized street pressure, legal action, and political engagement can force change, while also helping democratic actors imagine and defend a different way of governing.

TIPS

A DELIGHT IN DIVERSITY

Welcome different expressions of the same resistance. Use creative formats, music, satire and murals to keep the message inclusive and engaging. Embrace local 'flavors' and adapt to regional contexts. Leave room for disagreement while reinforcing solidarity around the shared goals. And don't get frustrated if people use different words than you: diverse voices make the coalition stronger.

B ENABLE COORDINATION, NOT COMMAND

Civil society coalitions break when coordination turns into command. Centralization may feel efficient, but it creates fragility, concentrates risk, and fuels internal conflict. What works better is distributed coordination: a shared center that enables action without directing it.

Build a light coordination hub whose role is to provide common resources, timing, and points of alignment, not to impose a single strategy or voice. Shared narratives, tools, and moments allow many actors to act autonomously while in sync. When coordination is designed to empower rather than control, alliances like these remain resilient, scale faster, and adapt under pressure when parts of the network are attacked.

C PARTNER WITH POLITICIANS, DON'T WORK FOR THEM

Democratic politicians must understand that civil society is not there to endorse, applaud, or stay quiet. Criticism is not disloyalty and collaboration does not mean control. At the same time, civic actors need to treat politics as a legitimate terrain of democratic struggle, not something to avoid or outsource.

When both sides engage openly, without subordination or mistrust, the relationship becomes a source of democratic strength. Civic actors bring pressure, legitimacy, and ideas; political actors can turn them into decisions, reforms, and change.

WHO'S DONE IT WELL

PACTO PELA DEMOCRACIA

PACT FOR DEMOCRACY

Building a big-tent coalition

BRAZIL

Launched in 2018, *Pacto pela Democracia* ("Pact for Democracy") brought together more than 200 civil society organizations to anticipate and confront democratic backsliding in Brazil. Rather than reacting after institutional erosion began, the coalition mapped risks early: threats to electoral integrity, disinformation campaigns, judicial pressure, and attacks on civil society. The tent was set deliberately before the 2022 electoral crunch, prioritizing actors with social legitimacy—legal watchdogs, grassroots movements, youth networks, policy institutes, and advocacy groups—over ideological alignment.

Pacto structured itself as a coordination hub, not a command center. Its lean executive secretariat acted as connective tissue: it streamlined communication, scenario planning, and joint positioning, while member organizations retained autonomy. This enabled a dual-track dynamic: civic actors focused on mobilization and public education, while dialogue with democratic institutional actors—including parliamentarians, legal professionals, and

electoral authorities—ensured civic pressure reinforced institutional defense without collapsing into partisan control. Pacto remained formally nonpartisan, preserving credibility while maintaining channels with parties committed to democratic rules. That boundary helped the coalition influence institutional actors without becoming an arm of any party strategy.

During the 2022 elections, this architecture was put to the test. As President Bolsonaro intensified attacks on Brazil's electronic voting system and cast doubt on electoral legitimacy, Pacto activated its Civic Vigil initiative. Member organizations monitored threats to the process, documented political violence, supported media literacy campaigns against disinformation, and coordinated legal expertise to defend electoral institutions. International outreach amplified scrutiny at a moment of heightened tension, raising the political cost of institutional rupture. These actions emerged from months of consultation, risk assessment, and shared messaging that translated civic concerns into coordinated pressure.

Crucially, the alliance operated around shared democratic commitments rather than total unity. Members opted into joint actions voluntarily, and public statements were circulated for endorsement rather than imposed. The trade-off was that coalition positions could be slower and less uniform. That flexibility helped prevent fragmentation across Brazil's diverse civic landscape and allowed organizations with different missions to align when core democratic norms were at stake.

> "A coalition does not need full consensus to perform network actions. Lack of unanimity on specific actions should not be a motive for disagreement or resentment."

After Bolsonaro's defeat, Pacto did not dissolve. It continued monitoring legislative threats, advocating institutional reforms, and sustaining coordination beyond the electoral cycle. In that sense, it became more than an election-time alliance: it helped build lasting civic infrastructure for democratic defense.

INDIVISIBLE

From local pressure to national civic power

UNITED STATES

Founded after Donald Trump's 2016 election, Indivisible emerged as a practical answer to democratic backsliding: a widely shared guide showing ordinary citizens how to apply sustained pressure on elected officials. It later evolved into a national hub enabling thousands of autonomous local groups to turn civic outrage into organized constituent power through town halls, district actions, and coalition pressure aimed squarely at Congress.

Indivisible's strength came from a distributed model: the national organization provided tools, timing, and strategic coordination, while local groups adapted tactics to their own communities. The tent was built around shared democratic goals rather than ideological unity.

That architecture also helped preserve civic autonomy. Indivisible worked with Democratic politicians when useful, but did not subordinate itself to party structures or treat elected officials as the movement's leaders. Instead, it treated them as actors to pressure, push, and criticize when needed. That helped the organization remain politically relevant without collapsing into partisan capture.

By mid-2025, during Trump's second term, Indivisible's infrastructure helped anchor No Kings, a major coalition mobilization against authoritarian practices and executive overreach. Strategically timed around moments of symbolic concentration, the campaign has brought together a broad range of partner organizations and thousands of local organizers

around a simple, values-based frame: inclusive patriotism and opposition to corruption and authoritarianism. The model is not command-and-control. National coordination provides the frame, tools, and momentum; local actors carry the work in their own spaces.

With no detailed policy platform but a clear collective 'no', narrative confrontation did the work. The coalition gained scale, clarity, and breadth by avoiding a more programmatic agenda. Millions joined coordinated, overwhelmingly nonviolent protests that combined humor, patriotism, and moral clarity to force political reaction and absorb repression collectively. The result was one of the largest coordinated protest days in recent U.S. history, helping normalize mass defiance to Trump and raising pressure on the Democratic Party to fight back.

INDIVISIBLE BY THE NUMBERS:

- 2,500 groups organizing throughout the U.S.
- Presence in 99% of congressional districts
- 2 million+ actions taken by Indivisible groups in 2025

THE IMPACT OF NO KINGS:

- 120+ partner organizations
- 2,000+ distributed local organizers and organizing coalitions
- October 18th: 2,700 protests, 7 million participants

POLAND'S CIVIC FRONT

Beating backsliding

POLAND

In 2023, after nearly a decade of democratic backsliding under the Law and Justice (PiS) party, Poland's pro-democracy forces won a pivotal election. Behind that victory was a people-powered opposition — a strategic alliance between civil society and political actors that reshaped the terrain of resistance.

> "But most importantly, for the first time in history, there was also coordination of the get-out-the-vote campaigns across civil society, with exchange of information about who is to target which group."

From early in PiS's rule, civil society actors recognized a systemic authoritarian drift. NGOs working on human rights, education, women's rights, and environmental protection joined forces to defend civic space and build democratic infrastructure. Campaigns like "Civil Organizations Work" reasserted their public legitimacy. Crucially, they remained independent from political parties, even as they convened them. Civil society organized transparent meetings, disclosed consultations, and developed proposals like the Civic Pact on Public Media, inviting all opposition parties to commit to core reforms.

Rather than pushing for a merger, opposition actors adopted a dual-track strategy. Political parties coordinated and negotiated, while civic movements led mass protests, town halls, and voter education campaigns. Civic actors helped frame the moral narrative of resistance, featuring activists alongside politicians on protest stages. They also managed tensions between opposition groups, serving as a neutral convener when party rivalry threatened collaboration.

Even after the election, civil society didn't step back. They pushed for inclusive education reforms, defended judicial independence, and remained watchdogs on contentious issues like gender and migration policy.

LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES

D-Hub. 2024. “Poland Beats Backsliding.” *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 1.

D-Hub. 2024. “Democracy on the Edge.” *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 5.

OTHER RESOURCES

Marczewski, Paweł et al. 2024. “Resisting the illiberal turn in Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia.”

Pacto pela Democracia. “Building Coalitions for Democracy.” Democracy Guides

WE CAN HELP YOU.

At the Democracy Hub, we understand the emotional and strategic challenges of confronting modern authoritarianism—uncertainty, confusion, pressure, and relentless attacks on democratic values.

But you are not alone.

D-Hub is a vibrant community dedicated to defending and renewing democracy. We have the knowledge, tools, and experience to help you fight back effectively.

Our mission is to increase the effectiveness of those fighting authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative peer-to-peer learning, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support, and fostering networks of solidarity and exchange. We aim to ensure that democracy advocates worldwide are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfill their mission.

→ **IF YOU NEED SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE, PLEASE CONTACT US AT CONTACT@DHUB.ORG**

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER AND RECEIVE UPDATES ABOUT OUR WORK WORLDWIDE.

JOIN THE COMMUNITY AND HAVE ACCESS TO INSIGHT BRIEFS, WORKING PAPERS, VIDEOS, PODCASTS, AUDIOBOOKS, AND MORE RESOURCES DESIGNED TO EQUIP DEMOCRACY DEFENDERS WITH THE LATEST SKILLS AND STRATEGIES.

Reach out to us. Together, we can defend democracy.

D-HUB IS A VIBRANT COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO DEFENDING AND RENEWING DEMOCRACY.

Our mission is to improve the effectiveness of those who fight against authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative learning among peers, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support and the promotion of networks of solidarity and exchange.

Our goal is to ensure that democracy advocates around the world are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfil their mission.

D-HUB

DHUB.ORG