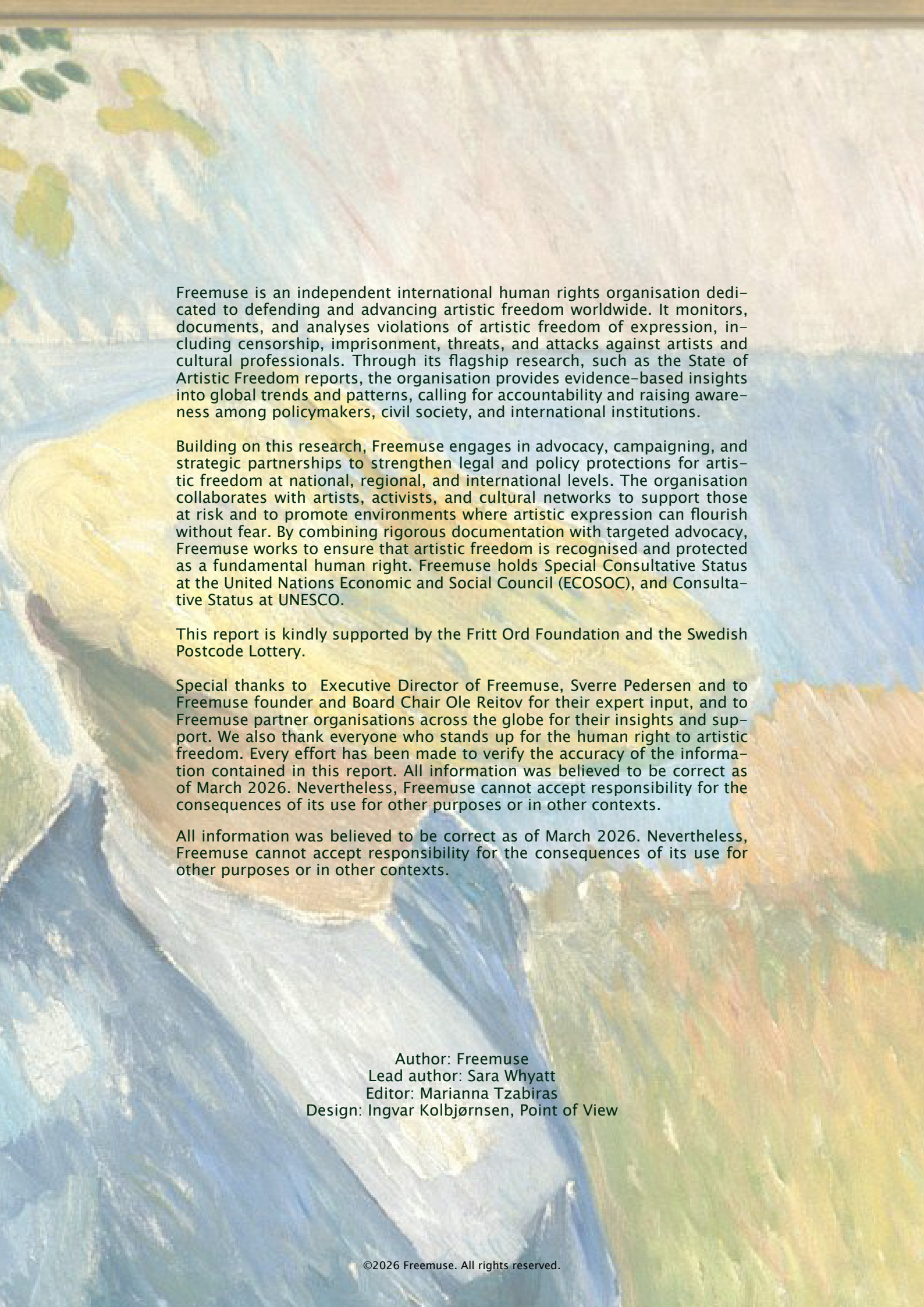


The background is an impressionist-style landscape painting with visible brushstrokes. The colors are soft and blended, featuring a mix of blues, greens, yellows, and oranges, suggesting a natural scene like a field or a riverbank.

THE STATE OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM **2026**

FREEMUSE
DEFENDING ARTISTIC FREEDOM

The background of the page is a painting. It depicts a hand holding a yellow flower, possibly a daisy, against a blue sky. The style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a mix of colors including blue, yellow, and green. The hand is rendered in shades of blue and white, and the flower is a bright yellow. The overall composition is centered and occupies most of the page.

Freemuse is an independent international human rights organisation dedicated to defending and advancing artistic freedom worldwide. It monitors, documents, and analyses violations of artistic freedom of expression, including censorship, imprisonment, threats, and attacks against artists and cultural professionals. Through its flagship research, such as the State of Artistic Freedom reports, the organisation provides evidence-based insights into global trends and patterns, calling for accountability and raising awareness among policymakers, civil society, and international institutions.

Building on this research, Freemuse engages in advocacy, campaigning, and strategic partnerships to strengthen legal and policy protections for artistic freedom at national, regional, and international levels. The organisation collaborates with artists, activists, and cultural networks to support those at risk and to promote environments where artistic expression can flourish without fear. By combining rigorous documentation with targeted advocacy, Freemuse works to ensure that artistic freedom is recognised and protected as a fundamental human right. Freemuse holds Special Consultative Status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and Consultative Status at UNESCO.

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Special thanks to Executive Director of Freemuse, Sverre Pedersen and to Freemuse founder and Board Chair Ole Reitov for their expert input, and to Freemuse partner organisations across the globe for their insights and support. We also thank everyone who stands up for the human right to artistic freedom. Every effort has been made to verify the accuracy of the information contained in this report. All information was believed to be correct as of March 2026. Nevertheless, Freemuse cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of its use for other purposes or in other contexts.

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COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS: ART UNDER FIRE

FOREWORD

For many years the State of Artistic Freedom reports by Freemuse have documented violations against artists around the world. Musicians, writers, filmmakers and visual artists have faced censorship, imprisonment, threats and violence simply for expressing ideas or reflecting the realities of their societies. This year's report shows that these threats are not only continuing but expanding.

What we increasingly see is that attacks on artistic freedom are no longer, mostly, limited to isolated cases against individuals or organisations. They are becoming part of broader political developments that affect the foundations of democratic societies. Laws, funding decisions, institutional pressure and public intimidation are narrowing the space for artistic expression across entire cultural ecosystems.

This makes the work of Freemuse more important than ever. The consequences are, for many, no longer distant or indirect. Even where artists are not directly persecuted, the ripple effects are felt through fear, shrinking spaces for expression and growing self-censorship. In that sense this report truly concerns us all.

At the same time, it reminds us that artists continue to create, organise and resist, often at great personal risk. Their courage matters. It reminds us that artistic freedom is not only a cultural issue but a cornerstone of open societies.

My hope is that this report will serve as a wakeup call. Protecting artistic freedom requires awareness and joint effort from artists, institutions, policymakers and the public. Courage is contagious. When artists speak out others find the strength to do the same.

Alfons Karabuda
Vice Chair
Freemuse

OVERVIEW

By Sara Whyatt

“Art has always been a vital force in shaping public debate. It provokes critical thought, and only through critical thought can society defend its most fundamental rights: peace, security, the dignity of the vulnerable. That is why art holds the power to spark social change, and this is why it is so feared by the far-right. Let us use this power, because repair is not only about defending the past: it is about reclaiming our future.”

Slovene artist Maja Smrekar¹

At the time of writing this report, wars are raging across the globe—in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran, in Ukraine, Sudan, and Myanmar—and artists are among their casualties. Cultural institutions have been deliberately destroyed. Artists have been killed, displaced and silenced. And for those who have spoken out, the consequences have been severe.

At the same time, democracy itself is in retreat. Governments are reaching for familiar tools such as nationalism, religion and security legislation, narrowing the space for artistic dissent. Foreign agent laws, institutional defunding and counter-terrorism charges are being turned against artists and cultural workers.

What emerges from this report is a picture of two intersecting crises: war, which devastates cultural ecosystems and exposes artists and cultural workers to violence and impunity, and democratic decline, which equips governments with the legal and institutional tools to suppress dissenting voices.

Yet what also emerges, as in previous years, is the resilience of artists. They continue to create, organise, and resist—sometimes underground, sometimes publicly, often at personal risk. That resistance is documented here alongside the violations.

1. The democratic deficit and its cost to culture

The broader context for the cases documented in this report could not be starker. According to V-Dem’s Democracy Report 2025, global democracy has fallen back to levels last seen in 1985, with autocracies now outnumbering democracies for the first time in over twenty years and nearly three quarters of the world’s population living under autocratic rule. Freedom of expression is the most severely affected component of democracy, having deteriorated in 44 countries by 2024.² UNESCO’s report on global trends in freedom of expression mirrors this alarming trajectory, recording a 10% decline since 2012 and a corresponding rise in self-censorship.³ While that report focuses on journalists, the same deterioration is visible across the arts sector.

“[We are told] don’t touch this, don’t touch that; we were left with dry, empty pages. Self-censorship has permeated so deeply that I don’t think most artists are even aware of it. It’s essential to recognise this and strive for balance; otherwise, one may become unable to express anything at all.”

Turkish cartoonist, Zehra Ömeroğlu⁴

Compounding this is the dramatic reduction in funding for civil society. The closure of USAID in July 2025, alongside sweeping aid cuts from European funders, poses a serious threat to the organisations that monitor and defend artistic freedom worldwide. A global survey by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems found that 84% of civil society organisations lost funding in 2025, with over a third having little confidence they could sustain their work at previous levels.⁵ For Freemuse and its partners, the implications are direct: as civic space shrinks and monitoring capacity erodes, the violations documented in this report risk becoming harder, not easier, to track. Meanwhile, governments across the world are increasingly deploying nationalism, religion, and security rhetoric to justify the repression of

¹ Maja Smrekar speaking in an interview with M. Igrak, ‘Maja Smrekar: When politics and religion control women’s bodies, they control art’, Freemuse, 24 September 2025 <https://www.freemuse.org/maja-smrekar-when-politics-and-religion-control-womens-bodies-they-control-art> (accessed 13 March 2026).

² ‘Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?’, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf (accessed 12 March 2026).

³ ‘UNESCO warns of serious decline in freedom of expression and safety of journalists worldwide’, 12 December 2025, UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-report-unesco-warns-serious-decline-freedom-expression-and-safety-journalists-worldwide> (accessed 12 March 2026).

⁴ Zehra Ömeroğlu in an interview with Ö. Altunok ‘Cartoonist Zehra Ömeroğlu: “We were left with dry, empty pages”’, Freemuse, 15 July 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/cartoonist-zehra-omeroglu-we-were-left-with-dry-empty-pages> (accessed 10 April 2026).

⁵ ‘Assessing the Impact of Foreign Aid Rollbacks on Civil Society’, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 5 September 2025, <https://www.ifes.org/publications/assessing-impact-foreign-aid-rollbacks-civil-society> (accessed 12 March 2026).



Pepperdine administrators censored the artwork 'The Video Call to Arms' 2015–2025, a piece exploring censorship and silencing. Photo: Courtesy of Elana Mann.

artists and activists. The tools of repression are wide-ranging, from protest laws and surveillance to the defunding and restructuring of cultural institutions, and their cumulative effect is the steady narrowing of space for free expression. This is as true of otherwise democratic states as it is of out-right autocracies.

2. War and artistic freedom

As this report is being written, wars continue to rage across the globe in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran in the Middle East, in Sudan, in Ukraine, and in Myanmar, with regional conflicts elsewhere that receive far less attention than they deserve. The targets and victims of war are not only military—it is cultural. Museums, studios and cultural institutions have been deliberately targeted or destroyed, an assault not just on buildings but on the memory and identity of the people they serve.

Nowhere is this starker than in **Gaza**, where artists have continued to create and resist amid genocide, siege and mass displacement and destruction. They exhibit work made from salvaged notebooks and tea bags that provide some colour, write poetry documenting forced displacement, and even transform the sound of drones into music. In February 2026, UNESCO reported on a preliminary damage assessment in February 2026 that found that over 157 cultural sites have been damaged by Israeli forces since October 2023.⁶

In **Ukraine**, now in its fourth year of war, UNESCO has recorded over 500 cultural sites damaged or destroyed⁷. Moreover, **Russian** artists who criticise the war face arrest, prosecution and exile.

The June 2025 **Iran-Israel** war intensified repression of artists under the pretext of national security, with minority and dissenting artists, particularly Kurds, Baha'is, and rappers, facing arrests, forced confessions and charges of "collaboration with the enemy." As the year closed, the situation deteriorated sharply: protests against the regime were met with lethal force, with thousands killed by the Revolutionary Guards in January 2026, among them artists. At the time of writing, the USA and Israel have launched a war against Iran, with Iranian forces retaliating. In the midst of this calamity, the full human cost to artists and cultural life remains impossible to measure.

In **Sudan**, over 50 artists have been reported killed since war broke out in April 2023, with museums, theatres and public libraries damaged or destroyed. Even those who have fled are not beyond the reach of their persecutors, facing forms of transnational repression, including threats and intimidation directed at them and, in some cases, their families back home.

What these conflicts share is a pattern in which artists, institutions, and heritage become deliberate targets, alongside the military ones, while criticism of war can bring dire consequences.

⁶ 'Impact on cultural heritage in Gaza', UNESCO, 24 November 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/gaza/assessment> (accessed 17 March 2026).

⁷ 'Damaged cultural sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO', UNESCO (last updated 11 February 2026) <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/damaged-cultural-sites> (accessed 17 March 2026).

3. Censorship of the war on Gaza

The censorship of commentary on the war on Gaza has not been confined to Gaza itself. In the Freemuse State of Artistic Freedom Report 2025, we focussed on the censorship of artists in Germany⁸, a trend that continues. In this report, we focus on the **United Kingdom** where cultural institutions, while not facing outright bans, have retreated into self-censorship under the pretext of risk assessments, neutrality policies and safety rationales to cancel or withdraw Palestine-related work.

In an extraordinary application of terrorism laws to curtail commentary on Palestine in the UK, punk-rap duo **Bob Vylan** faced a police investigation, lost bookings, and had their US visas revoked after leading chants against the Israeli Defence Forces at Glastonbury. The Northern Irish hip-hop trio **Kneecap** faced terrorism charges, and cancellations across Europe for their vocal support of Palestine. There have been no criminal convictions in either case.

The **Venice Biennale** has become an illustration of the spread of censorship of Palestine-related art. In **Australia**, Creative Australia rescinded its

invitation to Lebanese-Australian artist **Khaled Sabsabi** to represent the country at the 2026 Biennale following pressure in the Australian Senate—a decision reversed only after an outcry from the arts community and a wave of staff resignations.⁹ In late December in **South Africa**, the culture minister cancelled artist **Gabrielle Goliath's** planned Biennale pavilion, after objecting to its commemoration of Palestinian women and children killed in Gaza, describing the work as “highly divisive.” Goliath has initiated legal proceedings, arguing the cancellation was unconstitutional.¹⁰

In the **United States**, President Trump's executive order applying the IHRA definition of antisemitism made criticism of Israeli policy legally risky, contributing to the cancellations of public events and performances.

In Latin America as well, institutions have used the language of “neutrality” to restrict artistic expressions of solidarity with Palestine—cancelling performances, removing works from exhibitions, and shutting down literary festivals, in **Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia**.



Visual artist Abubakar Moaz's artwork, *On the Way Back*, received an honourable mention in the International Contest for Minority Artists 2025.

⁸ 'State of Artistic Freedom 2025', Freemuse, April 2025, pgs 51-57 https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SAF-2025_web.pdf (accessed 12 March 2026)

⁹ D. Jefferson, 'After a turbulent year, Australia's Khaled Sabsabi will present two works at the Venice Biennale', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2026/feb/25/khaled-sabsabi-australian-artist-venice-biennale-two-works> (accessed 12 March 2026).

¹⁰ C. Leonard, 'Artist Gabrielle Goliath's attempt to reinstate cancelled Venice Biennale pavilion dismissed by court', *The Art Newspaper*, 19 February 2026, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2026/02/19/artist-gabrielle-goliath-attempt-to-reinstate-cancelled-venice-biennale-pavilion-dismissed-court> (accessed 12 March 2026).

4. Artists and cultural institutions labelled as “foreign agents”

A troubling trend is the spread of so-called foreign agent laws that designate artists and cultural organisations receiving foreign funding such as grants or support from international donors and NGOs as “traitors” or security threats. Artists are labelled “foreign agents,” “extremists,” or “terrorists,” turning political dissent into criminal offences. What began as a **Russian** instrument of repression—and where artists deemed as “foreign agents” for their criticism of the authorities have been convicted and imprisoned—has become a template adopted or considered by other governments, such as **Georgia**. This is a trend that has spread beyond Europe, such as in **South Asia**. The effect is twofold: it cuts off vital funding for independent cultural organisations, and it casts a shadow of suspicion over any artist or institution that maintains international connections.

5. Legislative frameworks curtailing artistic freedom

Across the world, laws ostensibly designed to pro-

tect public order, morality, or national security are being deployed as instruments of control against artists. This “lawfare”—the weaponisation of legal frameworks to silence creative dissent—typically relies on vague concepts such as “obscene content,” “degrading lyrics,” or “promotion of crime.” This lack of clarity allows authorities to apply legislation selectively and arbitrarily against those they wish to silence. The law can become not a protection for artists but a weapon used against them.

I. Criticism through art labelled as “terrorism”

Nowhere is this lack of clarity more visible than in the use of counter-terrorism legislation against artists in countries such as **Türkiye**, **Myanmar**, **Iran**, and the **United Kingdom**.¹¹

In **Türkiye**, counter-terror measures have been expanded to conflate criticism with terrorism: philanthropist and cultural organiser **Osman Kavala** has been imprisoned since 2017 under such provisions, while Kurdish musician **Pınar Aydınlar** was sentenced to six years in prison for membership in a legal civil society platform. In **Myanmar**,



Afghanistan's Taliban law bans music, destroys instruments, and prohibits women from singing. Photo: Amu TV.

the Counter-Terrorism Law has been repeatedly applied to peaceful artistic expression, with the notable case of documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for using a drone in her work.

II. Blasphemy laws and artistic freedom

The criminalisation of blasphemy and insult to religion remains one of the most persistent threats to artistic freedom and an issue that has been central to Freemuse’s campaigns since it was founded. It cuts across regions, religions, and legal systems. In this report we report on cases in Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Türkiye and various countries in Latin America. Across all these contexts, the pattern is the same: religious sentiment, real or mobilised, is used to narrow the space for artistic expression—and institutions, more often than not, comply.

The most extreme example remains **Afghanistan** where the Taliban’s Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Vice has effectively abolished artistic life in the name of religious purity, by banning music, destroying instruments, and prohibiting women from singing even in prayer.

In some countries blasphemy carries the ultimate penalty: singer **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu** has spent five years on death row in **Nigeria’s** Kano region for a song shared on social media that was deemed blasphemous.

In **Iran**, the intersection of religion and state power makes the situation particularly acute: women are banned from singing solo before mixed audiences. In 2025 alone, female singers were arrested, summoned to court, and forced to sign commitments that they would refrain from performing, while a male singer who publicly expressed solidarity with them was sentenced to 74 lashes.

In **Latin America**, Catholic Church pressure led to the banning of a play in **Peru**, and the removal of homoerotic works from public exhibitions and the premature closure of a student exhibition in **Mexico**.

III. Censorship of LGBTI+ artistic expression

The repression of LGBTI+ artistic expression is documented across virtually every region covered in this report. In **Hungary**, a law banning Pride events represents one of the most aggressive

state assaults on LGBTI+ visibility in Europe, while in **Slovakia**, the withdrawal of Ministry of Culture funding from LGBTI+ festivals and plays has effectively closed spaces celebrating LGBTI+ culture. In **Türkiye**, where Pride marches have been banned for over a decade, President Erdoğan’s declaration of 2025 as the “Year of the Family” explicitly framed LGBTI+ expression as a threat to society leading to banning of a festival, the blocking of a gay musician’s song, and the sentencing of six young women in a music group for “indecent behaviour.”

In **Latin America**, religious and conservative pressure has driven a wave of censorship of LGBTI+ artistic expression: a play exploring gay identity and religion was banned in **Peru** following complaints from the Catholic Church; and homoerotic artworks were removed from public exhibitions in **Mexico**. In **South Asia**, a dance performance exploring a same-sex relationship was cancelled in Jaipur, **India**, following pressure from a right-wing organisation. In the **United States**, recent policy changes have created a chilling effect on LGBTI+ artistic programming, as in the cancellation of an exhibition featuring Amy Sberald’s painting *Trans Forming Liberty*, depicting a transgender woman, though that decision was subsequently reversed.

Across these varied contexts, the cases point to a recurring dynamic in which LGBTI+ artistic expression is restricted on the grounds that it conflicts with norms relating to family, religion or social order.

IV. The policing of women’s artistic expression

Women artists face repression across different political contexts: from **Afghanistan**, where women are effectively banned from public cultural life, to **Iran**, where female singers are arrested, summoned to court, and forced to sign commitments not to perform. Across **South Asia**, rising nationalism, religious pressure and digital surveillance have created a climate in which gender-related artistic expression is increasingly avoided, such as in **Pakistan**, where lifetime performance bans have been imposed on women in the performing arts for “vulgarity.” In **Nigeria** and **Ethiopia**, morality enforcement disproportionately targets women’s dress, conduct and online expression. In **Latin America**, Catholic Church pressure has led to the removal of works touching on gender and sexuality from public exhibitions, while in the **United States** executive orders restricting federal support for

initiatives deemed to promote “gender ideology” have created a chilling effect on artistic programming. In **Türkiye**, cartoonist Zehra Ömeroğlu argued that obscenity charges brought against her were gender-based, noting that male colleagues producing similar content faced no equivalent scrutiny. The pattern is consistent across regions different legal, religious and political systems with standards applied to women that are not applied to men.

V. Clothing, morality and artistic expression

The policing of bodies, clothing and moral conduct affects artists- male and female - across multiple regions. In **Nigeria**, a TikTokker was sentenced to a year in prison for cross-dressing in a comedy skit, while a male artist was detained for wearing a woman’s brassiere during a performance. In **Ethiopia**, six TikTokkers were detained after an awards ceremony for what authorities described as “indecent dressing.” In **Pakistan**, three actresses-dancers received lifetime performance bans for “indecent and vulgar” conduct, while in **Türkiye**, six young women in the music group Manifest were sentenced to prison for “indecent behaviour.”

These cases target men and women alike, though women bear a disproportionate burden, as they do in other areas which have been highlighted in this report.

VI. Satire under threat

In many countries, social media platforms have become the primary public space for satire and parody, art forms that authoritarian governments find particularly threatening. TikTok, YouTube and Instagram have given a new generation of satirists the ability to reach mass audiences directly, bypassing state broadcasters and institutional gatekeepers. In **Sub-Saharan Africa** in particular, young artists have used short-form video to mock presidents and parody government policies.

A dancer’s satirical video mocking a **Tanzanian** president’s election speech attracted over two million views in two days but led to her arrest on charges of treason; a **South Sudanese** comedian’s live stream joking that the president was a “big thief wearing a hat” led her to be arrested and arbitrarily detained on two separate occasions, for the same expression. In **Togo**, a musician’s satirical call to rally against the president went viral and sparked street protests, but he was later forced to

apologise from a psychiatric institution where he was incarcerated. In **India**, a stand-up comedian suffered a fierce backlash after their jokes were interpreted as insulting to a political leader.

6. Role of non-state actors

Beyond state actors, artists face a hostile environment shaped by online communities, public complaints and organised pressure campaigns. The very visibility that gives artistic work greater reach can also be a source of danger in this digitally monitored environment. In **Myanmar**, pro-regime social media channels, online informants and nationalist actors publicly accuse artists of supporting terrorism or undermining state interests. In **Nigeria**, mostly in Kano State, members of the public have filed complaints about work deemed immoral, offensive or contrary to religious values, leading to bans and prosecutions for material shared online without the prior approval of censorship bodies. In **India**, police seized a work by renowned artist M.F. Husain following a complaint about “hurt religious sentiments.” In **Bangladesh**, a Baul singer was arrested after recordings of his performance spread on social media, following a complaint from a local mosque imam and protests in the area. In **Türkiye**, ultra-religious groups and government officials worked in tandem to target a satirical magazine, leading to the arrest of five staff members following a social media disinformation campaign. In **Latin America**, organised crime adds a further and deadly dimension: musicians face not only state censorship but extortion, armed attacks and killings by criminal networks.

7. Artists as protagonists in social and political resistance

Across the world, artists who take to the streets do so at personal risk. The record number of elections held globally in 2024 generated waves of protest, and artists were consistently among those singled out for arrest, prosecution and violence. This pattern continued into 2025, as authorities responded to ongoing and renewed protest movements. In **Morocco**, rappers were among the first arrested following Gen-Z-led protests in September 2025, while in **Algeria**, a poet was sentenced to five years in prison in what observers described as a warning to cultural figures against fuelling dissent. In **Kenya**, four filmmakers were arrested the day after the country presented its human rights commitments to the UN Universal Periodic Review, for contributing to a BBC documentary about police violence against protesters.

Speaking to Freemuse, Kenyan poet and musician Javan talked about the power of music and poetry during protests. *“During the tax protests, my music became a rallying point for my fans and listeners, giving them both the space and power to speak out boldly. I banked it all on my master poetic piece, Killer Breed, which for the longest time has spoken about police killings that stem from police profiling of young people in informal settlements, youth who are often pushed into crime by lack of livelihood opportunities, a situation only made worse by rising taxes and government neglect.”*¹²

In Iran, protest and artistic expression have become inseparable. Artists who took part in the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising remain imprisoned, while the December 2025 nationwide protests were met with lethal force on the orders of Ayatollah Khamenei and left many artists among the dead and detained. In Myanmar, artists were among the hundreds arrested while protesting election fraud. In Türkiye, the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, a leading opposition figure, ignited widespread protests. Approximately 2,000 people were detained nationwide, with over 300 arrested, including musicians and actors.

8. Music and film: Patterns of targeted repression

Music emerges across this report as one of the most targeted art forms, from Afghanistan, where the Taliban have effectively erased it from public life to Latin America, where musicians face extortion and killings by organised crime, to Russia and Iran, where performing or distributing music linked to dissent carries criminal penalties. In the United Kingdom, pro-Palestinian expression by musicians has triggered police investigations and legal action. Music’s broad public reach and its capacity to carry voices of dissent make it threatening to both states and non-state actors alike.

In the film sector, another art form that is especially targeted, censorship operates across multiple mechanisms. In Myanmar, amendments to film laws criminalise distribution of unapproved content, while a documentary filmmaker was sentenced to life imprisonment and a film director to seven years for criticising a state propaganda film. In Iran, making unlicensed film is treated as a security crime. Filmmakers have been arrested, banned and sentenced. In India, formal regulatory bodies demand cuts or withhold approvals for films addressing politically sensitive subjects; across India and Pakistan, cross-border conflict resulted in the



Organised by Freemuse, SELAM, and PAWA254 artists and cultural workers gathered in Nairobi on 1 May 2025 to observe Kenya’s human rights record review.

Photo: PAWA254.

¹² Javan the Poet in an interview with L. Sidambe, ‘Kenya’s Sounds of Resistance’, Freemuse, 4 March 2026, <https://www.freemuse.org/kenyas-sounds-of-resistance> (accessed 13 March 2026).

abrupt banning of films from streaming platforms. What connects these cases is that censorship increasingly operates not only through outright bans but through surveillance, bureaucratic delay in granting licenses and the criminalisation of the act of filmmaking itself. This fosters self-censorship before filmmakers' works even reach a wider audience.

9. Self-censorship

Self-censorship emerges as a pattern across every region in this report. Being hidden, it is hard, if not impossible to measure. Artists and institutions avoid controversial themes fearing legal repercussions, public backlash, or the loss of funding. One example of this is in the **United States**, where funding uncertainty has had consequences for artistic spaces well beyond federally funded institutions; while across **South Asia** and **Eastern Europe**, surveillance and authoritarian shifts have rendered self-censorship a rational survival strategy. The result is that artistic spaces shrink even where no formal prohibition exists. As Iranian musician Haman Vafri said in an interview before the war: *“Political repression takes a toll on artists ... Pressure from security services or the threat of being arrested makes them question: Is the cost of art too high? Do I step back, or do I accept the risk and tell society what’s happened? That push-and-pull means sometimes a song can create a movement, or just stall.”*¹³

Creative resistance under repression

Despite growing repression, there are numerous examples in the report of artistic resistance. In **Gaza**, artists and musicians continue to create through painting, poetry and music, creating art materials from food and plants, and even harmonising with the sound of overhead drones. In **Afghanistan** and **Iran**, artists resist through underground cultural networks and communities in exile. In the **United States**, cultural workers have formed coalitions, filed legal challenges, and relocated censored exhibitions. In **Slovenia**, artist Maja Smrekar pursued legal action after her work was appropriated and weaponised in political propaganda. In **Türkiye**, a gallery successfully appealed against the closure of an exhibition on LGBTI+ art.

Across Europe, artists and cultural bodies have mobilised around the proposed **European Artistic Freedom Act**, advocating for binding legal protections across the EU. In **Ecuador**, organisers of the Cuenca Biennial successfully resisted pressure to remove a politically sensitive artwork.

Courts have also pushed back. Among them, West Africa’s regional court, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice, struck down blasphemy laws in Kano State, **Nigeria**; **Malawi**’s Constitutional Court ruled criminal defamation unconstitutional; a **Turkish** court overturned the ban on an exhibition addressing trans history; and a **US** federal judge found arts funding restrictions based on “gender ideology” to constitute unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination.

Taken together, these examples—legal action, collective mobilisation, underground practice, and artistic production—demonstrate that creative resistance can still emerge even in conditions of severe repression.

Closing comment

This report shows that attacks on artistic freedom are part of broader political and social shifts shaping the global environment for culture. War, democratic decline, and the expanding use of legal, financial and social pressures are narrowing the space in which artists can work freely. Yet at the same time, numerous examples throughout this report demonstrate that artistic expression continues to persist in the face of these pressures. Artists continue to document conflict, question authority and reflect the experiences of their communities—often at considerable personal risk. As Parvin Ardalan, Iranian women’s rights activist and researcher for Freemuse, observes in an interview with Freemuse, artistic activity in Iran is shaped by the need to navigate censorship and a multifaceted, totalitarian system—conditions within which creation nonetheless continues to emerge. She says: *“In this path, pain, fear, and anger become poetry, images, and songs. Courage is contagious ... Repression may silence artistic expression for a while, but it cannot stop the growth of resistance.”*¹⁴

¹³ M. Zarghami and K. Sharifi, ‘How Protest Musicians Became Icons and Targets in Iran’s Women, Life, Freedom Movement’, *Shouts – Music from the Rooftops!*, 18 September 2025, <https://shoutsmusic.blog/how-protest-musicians-became-icons-and-targets-in-irans-women-life-freedom-movement/> (accessed 13 March 2026).

¹⁴ P. Ardalan in an interview with M. Igrek, ‘Courage Is Contagious: Parvin Ardalan on Art and Resistance in Iran’, *Freemuse*, 30 January 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/courage-is-contagious-parvin-ardalan-on-art-and-resistance-in-iran> (accessed 13 March 2026).

The recommendations in this report outline concrete steps that governments, intergovernmental organisations, cultural institutions and civil society actors must take to protect artistic freedom and ensure that artists can continue this work safely and without fear.

Methodology

This report presents documented violations of artistic freedom during 2025 monitored by Freemuse researchers and partners.

Freemuse defines artistic freedom as the right of artists and cultural workers to create, perform, distribute, and express themselves without censorship, intimidation, or interference, whether from governments or others.

Each chapter was authored by an individual or an organisation well versed in artistic freedom and/or working closely with the artistic community in the region. Freemuse researchers and partners relied on primary sources, literature reviews, and analyses of the relevant legislation, often supplementing this with first-hand interviews with the artists themselves. The information gathered also informs Freemuse's advocacy, supporting evidence-based engagement with policymakers, international mechanisms and other stakeholders to promote and protect artistic freedom.

Due to the nature of monitoring restrictions on artistic expression, significant limitations affect data collection. Many violations remain underreported, particularly where artists practice self-censorship, civic space is restricted, or local monitoring capacity is limited such as in times of war. Language barriers, limited access to reliable sources, and safety concerns for artists and researchers further shape what can be documented.

The dramatic reduction in funding for civil society organisations, including the closure of the United States Agency for International Development and wider cuts by European funders, has significantly weakened monitoring capacity worldwide. For Freemuse and its partners, this shrinking support means that the violations documented here may represent only a partial picture, as the ability to monitor and verify cases becomes increasingly constrained.

For these reasons, this report should be understood as evidence of trends in restriction of expression, rather than a comprehensive global record of all violations of artistic freedom.

HOLDING SPACE FOR FREE EXPRESSION IN THE FACE OF MASS VIOLATIONS: TRENDS IN THE ARAB REGION WITH A FOCUS ON GAZA

Laila Hourani

- *Amid genocide, siege, and mass displacement, violations of artistic freedom in Gaza had sharply intensified since October 2023.*
- *Across the region, shifting and undefined “red lines” have intensified self-censorship and repression, particularly in contexts of political transition or heightened fear of dissent.*
- *At the same time, artists and cultural organisations have continued to resist, using art to document violations, sustain communities and assert artistic freedom despite severe constraints.*

The genocide carried out in Gaza over the last two years has dominated the scene of human rights violations in the Arab region¹. Artists, filmmakers, writers and cultural producers are amongst the over 70,000 Palestinians killed (including roughly 20,000 children), and the 1.9 million forcibly displaced² as a result of the Israeli occupation army’s assault on Gaza since 7 October 2023. Meanwhile, the rest of the Arab region, covering the 22 Arab States that constitute the Arab League, continued to experience different levels of violations of artistic freedoms.

It is impossible to cover in one chapter all the aspects of artistic freedoms in such a diverse region spanning the Maghreb and the Levant. What this chapter attempts to do is to outline major trends of violations of artistic freedoms and the resilient pushback against them, giving examples from some countries in the region.

Gaza: Cultural destruction and erasure

The genocide in Gaza and the war in Sudan have had a catastrophic impact on the safety of artists and their ability to carry out their profession, and on the infrastructure that enables their creative production and social influence. What is at severe risk here is not only artistic output, but the continuity of cultural identity, shared heritage, memory and its capacity to maintain social cohesion, dialogue and resilience.

It is estimated that 81% of all structures in Gaza have been damaged,³ this includes archaeological, cultural and artistic infrastructure. A report by the Institute for Palestine Studies, an independent research centre established in Beirut in 1963, provides a preliminary estimate of 49 cultural sites, museums and archaeological buildings, 36 cultural and artistic institutions, and 21 archives and

¹ See: International Court of Justice, ‘Application of the Genocide Convention in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v Israel), Order on Provisional Measures’, 26 January 2024; Francesca Albanese, ‘Anatomy of a Genocide’ (United Nations Human Rights Council, 25 March 2024); Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘UN experts warn of genocidal acts in Gaza’, 16 November 2023. (accessed 7 March 2026).

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), ‘Reported Impact Snapshot | Gaza Strip’, 23 December 2025, https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/Gaza_Reported_Impact_Snapshot_23_December_2025.pdf (accessed 26 January 2026).

³ United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) / UNOSAT, ‘UNOSAT Gaza Strip Comprehensive Damage Assessment’, 31 October 2025, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unosat-gaza-strip-damage-assessment-31oct25/> (accessed 26 January 2026).



Sohail Salem's art in Under Fire uses salvaged materials to depict Gaza. Photo: Daret al Funun website.

libraries that have been destroyed⁴ since October 2023. A report by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, examined attacks on cultural, religious and educational sites in Gaza, other occupied Palestinian territory, and in Israel.⁵ It found that the majority of these had been committed by Israeli occupation forces, and described these as war crimes. Incidents involving ten religious and cultural sites in Gaza were highlighted in the report. These included the bombing of Saint Porphyrius Church,⁶ believed to be the third oldest church in the world; the bombing, bulldozing and looting

of Pasha Palace⁷, a 13th-century Mamluk-era landmark and archaeological museum; the bombing of the 7th-century Great Omari Mosque, the enclave's largest mosque; and the seizure, burning, bulldozing and looting of Al Mat'haf Museum, Gaza's first archaeological museum⁸, which is home to an extensive private collection.

International humanitarian law obliges all parties in an armed conflict to respect and protect cultural property, and intentional or reckless destruction of heritage — including historic monuments, places of worship, or other cultural sites — can constitute a war crime.⁹

⁴ Institute for Palestine Studies, 'Documenting the Targeting of Culture in the Gaza Strip', <https://gazaculturalsector.palestine-studies.org/ar> (accessed 26 January 2026).

⁵ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, 'Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel (A/HRC/59/26)', United Nations Human Rights Council, 6 May 2025, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/report-of-the-independent-international-commission-of-inquiry-on-the-occupied-palestinian-territory-including-east-jerusalem-and-israel-a-hrc-59-26/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

⁶ S. Geranpayeh, 'Gaza's historic Greek Orthodox church sustains second Israeli strike', *The Art Newspaper*, 7 August 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/08/07/gazas-historic-greek-orthodox-church-survives-second-israeli-strike> (accessed 26 January 2026).

⁷ S. Geranpayeh, 'Amid desolation in Gaza, heritage experts are pushing a huge reconstruction effort', *The Art Newspaper*, 10 March 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/03/10/gaza-heritage-experts-huge-reconstruction-effort> (accessed 26 January 2026).

⁸ S. Geranpayeh, 'Gaza City archives among heritage sites destroyed in Israel-Hamas war', *The Art Newspaper*, 22 December 2023, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/12/22/gaza-city-archives-among-heritage-sites-destroyed-in-israel-hamas-war> (accessed 26 January 2026).

⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 'Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 38: Attacks Against Cultural Property', <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule38> (accessed 13 February 2026).

Expression amid genocide: *Gazan art created with charcoal, juice and tea*

The *Under Fire* exhibition, organised by Daret al Funun in Amman, Jordan, showcased the works of four Gazan artists (Basil Al Maqousi, Majed Shala, Raed Issa, Sohail Salem), produced during the genocide and salvaged from Gaza. They showed great innovation and creativity in using materials that are in short supply, such as UNRWA school notebooks, medical packages and old paper, to produce their work and bear witness despite bombardments, siege and forced displacement. Charcoal, pomegranate juice and tea bags provided the necessary colour for their pieces.¹⁰

الطفلة التي قُتِلَ أبوها
وهو يحمل
كيس طحين
على ظهره
ستبقى تتذوق دم أبيها
في كل كسرة خبز.

The little girl
whose father was killed
with a bag of flour
on his back
will forever taste his blood
in every piece of bread.

_Haidar Alghazali/ Gaza

Haidar AlGhazali, a young Palestinian poet, documented forced displacement from his home. Image: Haidar Alghazali, Instagram.

From Gaza to Italy: A poet's uprooting

As the genocide continued, poetry became a prominent form of expression. Haidar AlGhazali, a young Palestinian poet from Gaza, documented the repeated forced displacement from his home in Northern Gaza, travelling on a donkey-drawn cart—the only available means of travel—to a tent in the South, and ultimately to Italy in November 2025 after the ceasefire. His poems have been widely published and translated into multiple languages. His first forced displacement disrupted not only his home, community and university life, but also the literary workshops he ran for young Gazans with support from the Qattan Foundation. The solidarity he received from colleagues around the world that enabled his re-location to Italy is testimony to the power of solidarity in preserving artistic rights.

Making music to the sound of drones

In Gaza, music teacher Ahmed Abu Amsha¹¹ has transformed the relentless sounds of Israeli drones and warfare—a constant and inescapable psychological assault on civilian life—into a form of creative resistance, seeking to provide emotional support for displaced children and adults. Rather than allowing the noise of this relentless aerial buzz to represent fear, Abu Amsha encourages students to sing and make music with and above this acoustic terror, recording and sharing videos that have reached thousands online as an act of cultural resilience. His work highlights how making music can become not just therapy but a refusal to let instruments of domination define life under siege.

Violations in the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem

Israeli violations of the freedoms of Palestinian artists were not confined to the Gaza Strip. Arrests of Palestinian artists in the occupied West Bank and raids on Palestinian institutions in occupied East Jerusalem point to a strategy that targets Palestinian cultural voices and institutions to instill fear, silence expression and enforce erasure of cultural identity. In March 2025, Palestinian filmmaker **Hamdan Ballal** was beaten by Israeli settlers in the Masafer Yatta area of the West Bank in the presence of Israeli soldiers, only days after his Oscar

¹⁰ 'Under Fire: Pages from Gaza—Journals and Sketches of War', Darat al Funun - The Khalid Shoman Foundation, 15 October 2024-15 October 2025, <https://daratafunun.org/?event=pages-from-gaza-journals-and-sketches-of-war> (accessed 26 January 2026).

¹¹ 'A music teacher uses Gaza's relentless soundtrack of war to resist Israel', Al Jazeera, 30 August 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/30/a-music-teacher-uses-gazas-relentless-soundtrack-of-war-to-resist-israel> (accessed 26 January 2026).



Screenshot from the YouTube channel of Ahmed Abu Amsha, a music teacher and guitarist who performs for children and adults in Gaza.

win for the documentary *No Other Land*, which he had directed¹². The film documents the peaceful activism of Palestinian community in this occupied area against violence by Israeli soldiers and illegal settlers. **Yuval Abraham**, the Israeli co-director of the film, said Ballal was beaten by Israeli settlers and then removed from an ambulance by soldiers.¹³ An international outcry in solidarity with Ballal, whose attack was perceived as an act of revenge for his film that exposed settler violence in the West Bank, led to his release three days after his arrest. In July 2025, **Awdah (Odeh) Hathaleen**, a Palestinian consultant on the *No Other Land* documentary, was shot and killed by an Israeli settler, in the village of Umm al-Khair in in Masafer Yatta, South of Hebron in the occupied West Bank.¹⁴

In a separate case, Israeli occupation forces detained **Shaden Al-Qous**, a Palestinian American dancer, at Ofer Prison in the West Bank in January 2025 on charges of “incitement” after raiding her home and confiscating her laptop.¹⁵ A law student who was nearing graduation from Birzeit University when she was arrested, Al-Qous uses her dance and visual art, which she shares on so-

cial media platforms, to advocate for Palestinian freedom and justice. During her detention, Israeli authorities denied her the right to attend her suddenly deceased father’s funeral, a move widely condemned as an act of cruelty and psychological torment by human rights organisations. Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) condemned her arbitrary detention and called for her immediate release. U.S. representatives and senators were also urged to demand action for her release, given her U.S. citizenship. She was released on bail and the case against her is still pending almost a year later.

In March, Israeli police raided the Educational Bookshop—a leading destination in East Jerusalem for books in Arabic, Hebrew and English—for “selling books containing incitement” and support for terrorism. They detained its 61 year-old co-owner, **Imad Muna**, and confiscated 50 books, whose covers featured the word ‘Palestine’ or images of the Palestinian flag. Muna was released after 24 hours and the books returned, after an outcry by writers, intellectuals and readers from around the world. This was the second such raid on the bookshop. In February, Muna’s son and brother were detained

¹² L.Tondo and agencies, ‘Oscar-winning Palestinian director Hamdan Ballal released from Israeli detention’, *The Guardian*, 25 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/25/oscar-winning-palestinian-director-hamdan-ballal-released-from-israeli-detention> (accessed 26 January 2026).

¹³ ‘No Other Land co-director attacked by Israeli settlers and arrested’, *Al Jazeera*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/24/no-other-land-co-director-attacked-by-israeli-settlers-and-arrested> (accessed 7 March 2026).

¹⁴ ‘Israeli settler kills West Bank activist who worked on Oscar-winning film’, *Al Jazeera*, 29 July 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/29/israeli-settler-kills-west-bank-activist-who-worked-on-oscar-winning-film>, accessed 7 March 2026

¹⁵ ‘Afro-Palestinian Artist and Activist Arrested by Israeli Authorities’, *Artists at Risk Connection*, 27 January 2025, <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/statement/afro-palestinian-artist-and-activist-arrested-by-israeli-authorities/> (accessed 26 January 2026).



The war in Sudan is severely impacting cultural institutions and heritage sites. Photo: Frehiwot Teklemedhin, Unsplash.

for two days and held under house arrest for five days before being freed without charge. Police cited a children's colouring book as evidence of terrorism.¹⁶

A raid in November on the El-Hakawati Theatre—a cornerstone of Palestinian culture in Occupied East Jerusalem since 1984, which has faced repeated closures and bans over the years—took place just minutes before a musical performance titled *Dreams Under the Olive Tree*, featuring 70 children and teenagers, was scheduled to begin before an audience of their families. Acting on orders from far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israeli forces and intelligence agents ordered the audience to leave within five minutes, shouting at the children and sowing panic and fear among the young participants and families present, driving many of them to tears.¹⁷ The Palestinian Ministry of Culture¹⁸ and various international groups have sharply condemned the raid, describ-

ing it as a blatant violation of international laws and conventions that protect cultural institutions.

Sudan: War damage and cultural loss

The war in Sudan has resulted in extensive destruction across the country, severely impacting cultural institutions and heritage sites. A report by Action for Hope and UNESCO, released in 2025¹⁹, documents widespread and severe destruction of Sudanese cultural infrastructure during the war. It identifies 177 cultural institutions and spaces across four states that have been damaged or rendered at risk since the war broke out in April 2023, 144 of them in Khartoum alone. Among these are key national institutions, such as the Sudan National Museum, multiple state-run theatres, and public libraries, as well as galleries, cinemas, cultural centres and personal archives. The data shows that 30.5% of all institutions surveyed were looted, 18.6% were destroyed, 7.3% were damaged by shelling, and 3.9% set on fire while the

¹⁶ P. Beaumont, 'Israeli police raid Palestinian bookshop in East Jerusalem twice in a month', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/11/israeli-police-raid-palestinian-bookshop-east-jerusalem-twice-in-a-month> (accessed 26 January 2026).

¹⁷ 'Israeli forces raid Palestinian kids' play on Ben-Gvir's orders', *The New Arab*, 26 November 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/israeli-forces-raid-palestinian-kids-play-ben-gvirs-orders> (accessed 7 March 2026).

¹⁸ Palestinian News & Information Agency (WAFA), 'Ministry of Culture condemns Israeli occupation's storming of El-Hakawati Theatre in Jerusalem', *WAFA*, 24 November 2025, <https://www.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/136476> (accessed 26 January 2026).

¹⁹ Action for Hope / United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 'Contemporary Cultural and Artistic Assets and Spaces at Risk in Sudan', UNESCO, July 2025, https://unesco.org/creativity/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/07/English%20-%20Contemporary%20Cultural%20and%20Artistic%20Assets%20and%20Spaces%20at%20Risk%20in%20Sudan_0.pdf (accessed 26 January 2026).

fate of 23% of structures remains unknown due to the lack of information from inaccessible conflict zones. Public and personal libraries were especially hard-hit: 74% suffered destruction, vandalism or theft. In total, the study confirms that nearly one in three Sudanese cultural institutions considered in the assessment suffered direct physical damage, with losses in Khartoum described as “grave” and “scaling outward” as fighting expands. The Action for Hope/UNESCO report and the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACPJ)²⁰ recorded up to 55 deaths of artists in the period up to November 2024—and no doubt there have been more since then. Many have been forced to flee to neighbouring countries: Uganda, Egypt and the Emirates. According to testimonies even in exile Sudanese artists find themselves caught between the conflicting parties in this war, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), depending on the allegiance of the host country they are in, to one party or the other. Sudanese comedian Mouayed Jamal reported on his social media account that he was interrogated by the Emirati security in the presence of Janjaweed militia (armed groups originally from Darfur closely linked to the RSF).²¹ ²² The fear is such that exiled Sudanese artists are reluctant to participate in events, even online, that may bring them attention, as reported to Freemuse by Khalid Al Baih²³, Sudanese cartoonist and founder of KhartoonMag.²⁴

Syria: Ambiguity and artistic risk

The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024 was followed by a period of relative free expression in Syria after 40 years of dictatorship. Many dissident artists who had been forcibly displaced out of the country after the Syrian revolution in 2011, or during the decades of the Assad regime dictatorship that preceded it, rushed to return home to join the public festivities that marked

this turning point in Syrian modern history. Banned films, visual artworks and books exposing the dictatorship rule, and documenting the Syrian revolution and the torture of former regime political prisoners, found their way back to audiences in the homeland, after decades of exile.

In the months that followed the formation of the transitional government under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, President of Syria in a transitional capacity, there were some incidents and institutional measures that speak of inconsistency and ambiguity over the level of openness of space for free expression in post-Assad Syria. An example of this is a letter leaked on social media, signed by the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, and approved by the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, with instructions to ban students from creating work that features visual representations of nude models in their graduation projects. This was met by outrage from some students²⁵ and the independent art community.²⁶ In a separate incident, two brothers, **Walat Haji Nasir** and **Mustafa** from Afrin, were stopped at a checkpoint on the Homs–Lebanon road while returning from Beirut, where they had been playing music. Forces affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government intercepted them, smashed their instruments, insulted them by claiming “folk dance and music are anti-religious,” and threatened them with violence—effectively preventing them from bringing their instruments back through that crossing.²⁷

The hoped for period of relative free expression in Syria was shattered not only by internal unrest but also by continued Israeli strikes on Syrian territory and further compounded by bloody events in the Mediterranean coastal areas in March 2025 and the Suwayda Southern governorate in July 2025.

²⁰ African Centre for Peace and Justice Studies (ACJPS) and Sudanese Music Research Center, ‘The Tears of Guitars and the Cries of Museums: A Report on the Violations against Artists, Musicians and Civilian Archaeological and Artistic Objects’, *Salaamedia.org*, 27 November 2024, <https://salaamedia.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/THE-TEARS-OF-GUITARS-AND-THE-CRIES-OF-MUSEUMS.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2026).

²¹ Walad Kosti, ‘Sudani comedian arrested in UAE for criticizing the RSF militia’, *Instagram Reel*, <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DRIR682DlwB/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

²² ‘Complaint filed with UN over UAE detention of Sudanese comedian in coordination with RSF militants’ *Middle East Monitor* (2 December 2025) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20251202-complaint-filed-with-un-over-uae-detention-of-sudanese-comedian-in-coordination-with-rsf-militants/> (accessed 12 March 2026).

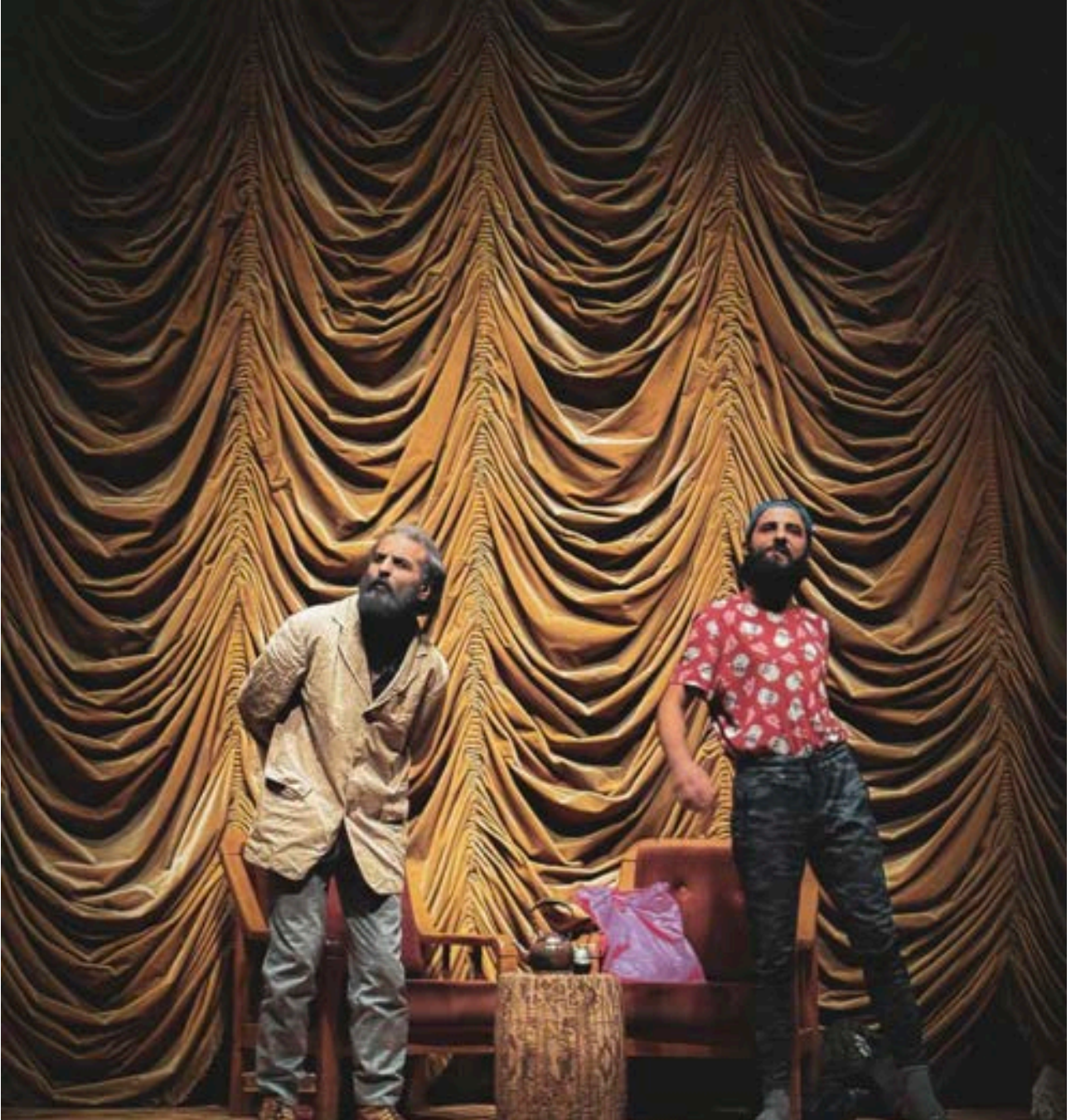
²³ Kalid al Baih in an interview with Freemuse December 2025.

²⁴ <http://khartoonmag.com/>

²⁵ Instagram post by Harak Tollabi / Students Movement, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DN6YUOKsBT/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

²⁶ ‘Damascus art students banned from using nude models, stirring debate on academic freedom’, *The Syrian Observer*, 26 August 2025, <https://syrianobserver.com/society/damascus-art-students-banned-from-using-nude-models-stirring-debate-on-academic-freedom.html> (accessed 26 January 2026).

²⁷ ‘Security forces assault Afrin artists, smash their musical instruments’, *Hawar News Agency*, <https://hawarnews.com/en/security-forces-assault-afrin-artists-smash-their-musical-instruments>, 31 July 2025 (accessed 13 February 2026).



The Malas Brothers' play 'All Shame Upon You' was suspended in Tartus, Syria, in August 2025. Photo: Malas Twins, Instagram.

International human rights organisations²⁸, as well as local Syrian monitoring groups²⁹, described these events as potential war crimes. They have documented widespread abuses by government-aligned militias and security forces and

called for independent investigations to determine whether senior officials issued direct orders. The reports confirm that both the Alawite and the Druze minorities were the primary victims of these brutal “massacres.”

²⁸ 'Syria: Coastal massacres of Alawite civilians must be investigated as war crimes', Amnesty International, 3 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/syria-coastal-massacres-of-alawite-civilians-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/> and 'Syria: New investigation reveals evidence government and affiliated forces extrajudicially executed dozens of Druze people in Suwayda', Amnesty International, 2 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/09/syria-new-investigation-reveals-evidence-government-and-affiliated-forces-extrajudicially-executed-dozens-of-druze-people-in-suwayda/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

²⁹ Refer to Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) articles 'Post Assad ... Before Building the State - Violations in Syria's Coast and Hama - March 2025', SCM, 15 July 2025, <https://scm.bz/en/post-assad-before-building-the-state-violations-in-syrias-coast-and-hama-march-2025/> and 'Statement on the escalation of violence in Sweida Governorate', 16 July 2025, <https://scm.bz/en/statement-on-the-escalation-of-violence-in-sweida-governorate-en/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

An internal report shared with Freemuse, by Ettijahat-Independent Culture³⁰, an independent cultural organization servicing Syrian artists, anonymously documented the cases of six Syrian artists who endured severe disruption to their lives and artistic practice in the wake of the 2025 coastal and Suwayda incidents. All faced displacement, looting and unsafe conditions that made continuing their work impossible. Among them was a 25 year-old female musician, forced to abandon her teaching after witnessing homes looted in her minority community, and a 26 year-old politically critical composer, who went into hiding and could no longer create due to fear and self-censorship.

In August 2025, a play by the prominent duo, the Malas Brothers, “ريخ ب متناو راع لك” (*All Shame Upon You*), which critically explored social and political issues in Syria, was temporarily suspended in Tartus following local administrative intervention. Observers and freedom of expression defenders suggest that the suspension may have been linked to the twin brothers’ recent public criticism of the violent incidents in the coastal regions and Suwayda.³¹ While the Ministry of Culture denied issuing an official ban, the episode was widely perceived as informal censorship, highlighting how politically sensitive work—especially pieces addressing recent human rights abuses—can result in pressure or intimidation, even in the absence of formal prohibitions, in post-Assad Syria. The Malas brothers have returned to perform in Syria after years of exile because of their explicit criticism of the Assad dictatorship.

Saudi Arabia: Culture, power and censorship

An important development in the region is the apparent emergence of Saudi Arabia as a country invested in the soft power of arts and culture under its Vision 2030 initiative.³² The Red Sea Film festival³³ is rapidly becoming a destination for filmmakers from the Arab region and the rest of the world, and a major source of generous funding for

film production, at a time when other sources are shrinking. The debate continues on whether this new high-profile investment in arts, festivals, film and cultural industries is also an embracement of artistic freedom of expression. The 2025 Riyadh Comedy Festival drew significant criticism from human rights organisations and artists, who highlighted the contradictions between Saudi Arabia’s cultural promotion and ongoing limits on free expression. American comedian **Atsuko Okatsuka**³⁴ publicly rejected an offer to perform at the festival and shared parts of the contract she received from festival organisers under the Saudi General Entertainment Authority, which restricts criticism of the Saudi royal family, religion and the legal system. Comedian **Tim Dillon**³⁵ said he was removed from the festival lineup after joking about Saudi labour practices, highlighting how even humour could be constrained in practice.³⁶ Human Rights Watch and other human rights organisations and artists criticised the organisers and many participating comedians for not using the platform to highlight or protest the detention of dissidents and activists, including cases of imprisoned critics.

Egypt: Fear of sound of dissent

The 2011 Arab Spring, during which mass protests toppled dictators and shook entrenched regimes, continues to haunt many regimes in the region. Even after counterrevolutions restored authoritarian power, rulers remain fearful of renewed dissent and closely police any sign of it. Determined to erase the revolution’s symbolic power—including the art and imagery that fuelled it—authorities continue to pursue artistic symbols of dissent, ensuring that the revolutionary spirit is denied any visible form in public life.

The release of Egyptian political activist, blogger and author Alaa Abd El-Fattah on 23 September 2025 allowed his supporters to breathe a sigh of relief amidst the continuing crackdown on dissident voices and symbols of the Egyptian 2011 revolution in the country.³⁷ Yet banning from travel

30 Ettijahat website, <https://www.ettijahat.org/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

31 ‘Syrian authorities halt play critical of transitional government’, *The Syrian Observer*, 14 May 2025, <https://syrianobserver.com/society/syrian-authorities-halt-play-critical-of-transitional-government.html> (accessed 26 January 2026).

32 Vision 2030 website, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/>, (accessed 26 January 2026).

33 Red Sea Film Festival website, <https://redseafilmfest.com/en/>, (accessed 26 January 2026).

34 M. Franklin, ‘Atsuko Okatsuka details censorship rules for Riyadh Comedy Festival’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 27 September 2025, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/atsuko-okatsuka-riyadh-comedy-festival-censorship-rules-1236387458/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

35 ‘Saudi Arabia: Riyadh Comedy Festival Whitewashes Abuses’, *Human Rights Watch*, 23 September 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/23/saudi-arabia-riyadh-comedy-festival-whitewashes-abuses> (accessed 26 January 2026).

36 ‘Riyadh Comedy Festival 2025 Human Rights Debate: Comedy, Censorship, and Complicity’, *Geneva Council*, 25 September 2025, <https://genevacouncil.com/riyadh-comedy-festival-2025-human-rights-debate-comedy-censorship-and-complicity/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

37 ‘Alaa ABD EL-FATTAH’, *PEN International*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.pen-international.org/cases/alaab-abd-el-fattah> (accessed 13 February 2026).

Ahmad Douma³⁸, another equally high-profile, former political prisoner and poet, and preventing him from boarding a plane at Cairo airport to Beirut on the very day that Abd E-Fattah’s travel ban was lifted speaks to a continued strategy of suppressing voices of dissent in the country. Likewise, of concern is: the continued imprisonment of **Ashraf Omar**, Egyptian cartoonist, author and translator in pretrial detention since July 2024, whose case is still pending and was referred to trial in 2025; **Abdelrahman Al-Ansary**³⁹—film director, tried in a state security case in 2025, and charged with “joining a terrorist group and spreading false news” ;” **Marwa Arafa**⁴⁰, translator in pretrial detention (despite her critical health condition) since April 2020, in violation of the law that stipulates two years as a maximum length of pretrial detention, her trial began in 2025⁴¹ in a state security case; and **Galal El-Behairy**, a poet and translator, 34 years old, who has been detained for more than seven years. El-Behairy was arrested after the release of the song *Balaha* by singer Ramy Essam, which criticised the Egyptian government before the presidential elections at the time. Freemuse has followed El-Behairy’s case and has documented it in several reports, condemning his imprisonment and calling for his release.⁴²

In February 2025, ElMaraya for Culture and Arts⁴³ was banned from participating in the 2025 Cairo Book Fair by the General Egyptian Book Organization (GEBO). ElMaraya is an independent, Cairo-based publisher, known for its diverse works in the humanities and fiction, featuring critical voices and award-winning translations.

In a related wave of prosecutions in Egypt, authorities have targeted online content creators and performers on vague “morality” grounds. EIPR’s latest report, “Disciplining the society”⁴⁴, unpacks

the context for the arrest of five tattoo artists for threatening “the values of Egyptian families,” amongst other cases related to content creators and users of social media platforms. This crackdown on online content creators also targeted women performers and creators on vague morality charges. This included a 16 yearold dancer, **Nour Tufaha**, jailed and sentenced to two years for posting dance videos; at least four belly dancers—**Badiaa**, **Noura Denial**, **Boosi alAsad**, and **Doo-sa**—detained for dancing in allegedly “indecent” clothing; and tattoo artist **Fadi Tattoo**, who had posted videos of himself tattooing women, who was arrested and later released on bail.⁴⁵

Morocco: Youth protest and repression.

Artists that have supported or participated in the “Gen Z 212”⁴⁶ youth-initiated protest movement, which erupted in several Moroccan cities in September 2025, have been violently arrested and subjected to legal cases. Despite the movement identifying itself as a peaceful movement seeking reform of the failing public services, and a response to the high unemployment, and corruption, the protests were met with what international and local human rights organisations described as excessive force and mass arrests of protesters and bystanders.⁴⁷ Prominent rapper **Hamza Raid**⁴⁸, known for using his art to speak out against injustice, was the first amongst a larger group of rappers to be arrested. Although released without bail, Hamza now faces serious charges of participation in unauthorised peaceful assembly and incitement to commit felonies and misdemeanors through electronic means.

Algeria: The lasting impact of Hirak

The Hirak movement, which began in February 2019 in Algeria as peaceful mass protests against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s bid for a fifth

38 M. Hagag, ‘Activist Ahmed Douma banned from travel’, *Mada Masr*, 21 December 2025, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2025/12/21/news/u/activist-ahmed-douma-banned-from-travel/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

39 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, press release, 2 June 2025, <https://bit.ly/4csCyau> (accessed 26 January 2026).

40 H. El-Mahdawy, ‘When helping people in need is a crime: The case of Marwa Arafa’, *Mada Masr*, 3 April 2022, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/04/03/feature/politics/when-helping-people-in-need-is-a-crime-the-case-of-marwa-arafa/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

41 ‘Marwa Arafa’s Trial Begins After More Than Five Years in Pretrial Detention’, EIPR, 6 July 2025, <https://eipr.org/en/press/2025/07/marwa-arafa%E2%80%99s-trial-begins-after-more-5-years-pretrial-detention> (accessed 26 January 2026).

42 ‘Egyptian poet and lyricist, Galal El-Behairy enters eighth year in prison’, *Freemuse*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/egyptian-poet-and-lyricist-galal-el-behairy-enters-eighth-year-in-prison> (accessed 26 January 2026).

43 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), ‘With the conclusion of the Book Fair, when will the Minister of Culture and the Egyptian Publishers Association announce their position on ElMaraya ban’, press release, 5 February 2025, <https://eipr.org/en/press/2025/02/conclusion-book-fair-when-will-minister-culture-and-egyptian-publishers-association> (accessed 26 January 2026).

44 M. Napolion, ‘327 prosecuted for ‘family values’ violations since 2020, report finds’, *Al Manassa*, 9 December 2025, <https://manassa.news/en/news/29006> (accessed 13 February 2026).

45 Human Rights Watch, ‘Egypt: Mass Crackdown Targets Online Content Creators’, 10 September 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/10/egypt-mass-crackdown-targets-online-content-creators> (accessed 26 January 2026).

46 Gen Z 212 is a Moroccan youth-led, digitally driven movement that emerged in 2024–2025 to protest unemployment, economic inequality, corruption, and restrictions on freedoms and to mobilize for political accountability.

47 ‘Morocco: Halt use of excessive force following crackdown on youth protests’, *Amnesty International*, 3 October 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/morocco-halt-use-of-excessive-force-following-crackdown-on-youth-protests/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

48 I. Ou-ouda, ‘Don Bigg backs fellow artists Raid and Pause Flow amid lyrics cases’, *MWN Lifestyle*, 24 November 2025, <https://mwnlifestyle.com/2025/11/24/don-bigg-backs-fellow-artists-raid-and-pause-flow-amid-lyrics-cases/> (accessed 26 January 2026).



Mohamed Tadjadit, poet and HIRAK supporter, was sentenced to five years in prison in 2025. Photo: Mohamed Tadjadit, Facebook.

term, quickly evolved into a sustained grassroots movement demanding an end to entrenched corruption and authoritarianism. Despite Bouteflika's resignation, the HIRAK persisted through decentralised, weekly demonstrations, inspiring widespread civic engagement and youth activism. In 2025, the sentencing of poet and HIRAK supporter **Mohamed Tadjadit** to five years in prison was widely seen both as a warning against the potential spillover of Morocco's Gen Z protests into Algeria, and as a symbolic act intended to deter cultural figures from fuelling dissent, highlighting the regime's continuing fear of the movement's enduring influence.⁴⁹

Resilience and resistance

All the trends and violations described in this chapter have not halted artists, cultural producers and the independent organisations that support them, from continuing to be a beacon for creativity, free thought and imagination in the Arab region. In Gaza, supported by institutions like the Edward Said Foundation, the Qattan Foundation, and Palestine Filmlab, artists ensured that music, poetry and film made their way to families and

children forcibly displaced to tents and subjected to daily Israeli bombardment over more than two years. **Lebanon** is gradually reclaiming its position as a hub for regional art and culture gatherings and a country untamed when it comes to individual freedoms. **Alexandre Paulikevitch**⁵⁰, Lebanese Queer dancer, insisted on continuing with their show despite threats of attack by fundamentalist Christian and Muslim religious groups. Art organisations in Egypt and Tunisia continued to host two of the most prominent, independent public space art festivals of the region: Dream City (Tunisia) and D-CAF (Egypt).

Together, these acts of cultural persistence, affirm that, even amid repression, violence and intimidation, artistic expression in the Arab region remains vibrant and a vital force of resistance, community and collective imagination.

⁴⁹ 'Free Mohamed Tadjadit', *Freemuse*, 10 November 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/free-mohamed-tadjadit> (accessed 26 January 2026).
⁵⁰ M. Harb and K. Chehayeb, 'A Lebanese dancer defies extremist threats and social norms with his sold-out performances', *Associated Press*, 13 September 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-dancer-lgbtq-religion-beirut-alexandre-paulikevitch-1b36f6ad8c6e5b82e07e49451b2e12e7> (accessed 26 January 2026).

CROSSING RED LINES IN IRAN: ARTISTIC LIFE UNDER CULTURAL SECURITY AND REGIONAL WAR

Parvin Ardalan

- *Artists and cultural workers remain targets of repression: Singing, the form of dress, art, and film-making, can lead to punishment, including long prison terms and even death sentences.*
- *Women artists are most vulnerable: Women are especially targeted, with their bodies, voices, and presence in public space treated as threats to society.*
- *Resistance grows: Despite tighter control, art has become a way to resist, drawing its power from real life and shared experience.*

In 2025, life in Iran unfolded under two major events that, by the first days of 2026, culminated in a third, marking a sharp “before and after” in the country’s social and political life.

The 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, sparked by the death of Jina Mahsa Amini¹, transformed public notions of the body, art, and politics, as women increasingly appeared without mandatory hijab and artists pushed beyond state red lines. The June 2025 “Twelve-Day War” when the U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran exposed the vulnerability of key infrastructures and led authorities to securitise the cultural sphere, summoning, prosecuting, and surveilling dissidents, among them artists, in the name of national security.

By late December 2025, a collapsing currency and deepening economic crisis triggered strikes and protests that quickly became a nationwide uprising, met with lethal force after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered their suppression “by any means necessary.” Amnesty International’s Raha Bahreini described the ensuing bloodshed as “a state-orchestrated massacre,” with many artists among the dead and detained, and a pervasive climate of fear driving Iran’s cultural life into silence.²

Despite the escalating repression, art has become a field of creative disobedience, where legitimacy derives not from official permission but from lived experience, the body and the collective memory of society.

¹ 'Death of Mahsa Amini', Wikipedia - The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Mahsa_Amini (accessed 25 February 2026).

² F. Fassihi, 'How Iran Crushed a Citizen Uprising With Lethal Force', The New York Times (25 January 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/25/world/middleeast/iran-how-crackdown-was-done.html> (accessed 25 February 2026).

Systematic repression of women's voices in Iran's music scene

The early months of 2025 began with systematic pressure and threats against female singers across Iran. On 28 February, **Hiwa Seyfizadeh**, a classical singer, was arrested while singing the first piece at a concert at the Emarat Roubrou cultural center in Tehran, which was halted by security forces for “singing solo without a permit.”³ Iranian law prohibits women from singing solo before mixed audiences that include men and mandates adherence to strict hijab regulations. She was released the next day on bail, but her Instagram page was blocked for producing “criminal content.”

One day later, on 29 February, **Bitā Sadeghian**, a singer and voice coach from Isfahan, was summoned to the General and Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office of Isfahan, and her Instagram page was also blocked. She was accused of “violating public morality” and “disseminating inappropriate content via computer systems.”⁴ On 7 April, she was summoned again, this time to the Justice Court of Najafabad for allegedly “publishing images and content against public decency.”⁵ In December 2025, she announced on Instagram that she had left Iran and settled in Europe.

Since the 1979 revolution, women in Iran have been banned from singing solo in public due to a strict religious interpretation that a woman's voice is provocative for men. But despite the restrictions, many female artists have turned to social media to share their voices—often defying both the singing ban and the country's strict hijab laws.

On 12 March, **Saba Morteza-Nejad**, a singer, was summoned by the Public Security Police for performing in the musical project *Tar o Tarikh*⁶ at the Ti-Ti Caravanserai in Siahkal.⁷ Her Instagram account⁸ was shut down for a while but is now accessible, but with the music project content removed. Following these arrests, BBC Persian and Radio Liberty reported on a list of other female



Singer Saba Morteza-Nejad was summoned on 12 March after performing in *Tar o Tarikh* in Siahkal; related Instagram content was later removed.

Photo: Saba Avaaz, Instagram.

singers facing judicial actions, including **Golsa Rahimzamani**, **Reyhanoo**, **Nazanin Amiri**, **Parisa (BabyDragon)**, and **Mehrban Jazini**⁹. The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported the summons of seven female singers in Behbahan—**Zolfa Jamashiani**, **Azardokht Taherpour**, **Elaheh Ahadi**, **Mahsan Ehtarami**, **Ramesh Seyed**, **Mozhdeh Nasiri**, and **Negin Mansoori-Nazad**—to the Intelligence Department and Basij of Behbahan. They were forced to sign commitments they would refrain from solo singing, attending women's gatherings, playing musical instruments, and publishing artistic content online, but if they wished they could perform publicly in the form of religious chanting (*maddahi*).¹⁰ In response, 160 artists and civil activists, men and women, issued a statement titled “Women's Voices, Echoes of Freedom; Silencing Women's Voices Is Silencing Freedom,” describing the government's approach

³ ‘Female singer arrested during live performance in Tehran’, *Iran International*, 28 February 2025, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202502286976>, (accessed 12 January 2026).

⁴ ‘Iranian singer Bitā Sadeghian summoned to court on March 4, 2025, following Hiva Seyfizadeh's arrest’, *DeepNewz*, 1 March 2025, <https://deepnewz.com/iran/iranian-singer-bitā-sadeghian-summoned-to-court-on-march-4-2025-following-hiva-s-fa6c219b>, (accessed 12 January 2026).

⁵ ‘نایق داصی چایب ددجم راضح’, *online news article (Persian)*, <https://komalah.org/نایق-داصی-چایب-ددجم-راضح/>, (accessed 12 January 2026).

⁶ A tar is a musical instrument and tarikh means history.

⁷ ‘دش راضح ای مومع تینما سیلپ هب دازنینض ترم ابص: یگدن ناوخ لیلد هب’, *HRANA News (Human Rights Activists News Agency)*, 19 November 2025, <https://www.hra-news.org/2025/hranews/a-53809/>, (accessed 13 January 2026).

⁸ Saba Morteza-Nejad's Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/saba.avaaz/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

⁹ ‘Iran steps up crackdown on female singers’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, 17 March 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-women-singers-crackdown-rights/33346815.html>, and ‘شیرازفا!’, *BBC Persian*, 11 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cdel6gk8ddo>, (both accessed 21 January 2026).

¹⁰ ‘Seven female singers banned after security interrogation in Iran’, *IranWire*, 16 April 2025, <https://prod.iranwire.com/en/women/140407-seven-female-singers-banned-after-security-interrogation-in-iran/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

as the systematic suppression of women and an effort to consolidate a discriminatory, misogynistic system. The statement stated:

“The repression of women’s singing is a crime against art and freedom of expression, a violation of human rights, and an act of overt violence against women. We strongly condemn the government’s attempt to silence women’s voices and fully support all female singers.”¹¹

Iranian authorities have not only targeted women who defy gender restrictions but have also moved aggressively against men and public figures who express solidarity with them. On 28 February, singer **Mehdi Yarrahi** posted a video on X stating that he had been banned from performing for five years and that this prohibition allowed him to understand the pain of Iranian women and reject benefiting from gendered privilege. On 5 March, Yarrahi appeared at court, where he was subjected to 74 lashes.¹² Two years earlier, in August 2023, Yarrahi had been arrested after releasing the song *Rousarito (Your Headscarf)* and sentenced to two years and eight months’ imprisonment and 74 lashes for the song and for supporting the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.¹³

Despite the imposed restrictions on female singers, the visibility of women’s voices and images continues to grow on Instagram and other social media channels, a development unimaginable five years ago. This reflects a form of legitimisation from within the movement itself, despite the opposition from the state in control of laws. Political voices and bodies asserting their political views are increasingly visible.

Public space, the politics of the body and the duality of legitimacy in art

Since the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, Iranian streets and digital spaces, inside and outside the country, have become arenas for everyday struggle, resistance and disruption. Women

and youth demonstrate agency both individually and collectively, through their dress choice, by reclaiming public spaces, and by entering forbidden arenas. These daily acts politicise the body and challenge the official understanding of social order. Examples include women not following the legally mandatory dress code, mixed-gender street performances, women taking part in marathons, group motorcycling, and transforming cafes into discussion spaces. While these acts are often met with admonishment, fines, closure, or judicial action, the resistance continues.

The removal of morality patrols and the postponement of the “Hijab and Chastity” bill from becoming law by the Supreme National Security Council in December 2024, signaled the growing power of resistance.¹⁴ Yet tensions over the legally mandatory dress code continue. Women cannot attend official events in attire of their choice, an edict that affects female filmmakers, singers and actors.

Azadeh Bizargiti, a documentary filmmaker who spoke to *Freemuse* in 2025, appeared publicly without the compulsory hijab after the 2022 Jina Mahsa Amini uprising, stating, “*This choice is a form of resistance that gives women agency and the right to narrate in their own way, but it also leads to absence and invisibility in formal and media spaces.*” Similarly, many female artists were banned from working but refused to continue to do their work, nevertheless. retract their choice.



Since Woman, Life, Freedom, everyday acts in streets and online spaces have become forms of resistance in Iran. Photo: Artin Bakhan, Unsplash.

¹¹ “Women’s voices, the echo of freedom, grows louder and stronger”, *Kolbarnews English*, 17 April 2025, <https://en.kolbarnews.com/womens-voices-the-echo-of-freedom-grows-louder-and-stronger/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

¹² “Mehdi Yarrahi tag archive”, *HRANA News (Human Rights Activists News Agency)*, <https://www.en-hrana.org/tag/mehdi-yarrahi/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “The Islamic Republic of Iran’s Chastity and Hijab Law and the Weaponization of Women’s Economic Vulnerabilities”, *Middle East Briefs*, *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University*, December 2024, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/meb162.html>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

Even long after a person has been released, they may continue to suffer reprisals. Actress **Taraneh Alidoosti** was arrested, imprisoned and banned in 2022 after posting unveiled photos of herself and protesting the execution of protester Mohsen Shekari for his role in the demonstrations that year.¹⁵ After her release on bail in January 2023, she temporarily withdrew from public life due to autoimmune illness. At the end of 2025, BBC Persian released the documentary *Taraneh*¹⁶ by filmmaker Pegah Ahangarani, in which Alidoosti stated that Jina Mahsa Amini's death changed her life. Post-Amini, working within official channels no longer makes sense. She has declared she will no longer act while wearing the compulsory headscarf.¹⁷

The Twelve-Day War

The June 2025 Iran-Israel war not only shook the country militarily, but it intensified national security discourse and ideological boundary-settings. Ethnic and minority groups, including Kurds, Baluchis and Afghans, faced increased accusations post-war when Iran's government used the pretext of "national security" as justification for suppressing dissent. The "Enhanced Punishment for Espionage and Cooperation with Enemy States" law passed rapidly through parliament and the Guardian Council, heightening repression. Human rights organisations described these measures as a response by the state to its legitimacy crisis, rather than necessary for safeguarding the country's security.¹⁸

Baha'i artists faced intensified legal pressure during and after the war. Iran's Baha'i minority faces systematic persecution. The government does not recognize the Baha'i faith and routinely arrests members on security-related charges. In each case, the pattern is clear, artistic or cultural success by a Bahá'í is not tolerated. Among them were **Arman Nik-Ain**, a musician from Qeshm, **Navian Hejazi**, **Nazanin Abedini** and **Paria Marandiz**, a stage and costume designer.¹⁹ Marandiz was briefly detained in June, her home searched, and personal belongings confiscated. On 16 August, she was sentenced

to three years in prison for "propaganda against the Islamic Republic during the Twelve-Day War" and "propaganda activities aimed at strengthening and reinforcing Israel." She began her sentence on 22 November.



Filmmaker Negin Aminzadeh was arrested and given a suspended prison sentence over online posts. Photo: Negin Aminzadeh, Instagram.

Photographers and videographers from minority groups also faced heightened scrutiny. **Keyhan Maqsoudi**²⁰, a Baha'i nature photographer and videographer from Urmia, was arrested in June, and transferred multiple times among different security detention centers. There are still no formal charges presented. Kurdish activists and artists, including **Omid Bagheri**, **Shirko Kani-Sanani** and **Nima Mandoumi**, faced arrests and indefinite detention, sometimes due to prior collaborations with Israeli artists.²¹ **Filmmaker Negin Aminzadeh** from Shiraz was arrested and sentenced to

¹⁵ 'Iran: Horrifying execution of young protester exposes authorities' cruelty and risk of further bloodshed', Amnesty International, 9 December 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/iran-horrifying-execution-of-young-protester-exposes-authorities-cruelty-and-risk-of-further-bloodshed/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

¹⁶ 'Taraneh' (2025), The Movie Database (TMDb), <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/1603877>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

¹⁷ 'Iranian Actress Taraneh Alidoosti Praised For Defiance After New Documentary, RFE/RL Radio Farda, 26 December 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taraneh-alidoosti-documentary-praise-women-life-freedom/33633369.html>, (accessed 5 February 2026).

¹⁸ 'Iran's Parliament approves harsh anti-espionage law amid strategic weakness and domestic unrest', Iran News Update, 13 July 2025, <https://irannewsupdate.com/news/news-digest/irans-parliament-approves-harsh-anti-espionage-law-amid-strategic-weakness-and-domestic-unrest>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

¹⁹ 'In the shadow of art: how Bahá'í artists in Iran are being silenced', IranWire, 3 September 2025, <https://iranwire.com/en/news/144515-in-the-shadow-of-art-how-bahai-artists-in-iran-are-being-silenced/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

²⁰ 'Bahá'í photographer held in Iran for nearly three months', IranWire, 12 September 2025, <https://iranwire.com/en/bahais-of-iran/144760-bahai-photographer-held-in-iran-for-nearly-three-months/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

²¹ 'Iran arrests musician Nima Mandoumi in Alborz, fate remains unknown', Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, 28 December 2025, <https://hengaw.net/en/news/2025/12/article-154>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

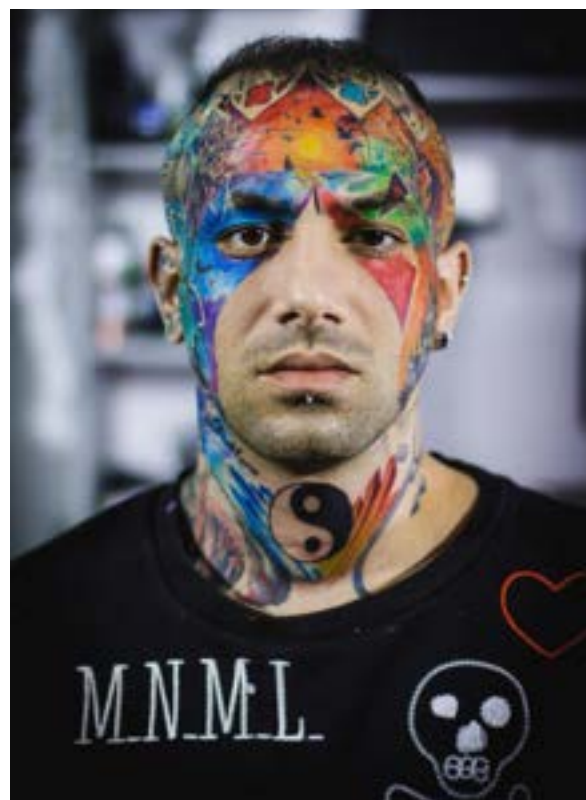
suspended imprisonment and periodic reporting to the intelligence agency, due to “insulting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei” online.²²

Following the Twelve-Day War between Iran and Israel, rap became a primary target for renewed repression. Pro-government media released videos of forced confessions of three arrested rappers: **Danial Faraji (Meshki)**, **Ardalan (Deloo)** and **Sajjad Shahi**, who were accused of “publishing unconventional and controversial content social media.” Faraji had previously released a critical song about the Twelve-Day War. In the confession video, he was forced to apologise to the Supreme leader Ali Khamenei and removed his signature black mask for the first time, in an action symbolising humiliation rather than transparency. The three remain imprisoned in Tehran’s Fashafouyeh prison.²³

The case is part of a broader pattern of forced confession, as exhibited in the cases of rappers Arash Sayadi, Ashkan Shekariyan Moghadam and composer Rassam Sohrabi. State media broadcast confession videos of them after their release, with shaved hair in a degrading position and reciting pre-written statements. Prominent rapper Tomaj Salehi criticised this move, emphasising that the issue is not individuals or their work but the state’s power to coerce confessions on camera.²⁴

From censorship to execution of cultural activists

Executions doubled in 2025 compared to the previous year. Accusations of rebellion (*baghi*) against cultural activists, which carry the death penalty, have been used as a pretext to go beyond mere censorship to the ultimate punishment. As the BBC reports, activists have said that the rate of executions in Iran increases when the regime feels under threat and that the aim is to forestall internal opposition by instilling fear in the population.²⁵



Amirhossein Maghsoudlou AKA Tataloo. Photo:Pouria Afkhami (Pixoos), licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

- Kurdish activist, cultural figure and publishing manager, **Ehsan Rostami** and poet **Peyman Farah-Avar** were accused of *baghi* and sentenced to death. Rostami was arrested on 20 August, along with five other cultural activists. Farah-Avar who was charged in connection with his protest poetry, has been held in Rashed Prison, Rāsh, since September 2024 and sentenced to death without a public trial.²⁶
- Famous singer **Amirhossein Maghsoudloo (Tataloo)**, has been imprisoned since December 2023, initially sentenced to five years, the penalty was later revised to a death sentence and more recently the court has accepted his “repentance”. He is now waiting for a final decision on a possible sentence reduction.²⁷

²² ‘Suspended sentence for Iranian filmmaker over online post’, Jinha Womens News Agency, 28 September 2025, <https://jinhaagency.com/en/actual/suspended-sentence-for-iranian-filmmaker-over-online-post-37496>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

²³ ‘Arrest and Broadcast of Forced Confessions of Two Rap Artists in Iran’, HRANA – Human Rights Activists News Agency, 13 October 2025, <https://www.en-hrana.org/arrest-and-broadcast-of-forced-confessions-of-two-rap-artists-in-iran/> (accessed 25 February 2026).

²⁴ ‘Iran’s crackdown on rap: young artists arrested for songs of protest’, IranWire, 15 October 2025, <https://iranwire.com/en/society/145567-irans-crackdown-on-rap-young-artists-arrested-for-songs-of-protest/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

²⁵ ‘Iran protests: escalating political crisis and executions’, BBC News, 28 December 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3v1g227p4xo>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

²⁶ ‘Iranian political prisoner Ehsan Rostami faces risk of execution’, IranFocus, 24 December 2025, <https://iranfocus.com/human-rights/56474-iranian-political-prisoner-ehsan-rostami-faces-risk-of-execution/>, and ‘Iran’s Supreme Court Upholds Death Sentence for Poet’, IranWire, 25 September 2025, <https://iranwire.com/en/news/145077-irans-supreme-court-upholds-death-sentence-for-poet/> (accessed 21 January 2026).

²⁷ ‘Iran court accepts Tataloo’s repentance case, goes to judiciary chief’, IranWire, 18 August 2025, <https://iranwire.com/en/society/144115-iran-court-accepts-tataloos-repentance-case-goes-to-judiciary-chief/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

Women, war and cultural resistance

The cultural landscape of Iran in 2025 was defined by the intersection of two decisive forces: the continuation of the revolution in the making of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement with resistance expressed via the politicisation of women's bodies, voices and creativity - and the Twelve-Day War, which reinstated national security logic at the center of policy and repression.

Women's solo singing, not following the mandatory dress code, unlicensed film, poetry, rap, documentary work, and even opting to stay in Iran while facing persecution, are all considered political acts. The state seeks control via legal, security and narrative tools, while the artistic community responds with creative disobedience.

The Twelve-Day war intensified these dynamics. Minority and dissenting artists face severe charges like "propaganda against the state," "collaboration with enemies," or even "rebellion," erasing boundaries between cultural activity and security crimes.

Yet this repression has not silenced expression. Increased female visibility, uncensored productions, and insistence on narrating lived experiences indicate that art in Iran 2025 became an arena for reclaiming meaning, body and collective memory. Resistance may not yield immediate victories, but it has made returning to the past impossible. Artistic life today exists suspended between threat and possibility, with creative imagination continuing to cross lines once considered forbidden.

UNITED KINGDOM: ART, PALESTINE, AND THE POLITICS OF “SAFETY”

Musa Igrek

- *Instead of outright bans, venues and broadcasters increasingly used risk assessments, staff welfare claims, and neutrality policies to withdraw or cancel Palestine-related work.*
- *Counter-terror anxieties, policing of expression, insurance/security pressures, and complaint campaigns pushed artists and promoters to self-censor or drop bookings, even when they were not facing convictions.*
- *Pressure has hit the whole arts sector, not just pro-Palestinian speech. It fell most heavily on Palestinian and pro-Palestinian artists but also affected some Jewish and Israeli artists.*

The world is better, and more complex, when artists can speak in their own terms. But in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2025, expression about Palestine increasingly became a pressure point for artistic freedom. Under scrutiny, the space for artistic expression depends less on the work itself than on the institutions willing to circulate and defend it.

The cancellations, withdrawals and episodes of policing expression described here are rarely the result of direct, centralised state bans. Instead, the range of expression narrows when Palestine is at issue through institutional risk management, neutrality rules and pre-emptive decisions about “safety”. In 2025, artistic freedom in the UK was shaped less by law than by this kind of risk aversion.

Speaking about Israel and Palestine has long been difficult for artists, as it has always been treated as a sensitive subject, shaped by both censorship and the need for caution. Since the Hamas-led attacks on southern Israel of 7 October 2023, that difficulty has only intensified. The humanitarian catastrophe that followed in Gaza, which the UN’s

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and rights organisations have described as genocide¹, has led exhibitions and performances far from the region to be postponed, cancelled or quietly stripped of institutional backing.

Despite the ceasefire that began in October 2025, the humanitarian emergency has not ended. Since it took effect, Palestinians have continued to be killed.² And Gaza, in the occupied Palestinian territories, remains a landscape of displacement, restrictions, loss and hunger.

The effects have been felt internationally, with repercussions for artistic expression from the beginning of the war and not just in the UK. Freemuse’s 2024 reporting identified Germany as a particularly intense site of cultural aftershocks after 7 October.³ It traced the pressure to institutional gatekeeping, as arts funding became tied to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, a definition even its lead author, Kenneth Stern, warns is being misused to

¹ D. Gritten and, I. Foulkes, 'Israel has committed genocide in Gaza, UN commission of inquiry says', The BBC, 16 September 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8641wy0n4go>; 'Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza', Amnesty International, 5 December 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>; 'Israel's Crime of Extermination, Acts of Genocide in Gaza', Human Rights Watch, 19 December 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extermination-acts-genocide-gaza> (accessed 10 January 2026).
² 'Israeli strikes kill five in Gaza, health officials say', Reuters, 10 February 2026 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-strikes-kill-five-gaza-health-officials-say-2026-02-10/> (accessed 15 February 2026).
³ M. Igrek and S. Whyatt, 'Censorship of Commentary on Palestine in Germany: Art in the Crossfire: Navigating Censorship in Turbulent Times', in *The State of Artistic Freedom 2025*, Freemuse, https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SAF-2025_web.pdf (accessed 10 January 2026).

silence pro-Palestinian speech.⁴ The German Bundestag reinforced this climate further by passing a resolution against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, cutting funding for organisations that supported it.⁵

The UK was subject to similar pressures and developments as regards expression connected to Palestine. But by 2025 it was generating its own steady supply of cases, framed less by explicit clauses addressing the matter than by procedure: risk assessments and neutrality policies.

The pattern around artistic freedom is now clear enough to have entered official discourse, as evidenced by an independent review of Arts Council England by Baroness Margaret Hodge, published in December.⁶ The Baroness, a member of the House of Lords (the independent upper chamber of the UK Parliament), warned that politicisation and external pressure threaten the sector's independence and, by extension, artistic freedom. The report did not single out Palestine. It did not need to.

Palestinian narratives and scrutiny

What has been happening is less a ban than a quiet withdrawal. Screenings disappeared. Festival slots were pulled. Venues cited neutrality, staff welfare or public safety. Each decision is defensible in isolation. Together they form a system in which expression about certain subjects, Palestine above all, carries disproportionate institutional risk.

In March, a film about censorship itself, *Censoring Palestine*, had multiple UK screenings cancelled after what its makers described as behind-the-scenes pressure on venues. No authority formally intervened. The film simply became difficult to show.⁷ Producer **Norman Thomas** called it “the most crude and malicious form of censorship – the worst kind because it’s secret”. In June, documentary filmmakers **Hannan Majid** and **Richard York** said they feared prosecution



To Kill a War Machine, Hannan Majid and Richard York's documentary on Palestine Action targeting arms firms linked to weapons used by Israel.

Image: To Kill a War Machine website.

under counter-terrorism laws if they kept distributing their film *To Kill a War Machine*.⁸ The film follows the direct-action group Palestine Action as it targets arms firms and factory sites linked to the supply of weapons used by Israel, just as the UK government moved to ban the group as a terrorist organisation. The filmmakers' anxiety over being criminalised had them scrambling for legal advice even as they pressed on with filming. The group was later banned, making it illegal to belong to the group or invite support for it, though the High Court ruled the proscription unlawful in February 2026.⁹ The ban, however, remains in force pending a government appeal.

⁴ E. Press, 'The Problem with Defining Antisemitism', *The New Yorker*, 13 March 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/persons-of-interest/the-problem-with-defining-antisemitism>, (accessed 10 January 2026).

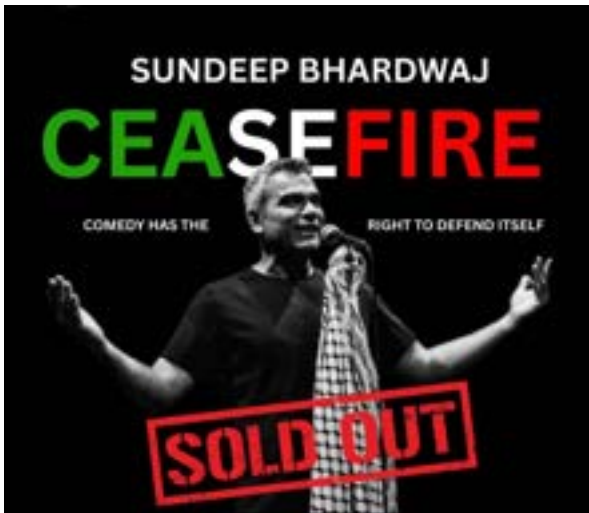
⁵ B. Knight, 'Lawmakers condemn 'anti-Semitic' BDS movement', *Deutsche Welle*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-parliament-condemns-anti-semitic-bds-movement/a-48779516>, (accessed 10 January 2026).

⁶ 'Arts Council England – an independent review by Baroness Margaret Hodge', Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 19 December 2025 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodge/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodge>, (accessed 10 January 2026).

⁷ 'Secret censors censoring film about Palestine, says film's producer', *Skwawkbox*, 14 March 2025 <https://skwawkbox.org/2025/03/14/secret-censors-censoring-film-about-palestine-censorship-says-films-producer/>, (accessed 5 January 2026).

⁸ B. Quinn, 'Palestine Action documentary makers fear being criminalised under anti-terror laws', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/jun/29/palestine-action-documentary-makers-fear-being-criminalised-under-anti-terror-laws>, (accessed 5 January 2026).

⁹ S. Tobin, 'UK terrorism ban on Palestine Action group unlawful, court rules after appeal', *Reuters*, 13 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uk-terror-ban-pro-palestine-group-unlawful-court-rules-after-appeal-2026-02-13/>, (accessed 20 February 2026).



Liverpool's Unity Theatre cancelled Sundeep Bhardwaj's Ceasefire for Palestine show after complaints and outside pressure. Image: Sundeep Bhardwaj, Instagram.

Restrictions even extended to public broadcasting. In early 2025, the BBC pulled a Gaza documentary, *Gaza: How to Survive a Warzone*, from iPlayer after it emerged that its teenage narrator was the son of a Hamas-affiliated official. The broadcaster cited editorial concerns, but critics said the removal showed how Palestinian narratives face extraordinary scrutiny in mainstream British media, and can disappear not because the information they present is disproven, but because they are deemed too risky amid concerns about bias.¹⁰

Similar caution resurfaced months later, when the BBC declined to air *Gaza: Doctors Under Attack*, a film it had commissioned – an investigation into Israeli military attacks on hospitals in Gaza – citing impartiality concerns.¹¹ The decision only amplified the documentary's impact when Channel 4 – a publicly owned but commercially funded UK broadcaster with editorial independence – chose to air it. In cases such as these, the constraint is not based on an explicit ban but rather a narrowing of what a large institution is prepared to stand behind.

Music festivals, which increasingly operate under intense insurance and security scrutiny, became

battlegrounds in 2025. At Victorious Festival in Portsmouth in August, stage crew intervened during a set by the Irish folk band, the **Mary Wallopers**.¹² They removed a Palestinian flag and cut the sound after chants of “Free Palestine”. Organisers pointed to a long-standing “no flags” policy. After the ensuing backlash, with various other music groups withdrawing from the venue in solidarity with the Mary Wallopers, the festival apologised to the band.

In Cornwall in August, the American DJ **The Blessed Madonna** withdrew from the Boardmasters festival after being asked, hours before her set, to sign a “Show Stop Procedure Acknowledgement” that she said would restrict political or symbolic elements.¹³ She framed her withdrawal as a free-speech issue. Organisers said their measures were based on routine safety procedure and legal guidance.

Cases involving comedy venues followed a similar pattern. In early July, Liverpool's Unity Theatre cancelled a privately hired show by pro-Palestinian comedian **Sundeep Bhardwaj**, part of his *Ceasefire for Palestine* comedy tour, a political satire, after complaints and pressure exerted on the venue and its funders. It cited safety and community concerns.¹⁴ It later apologised, saying it had failed its mission and that the cancellation risked silencing others.¹⁵ Bhardwaj staged the show elsewhere.

Bob Vylan: Escalation without conviction

The case of the punk-rap duo **Bob Vylan** shows how quickly a political statement can collide with broadcaster standards, promoter risk calculations and policing. During their BBC-broadcast at the Glastonbury music festival in June, the frontman led chants of “death, death to the IDF [Israel Defence Forces]” prompting immediate condemnation.¹⁶ In response to criticisms, Bob Vylan posted on their Instagram account, “We are not for the death of Jews, Arabs or any other race or group of people. We are for the dismantling of a violent mil-

10 D. Sabbagh, 'BBC pulls Gaza documentary from iPlayer amid concerns about narrator's family ties', *The Guardian*, 21 February 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/feb/21/bbc-pulls-gaza-documentary-iplayer-hamas> (accessed 5 January 2026).

11 B. Pear and R. Navai, 'BBC bosses pulled our film on Israel attacking Gaza's medics. Here's why', *The Observer*, 13 July 2025 <https://observer.co.uk/news/national/article/bbc-bosses-pulled-our-film-on-israel-attacking-gazas-medics-heres-why> (accessed 5 January 2026).

12 'Mary Wallopers stopped at Victorious Festival after Palestinian flag displayed', *BBC News*, 24 August 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1jnyrk07ndo> (accessed 2 January 2026).

13 Z. Woodcock, 'DJ The Blessed Madonna pulls out of Boardmasters festival after censorship claims', *Mirror*, 9 August 2025 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/dj-blessed-madonna-pulls-out-35703965> (accessed 2 January 2026).

14 'Liverpool theatre cancels comedian who says his pronouns are 'he/Hamas'', *Jewish News*, 2 July 2025 <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/liverpool-theatre-cancels-venue-hire-for-comedian-who-called-israel-an-illegitimate-bullshit-experiment/> (accessed 2 January 2026).

15 'A Statement from Unity About Recent Cancellation', *Unity Theatre*, 7 July 2025, <https://www.unitytheatreiverpool.co.uk/a-statement-from-unity-about-recent-cancellation/> (accessed 5 January 2026).

16 T. Smith, 'Bob Vylan 'Death to the IDF' Chants Leave Glastonbury 'Appalled,' Festival Says They 'Crossed A Line', *Billboard*, 29 June 2025 <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bob-vylan-glastonbury-idf-chants-festival-response-1236010133> (accessed 5 January 2026).

itary machine”.¹⁷ Within days, the Radar Festival in Manchester dropped the band and police opened an investigation.¹⁸ A planned autumn US tour then fell into doubt after the State Department revoked the band members’ visas.¹⁹ The ripple effects impacted corporate sponsorship, as well. After documentary filmmaker **Louis Theroux** interviewed Bob Vylan on his podcast, British Airways paused its sponsorship and pulled its ads from the show. The airline said the episode breached its policy on politically sensitive or controversial content.²⁰



Bobby Vylan and Bobbie Vylan, a duo, released their debut album in 2020. Their music combines punk, grime, reggae, and indie. Photo: Bobby Vylan, Facebook.

The investigation itself proved decisive in its aftermath. Even before any legal outcome was pronounced, the group’s status shifted from controversial to high-risk. Venues and promoters, facing little upside and significant risk, stepped away. Months later, police said there would be no charges, citing insufficient evidence, and the Crown

Prosecution Service did not proceed with any further action.²¹ The legal system, at least at that stage, declined to criminalise the artist’s speech. But the damage was already done: lost bookings and reputational harm. In December, Bob Vylan sued the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ for defamation, saying it falsely claimed that they had led “antisemitic chants” at Glastonbury.²²

Kneecap: When culture meets counter-terror law

If the Bob Vylan case suggests how political pressure can flare and then fade, incidents concerning the Irish hip-hop trio **Kneecap** illustrate what happens when controversy hardens, and when an artist’s support for Palestine becomes inseparable from their public identity. In May, Liam Óg Ó hAinmí, a member of the group, was charged under UK terrorism laws over the alleged display of a Hezbollah flag at a London concert the previous year — the case was later dismissed on procedural grounds, although prosecutors had moved to reinstate it.²³

In June, Prime Minister Keir Starmer publicly questioned the appropriateness of the group’s inclusion in the Glastonbury Festival lineup.²⁴ Artists, fellow musicians, and civil-liberties advocates warned that such statements amounted to political pressure on cultural programming. The controversy did not remain confined to the UK. In July, Hungary imposed a three-year entry ban against the band, citing national security concerns and alleging antisemitic speech and support for terrorism.²⁵ Around the same time, the municipality of Saint Cloud in France withdrew its subsidy from the Rock en Seine festival after it booked the group.²⁶ By late summer, a Vienna headline show was cancelled over what organisers described as acute safety concerns.²⁷ In September, Canada

17 Bob Vylan, ‘Silence is not an option’, Instagram post, https://www.instagram.com/p/DLkA_yQoDNs/ (accessed 5 January 2026).
 18 ‘Bob Vylan performance at Manchester festival cancelled amid Glastonbury row’, *The Guardian*, 2 July 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/jul/02/bob-vylan-manchester-festival-cancelled-glastonbury> (accessed 2 January 2026).
 19 S. Wolfson, ‘Who are Bob Vylan? The British punks who had their US visas revoked for anti-IDF chants’, *The Guardian*, 2 July 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/jul/02/bob-vylan-glastonbury-band> (accessed 7 January 2026).
 20 H. Taylor, ‘British Airways pulls Louis Theroux podcast sponsorship after Bob Vylan interview’, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/oct/25/british-airways-pulls-louis-theroux-podcast-sponsorship-after-bob-vylan-interview> (accessed 7 January 2026).
 21 J. Skirkowski, ‘No charge over Bob Vylan IDF chants at Glastonbury’, *BBC News*, 23 December 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y2vy9lv6go> (accessed 5 January 2026).
 22 R. Carroll, ‘Bob Vylan to sue Ireland’s RTÉ for defamation over Glastonbury coverage’, *The Guardian*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/dec/10/bob-vylan-sue-ireland-rte-defamation-glastonbury> (accessed 7 January 2026).
 23 H. Siddique, ‘CPS to appeal dismissal of terrorism charge against Kneecap’s Liam Óg Ó hAinmí’, *The Guardian*, 7 October 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/oct/07/cps-to-appeal-dismissal-of-terrorism-charge-against-kneecaps-liam-og-o-hainmí> (accessed 8 January 2026).
 24 H. Vernon, ‘Kneecap’s Glastonbury performance not “appropriate”, says Keir Starmer’, *The Guardian*, 21 June 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/jun/21/kneecaps-glastonbury-performance-not-appropriate-says-keir-starmer> (accessed 8 January 2026).
 25 K. Rawlinson, ‘Kneecap lambast Viktor Orbán over “outrageous” ban from Hungary’, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/jul/24/kneecap-banned-from-entering-hungary-for-three-years-for-supporting-terrorism> (accessed 8 January 2026).
 26 ‘French town withdraws pop festival funding over Kneecap appearance’, *France24*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250717-french-town-withdraws-pop-festival-funding-over-kneecap-appearance> (accessed 8 January 2026).
 27 ‘Kneecap apologise to fans after Vienna show cancelled due to “safety concerns”’, *Irish Times*, 8 August 2025, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2025/08/08/kneecaps-vienna-concert-cancelled-due-to-safety-concerns/> (accessed 9 January 2026).

barred the trio from entry altogether.²⁸ Kneecap responded by rejecting the allegation of antisemitism, noting that *The Times* had described their London headline show the previous night as “emphatically anti-sectarian”.

Complaint campaigns have produced their own pushback. Musicians and bands Massive Attack, Brian Eno, Fontaines D.C. and Kneecap announced in July a “syndicate” to support artists who speak about Gaza and face what they call vexatious complaints from pro-Israel advocates.²⁹ They pointed as an example to UK Lawyers for Israel, which reported Bob Vylan and the BBC to the authorities and wrote to venues ahead of cancellations, carrying out both public actions and actions behind the scenes to exert pressure without publicising the fact.

One response of resistance has been practical. In May, the Palestine Museum U.S., based in Woodbridge, Connecticut, in a gesture of solidarity, opened a satellite space in Edinburgh. The move followed a series of cancellations of Palestinian cultural events in the UK.³⁰

For artists and venues, the distinction between dismissal and appeal matters less than the fact of the allegation. Terrorism law triggers a different kind of institutional reflex from public-order offences. Once it is in play, it can narrow not only what an artist feels able to say, but what venues and promoters feel able to host.

Antisemitism and censorship

The pressures brought on since 7 October 2023 have not been confined to artists speaking for Palestine. They have spread outward, reshaping the conditions under which Jewish and Israeli artists, as well, are able to work. But they fall most heavily on Palestinian related artistic expression. In May, planned UK performances by English guitarist **Jonny Greenwood** and the Israeli musician **Dudu Tassa** were cancelled after venues cited “credible threats”.³¹ The phrase offered a public safety ra-

tionale, though activists said the pressure was political, not based on actual physical risk. The same month, Jewish klezmer-dance band **Oi Va Voi**, after two decades of touring, saw shows in Bristol and Brighton cancelled amid objections to past performances in Israel and their collaboration with an Israeli singer, Zohara. Objections also focused on the cover of Zohara’s solo album, *Welcoming the Golden Age*, which shows her nude in a field with watermelons, a fruit whose colours echo the Palestinian flag and has become a symbol of Palestinian resistance.³² Her bandmates say she meant it only as a statement about femininity and nature, unaware of that association. The Brighton promoter later apologised, while the Bristol Strange Brew club event organisers conceded they had “made a mistake”.



Oi Va Voi, a British band from London, blends Eastern European folk with drum ‘n’ bass and dance. Photo: Oi Va Voi, Facebook.

Comedic expression proved no safer. At the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, performances by veteran Fringe comedians **Rachel Creeger** and **Philip Simon** were dropped after a venue said staff felt “unsafe”, a rationale the performers said was entangled with their public positions on Israel and Palestine.³³ By August, the matter had reached one

28 [‘Kneecap banned from Canada for “glorifying terrorist organisations”’, *The Guardian*, 19 September 2025](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/sep/19/kneecap-banned-from-canada-for-glorifying-terrorist-organisations) <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/sep/19/kneecap-banned-from-canada-for-glorifying-terrorist-organisations> (accessed 9 January 2026).

29 H. Siddique, ‘Massive Attack announce alliance of musicians speaking out over Gaza’, *The Guardian*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/jul/17/massive-attack-announce-alliance-of-musicians-speaking-out-over-gaza> (accessed 7 January 2026).

30 A. Villa, ‘Connecticut-Based Palestine Museum to Launch Satellite Space in Edinburgh’, *Artnews*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/connecticut-palestine-museum-us-satellite-edinburgh-may-2025-1234736831/> (accessed 5 January 2026).

31 L. Snapes, ‘Jonny Greenwood and Israeli musician Dudu Tassa condemn “silencing” after UK concerts pulled’, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/06/jonny-greenwood-and-israeli-musician-dudu-tassa-condemn-silencing-after-uk-concerts-pulled> (accessed 10 January 2026).

32 G. Hinsliff, ‘Jewish klezmer-dance band Oi Va Voi: “Musicians shouldn’t have to keep looking over their shoulders”’, *The Guardian*, 26 December 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/dec/26/london-klezmer-dance-band-oi-va-voi-josh-breslaw-steve-levi-interview> (accessed 10 January 2026).

33 J. Prinsley, ‘Two Jewish shows pulled by Fringe venue over “safety concerns”’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 27 July 2025 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/two-jewish-shows-pulled-by-fringe-venue-over-safety-concerns-s8p77lp4> (accessed 9 January 2026).

of the UK's leading cultural institutions. The Royal Ballet and Opera withdrew a planned production of *Tosca* in Tel Aviv after a hundred and eighty-two staff members signed an open letter criticising the company's relationship with Israeli cultural institutions.³⁴ The signatories also noted that, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the company had played the Ukrainian national anthem and displayed the country's flag. Why, the signatories asked, was silence appropriate now?

It was in this climate that UK-based Jewish artists published *Courage and Care: Guidelines on Confronting Antisemitism and Censorship in the Arts* in May. The text argues that antisemitism must be confronted without collapsing into censorship, and that slogans such as "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" are not, in themselves, antisemitic or grounds for a ban.³⁵ It also insists that criticism of Israel and support for Palestinian liberation can coexist with Jewish presence in the arts.

Institutions under pressure

What connects these incidents is an institutional logic that repeats across settings. Cultural institutions are being asked to manage Israel's war in Gaza and the wider Israel-Palestine question with tools designed for health and safety. Neutrality policies, originally intended to prevent partisan campaigning in shared public space, are increasingly invoked to exclude political art altogether. Safety rationales, often based on anticipated protest rather than concrete threat, become a tool for refusal. Over time, these small acts of restraint add up to something larger.

The shape of that larger problem came into focus in two reports on artistic freedom published in the UK last year. They observe the same phenomenon from different angles. *Afraid to Speak Freely*, published by Freedom in the Arts, presented findings from a survey of 483 artists and arts professionals, and argued that certain opinions have become professionally costly inside parts of the cultural sector.³⁶ It identified gender-critical views as the most "dangerous" topic, with Israel and Palestine close behind, and noted that even expressions of support for Israel, or Jewish solidarity, had become professionally risky.

The report *Let's Create Change: Artistic Freedom in a Time of Genocide and Rising Fascism*, published by QUEERCIRCLE, reached a different conclusion.³⁷ Drawing on anonymous testimony from forty-four cultural workers, it argued that the most powerful constraints sit higher up the chain, among trustees, funders, regulators and a risk-averse state. It described neutrality as a managerial language that disciplines pro-Palestinian speech through funding guidance, legal anxiety and media scrutiny.

Palestine as the fault line

Why Palestine? Partly it is the intensity. Few issues combine moral urgency, mass human rights violations, and what the UN Commission of Inquiry, the International Criminal Court, and some rights organisations have described as genocide, with international law, domestic politics, and communal sensitivity. Speech about Gaza or Israel is quickly read not as commentary but as alignment. Institutions, wary of being seen to take sides, retreat. Another part of the equation is the way these matters are treated as a security matter. When cultural expression is even loosely linked to terrorism law, through symbols, slogans or associations, the stakes change. The law may eventually draw a line, but the cultural sector often steps back long before any formal line is drawn. But if institutions are retreating, how will the work be shared, who still gets to tell the story and who will hold the institutions to account?

The result is a quiet contraction of space. Artists learn which subjects carry disproportionate cost. Venues learn which bookings invite scrutiny. None of this requires a ban. Sometimes self-censorship does the rest. Policing of expression, venue withdrawals and organised complaints have had an effect on even ambiguous cases, where the speech is critical or symbolic rather than violent. The UK remains a country where artists can, in theory, say almost anything. In practice, speaking about Palestine became increasingly costly in 2025.

³⁴ N. Khomami, 'UK's Royal Ballet and Opera withdraws *Tosca* production in Tel Aviv', *The Guardian*, 4 August 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/04/uk-royal-ballet-and-opera-withdraw-tosca-tel-aviv-israel-gaza> (accessed 9 January 2026).

³⁵ 'Courage and Care: Guidelines on confronting antisemitism and censorship in the arts', Jewish Artists UK, <https://www.jewishartists.uk> (accessed 10 January 2026).

³⁶ D. Fahmy, R. Kay, J. Phoenix, 'Afraid of Speak Freely', *Freedom In the Arts*, 2025, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64a6f863d07ed962ae999ae0/t/6819e95bfa65874ec0ef22a2/1746528604026/FITA+Speak+Freely.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2026).

³⁷ 'Let's Create Change: Artistic Freedom in a Time of Genocide and Rising Fascism', QUEERCIRCLE, 2025 <https://queercircle.org/lets-create-change/> (accessed 5 January 2026).

PRESSURE, CHAOS, FEAR AND ANGER: THE SECOND TRUMP PRESIDENCY PUTS THE RESILIENCE OF U.S. FREE SPEECH VALUES TO THE TEST

Svetlana Mintcheva

- *Widespread new government pressure on cultural institutions: Executive Orders, policy changes, and funding cuts aim to reshape museums, universities and arts organisations.*
- *Climate of fear and self-censorship: Institutions face uncertainty, leading to modified programming, cancelled exhibitions, and heightened caution in presenting controversial or critical work.*
- *Emerging resistance and collective action: Despite pressure, cultural workers and organisations are mobilising—through legal challenges, coalition-building, and public initiatives—to defend artistic freedom and preserve democratic values.*

In the 2024 Freemuse report, it was noted that “direct government suppression of art hasn’t been a serious issue in the United States in recent years ...[but] under the new administration, things may get worse, especially if government financial regulation is used to stifle political unorthodoxy.” What happened in 2025 exceeded these fears.

A series of rapid-fire executive orders and policy moves far exceeding the actions of the first Trump administration has had a deeply unsettling effect on U.S. cultural institutions. Social gains around diversity and inclusion and acceptance of gender nonconformity are being reversed by decree, while leading national cultural agencies are uncertain of their future, their staff reduced and their grant giving operations thrown into chaos under the pressure to comply with the requirements of the administration. The confusion has spread to large and small cultural organisations trying to adapt to vague federal guidelines while maintaining their mission. But, after the initial shock, the cultural sphere has begun to resist—by litigating, mobilising, forming coalitions, or even rejecting federal funding altogether.

What are Executive Orders, and how much power do they have?

Laws in the United States are the business of Congress—the legislative branch of government. Executive Orders (EO) are an exception: they are directives given by the president, which have the power of law. However, they only apply to federal institutions and cannot contradict existing law or the Constitution. As a result, they can be challenged in court and judges can stop their enforcement.

On January 20, 2025, his first day in office, President Donald Trump signed (among 24 others) two far-reaching Executive Orders, which made it clear that the new administration was going to be aggressive in its ideological control of cultural institutions. The EOs banned federal funding from going to “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” (DEIA) programs or to initiatives that “promote gender ideology”¹ (i.e., any discussion of gender that separates biological sex from gender identity).

Both orders claimed to be anti-discriminatory. DEIA programs—even though they were original-

¹ ‘Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing’, The White House, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/> (accessed 22 December 2025). and ‘Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government’, The White House, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/> (accessed 22 December 2025).

ly intended to combat historical discrimination and injustice in hiring, create fair representation in organisational leadership, and institute policies inclusive of previously marginalised groups—were condemned as supposedly discriminatory themselves. Programs supporting transgender individuals were banned in the service of ostensibly defending women’s rights and, confusingly, “freedom of conscience.”

Museums and cultural bodies under federal agencies rushed to remove references to DEIA and restricted use of DEI-related language or programming in exhibits. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) implemented rules requiring applicants for grants to certify they will not “promote gender ideology” and prohibited granting funds to projects that reasonably appear to promote gender ideology. Many grants were frozen as a result. Some grant pauses were later rescinded, but uncertainty remained.

In response, some individual institutions cancelled programming. The Art Museum of the Americas, for instance, canceled two exhibitions² that would have included Black and queer artists: *Nature’s Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean* by

Andil Gosine (queer/Caribbean) and *Before the Americas*.

Before January was over, Trump signed another order, also masquerading as protection of a vulnerable group, but de facto further restricting the scope of permissible ideas: the so-called “combating antisemitism” order, which asked federal agencies to consider the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism when enforcing anti-discrimination laws. Under that definition, criticisms of the state of Israel (for instance, calling it a “racist endeavor”) could be labeled antisemitic. The order, though mostly targeted at universities where pro-Palestinian protests had taken place in 2024, makes it risky to criticise Israeli policies towards Palestinians. Non-citizen artists and curators are particularly affected alongside foreign students: the order states that individuals who violate the terms of the order could face removal from the country. It is hard to establish the precise effect of this order—which primarily targets academia, including pro-Palestinian speech on campus—on the arts.

The censorship of pro-Palestinian art had already dramatically increased after 7 October 2023 and



The Bainbridge Island Museum of Art canceled a performance of *One Family in Gaza* three days before opening, saying the subject matter could create an unsafe environment. Photo: The Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, Art Grice.

² K. Capps, 'Art Museum of the Americas Cancels Shows of Black, LGBTI+ Artists Following Trump DEI Orders', *The Washington Post*, 26 February 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/art/2025/02/26/art-museum-of-americas-cancels-shows-trump-dei-orders/?itid=ik_inline_manual_37 (accessed 22 December 2025).

persisted through 2024. In fact, there has been a relative drop in controversies around such works in 2025, which is more a sign of self-censorship rather than any shift in the censorious climate around Palestine/Israel. Wherever the topic is addressed, controversy follows and, in certain cases, cancellations, many of them in campus galleries, some outside. The Bainbridge Island Museum of Art (BIMA), for instance, canceled a performance of the nonfiction play *One Family in Gaza* three days before opening, arguing that the subject matter could contribute to an unsafe environment at the venue. The production, organized by the Kitsap Palestine Solidarity Coalition (KPSC) tells a story of war through correspondence between the playwright and a father living in Gaza.

The administration's next step was to purge what it deemed "improper ideology" or "divisive narratives" from the way U.S. history was represented. An EO called for a review of federal historical sites, Smithsonian museums, memorials, and monuments.

"The Museums throughout Washington, but all over the Country are, essentially, the last remaining segment of 'WOKE,' ... The Smithsonian is OUT OF CONTROL, where everything discussed is how horrible our Country is, how bad Slavery was, and how unaccomplished the downtrodden have been — Nothing about Success, nothing about Brightness, nothing about the Future."

- Trump on Truth Social³

The order specifically targeted the Smithsonian⁴ directing Vice-President JD Vance (who is also a member of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian) to oversee the removal of ideological or "partisan" content from Smithsonian exhibits, ensuring future programs align with "shared American values." As it is, the vice-president does not hold such powers: the Smithsonian, which was established by an act of Congress in 1846, is a public trust operating autonomously under a congressionally appointed Board. For the same reason, the presi-

dent does not have the power to fire Smithsonian staff. However, this failed to stop Trump from announcing he had fired the director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, Kim Sajet,⁵ because of her support for DEIA. Even though legally autonomous in its operations, the Smithsonian is dependent on Congress for \$600 million of federal funding annually, a large part of its total budget, which makes it politically vulnerable.

Defunding government cultural agencies: a strategy to starve the "liberal agenda"

Government actions also targeted cultural funding broadly, though the agencies singled out for funding cuts were the ones seen as promoting a liberal cultural agenda. Staff were laid off and grant reductions were pervasive.

In mid-March 2025, Trump signed an EO aiming to "eliminate ... to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law" the Institute for Museums and Library Services (IMLS), which gives federal grants supporting archives, preservation, public programs and community projects. IMLS staff were placed on administrative leave, and grant disbursements were paused.⁶

The administration also proposed eliminating funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in the 2026 appropriations budget presented to Congress.⁷

According to a survey by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), about one-third of U.S. museums lost government funding under the 2025 Trump policies, with a median grant loss of ~\$30,000 per museum.⁸

The art institutions receiving funding from government cultural agencies, especially smaller ones, are almost always in a financially precarious situation. They are now faced with choices about maintaining their mission and programming, which would entail seeking alternative funding streams,

³ Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Truth Social post, 7 December 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115056914674717313> (accessed 22 December 2025).

⁴ Smithsonian Institution, 'About the Smithsonian', <https://www.si.edu/about> (accessed 22 December 2025).

⁵ J. Kingsberry, M. Judkis and S. Nguyen, 'Trump says he fired museum director as his budget targets Smithsonian', Washington Post, 30 May 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/art/2025/05/30/trump-portrait-gallery-director/> (accessed 9 January 2026).

⁶ 'Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy', The White House, 18 March 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/continuing-the-reduction-of-the-federal-bureaucracy/> (accessed 22 December 2025).

⁷ S. Chery, 'Trump proposes eliminating the NEA and NEH as arts grants are canceled', The Washington Post, 3 May 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/2025/05/03/trump-budget-nea-neh-eliminate> (accessed 22 December 2025).

⁸ '2025 Annual National Snapshot of United States Museums', American Alliance of Museums, 11 November 2025, <https://www.aam-us.org/2025/11/11/2025-annual-national-snapshot-of-united-states--museums/> (accessed 22 December 2025).



Pepperdine administrators censored the artwork 'The Video Call to Arms' 2015–2025, a piece exploring censorship and silencing. Photo: Courtesy of Elana Mann.

or conforming to new agency guidelines. Worse, the prospect remains that, if Congress cuts funding for these agencies entirely, even that choice would not be available. Private foundations, like the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual arts and the Mellon Foundation are stepping up to partially fill the gap, but the field is radically changing.⁹

Private institutions only partially shielded

Private museums, especially those not dependent on large government grants, appear shielded. However as non-profit institutions they—and their donors—enjoy favourable tax status. And the administration is not shy about threatening the non-profit status of private institutions when it considers them a threat to its ideological dominance. Vice-President Vance, for instance, used the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk as a pretext to threaten¹⁰ the non-profit status and mission of the Ford Foundation and George Soros's Open Society Foundations.

Fearful that the exhibition of a political work would be a threat to its non-profit status, the private Pepperdine University recently removed a work that documented performers staging free speech-related actions in the context of various protests.¹¹

A high-profile censorship controversy, though not necessarily funding-related, makes clear the extent to which private institutions are embroiled in the polarised politics of the moment. In May, the Whitney Museum of American Art canceled a performance, *No Aesthetics Outside My Freedom: Mourning, Militancy, and Performance*, about Palestinian mourning, organised by its Independent Study Program (ISP). The museum claimed the performance, which had references supporting Palestine, had "exclusionary and inflammatory" content and violated its policies. Amid accusations of censorship by former and current program participants, curators and scholars, the Whitney suspended the entire ISP program and dismissed its associate director¹² after the program's current artists, curators and scholars accused the museum of censorship.

⁹ S. Lubell, 'Facing Funding Cuts and Censorship Threats, Museums Band Together', 16 October 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/16/arts/design/museums-trump-funding-cuts.html> (accessed 8 January 2026)

¹⁰ C. Zakrzewski, Michael Birnbaum and Yvonne Wingett Sanchez, 'JD Vance vows retribution on liberal institutions after Charlie Kirk killing', *The Washington Post*, 15 September 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/09/15/vance-charlie-kirk-podcast-episode/> (accessed 22 December 2025).

¹¹ H. Adams, 'Pepperdine Administrators Shut Down Weisman Exhibition After Censoring Artwork', *Pepperdine Graphic*, 10 October 2025, <https://pepperdine-graphic.com/pepperdine-administrators-shut-down-weisman-exhibition-after-censoring-artwork/> (accessed 22 December 2025).

¹² I. Farfan, 'Whitney Museum Cancels Performance About Palestinian Mourning', *Hyperallergic*, 20 May 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/whitney-museum-cancels-performance-about-palestinian-mourning/> (accessed 22 December 2025).

Individual institutions reacting

Concerned about sustainability, many arts and culture organisations are seeking compromise solutions, whereby they can continue their programming, in spite of anxiety over ideology-based threats to their funding and possible disruption by outside groups emboldened by the President's aggressive rhetorics. They lower the profile of planned events by sometimes distributing the call for participation to a smaller list of recipients; publicising by word of mouth rather than social media; and omitting events from the organisational calendar.

Modifications on programming and changes to how work is presented seek to resolve the conflict between institutional mission and political pressure, but they don't always work. The Smithsonian American Art Museum, for instance, made an event related to its *The Shape of Power: Stories of Race and American Sculpture* exhibition invite-only and unpublicised in order to protect the museum and speakers from further "targeting by the Trump administration." *Shape of Power*, which examined how sculpture has shaped and reflected attitudes and understandings about race in the United States, was criticised by President Trump as an example of how the Smithsonian had "come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology." Artists withdrew from the event, saying the restrictions on the event were a form of silencing participants.¹³

In another case, Amy Sherald's painting, the celebratory *Trans Forming Liberty*, which depicts a transgender woman proudly standing as the Statue of Liberty, raised internal concerns in light of the "gender ideology" Executive Order and the President's singling out the Smithsonian as influenced by "a divisive, race-centered ideology". As a compromise, the painting was to be exhibited alongside a video of people expressing anti-trans views. Angered by this, Sherald cancelled the entire exhibition¹⁴ stating: "It's clear that institutional fear shaped by a broader climate of political hostility toward trans lives played a role."



Amy Sherald's painting *Transforming Liberty* was scheduled to be displayed at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC.

Image: Instagram, Asherald.

Censorship worries, of course, can be entirely avoided when an exhibition is cancelled altogether. *The Fletcher Exhibit of Social and Politically Engaged Art*, held annually at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) since 2013, was not invited to return to the school in 2025 after a wave of right-wing backlash. The exhibit came under intense scrutiny from conservatives during and after the November 2024 presidential election, due to the inclusion of artworks that criticised conservative figures.¹⁵

Legal form of pushback

Some of the administration's actions have been (partially) halted¹⁶ by the courts with a number of lawsuits under way. The dismantling of the IMLS faced multiple suits. On November 21, 2025, a U.S. District Court judge in Rhode Island issued a permanent injunction, ruling the executive order to dismantle IMLS unlawful, arbitrary and capricious and contrary to federal law that established IMLS.

¹³ I. Farfan, 'Artists Nicholas Galanin, Margarita Cabrera Withdraw From Smithsonian Symposium', *Hyperallergic*, 12 September 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/1041328/artists-nicholas-galanin-margarita-cabrera-withdraw-from-smithsonian-symposium/>, (accessed 22 December 2025).

¹⁴ J. Kingsberry and M. Judkis, 'Amy Sherald Cancels Major Smithsonian Show Over "Censorship"', *The Washington Post*, 24 July 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/2025/07/24/amy-sherald-cancels-smithsonian-national-portrait-gallery-american-sublime/>, (accessed 22 December 2025).

¹⁵ The incident was mentioned in '2024: A year of political tensions and growing fears for artistic freedom', the US report for *Freemuse* last year. *Works in the show had suggested connections between right-wing U.S. politicians and fascism.*

¹⁶ L. Skene & L. Whitehurst, 'Judge Largely Blocks Trump's Executive Orders Ending Federal Support for DEI Programs', *AP News*, 19 September 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/dei-diversity-equity-inclusion-trump-federal-judge-5b04fbc742bd32adf98ca108b4b12b37> (accessed 22 December 2025).

The injunction affects the entirety of Executive Order 14238, Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy, which defunds seven government agencies including IMLS. The Institute of Museum and Library Services has now reinstated all grants that were previously terminated.¹⁷

A lawsuit also challenged the NEA's implementation of new grant criteria in compliance with the gender ideology EO. In September 2025, a judge ruled that the NEA's evaluation system—which considers whether a project promotes gender ideology—is “viewpoint discrimination” and thus violates the First Amendment. The government may seek to appeal.

Individual museums are also directly suing to get hastily rescinded grants reinstated. The Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia, for instance, succeeded in having a \$750,000 IMLS grant—which had been cancelled abruptly and without explanation—reinstated in early September 2025.¹⁸

Other actions of resistance

Legal action is not the only recourse in protecting artistic freedom: art institutions, artists and activists are mobilising into a growing, multi-levelled resistance movement committed to protecting the autonomy of culture from government propagated ideology.

Institutions are offering space for exhibitions that face censorship-related issues elsewhere: the Amy Sherald exhibition, which the artist withdrew from the Smithsonian in protest, was picked up by the Baltimore Museum of Art¹⁹, an institution mostly supported by state and city funding.

Artists support each other by withdrawing from exhibitions where censorship has taken place, even if their work has not been targeted. For example, when Pepperdine University removed art that it deemed too political²⁰ from the exhibit *Hold My Hand in Yours*, other artists included in the show

removed their work in protest. The entire exhibition was shut down as a result and the director of the museum resigned.²¹

Organisations are refusing funding altogether because of concerns that they would have to censor their programming²², among them The Arts Center of the Capital Region, in Troy, NY, which rejected a \$50,000 grant from the NEA due to concerns over federal diversity, equity and inclusion requirements and fears of censorship.²³

Alongside tactical adjustments to the new environment, U.S. cultural institutions are also building a unified front against the government's threats and its extraordinary attack on their independence.



Hundreds of US arts organisations and professionals signed a nationwide statement affirming shared values, defending programmatic independence, and resisting institutional self-censorship. Illustration: Collective Courage.

In August, hundreds of arts organisations and professionals signed a statement entitled, “Cultural Freedom Demands Collective Courage: A Nation-Wide Statement of Values and Principles for the Field of Arts and Culture”²⁴ articulating a set

¹⁷ A. Limbong, 'Libraries and museums get federal funding back after Trump cuts', NPR, 4 December 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/04/nx-s1-5633347/libraries-museums-federal-funding-impls-trump-cuts> (accessed 9 January 2026).

¹⁸ 'Pennsylvania Museum Wins Lawsuit Against Federal Museums Agency', Artnet News, 8 September 2025, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/woodmere-museum-sues-trump-canceled-impls-grant-2683466> (accessed 22 December 2025).

¹⁹ J. Kingsberry and M. Judkis, 'Amy Sherald Takes Canceled Smithsonian Show to Baltimore Museum of Art', The Washington Post, 3 September 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/art/2025/09/03/amy-sherald-american-sublime-baltimore-museum-art/> (accessed 22 December 2025).

²⁰ 'Pepperdine University Censorship Sparks Artist Protest at Weisman Museum', National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC Comms), 17 October 2025, <https://ncac.org/news/pepperdine-university-censorship-sparks-artist-protest-at-weisman-museum> (accessed 22 December 2025).

²¹ B. Boucher, 'Pepperdine University Museum Director Resigns After Censorship Scandal', Artnet News, 28 October 2025, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/pepperdine-university-museum-director-resigns-censorship-scandal-2705587> (accessed 22 December 2025).

²² M. Towfighi, 'Told to Avoid D.E.I., Arts Groups Are Declining Grants Instead', The New York Times, 20 November 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/20/arts/design/dei-arts-groups-grants-nea.html> (accessed 22 December 2025).

²³ K. Kiessling, 'Arts Center of Capital Region Declines \$50K NEA Grant Over DEI Rules', Times Union, 12 September 2025, <https://www.timesunion.com/preview/article/arts-center-dei-nea-grant-21040902.php> (accessed 22 December 2025).

²⁴ 'Collective Courage — Cultural Freedom Demands Collective Courage', Collective-Courage.com, <https://www.collective-courage.com/> (accessed 9 January 2026).



In early 2025, Fort Worth police seized photographs from Sally Mann's Immediate Family exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, reviving a long-running debate. Photo: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth website.

of foundational principles and shared values that unite America's diverse arts and cultural field. The statement reasserts the arts sector's commitment to retain programmatic independence and resist pressures of institutional self-censorship. It states:

We will remain true to our democratic responsibility to act as guardians of artistic freedom and independent thought.

We affirm the independence of our programming in service to our mission and commit to resisting external pressures, thus assuring our organization's credibility and cultural authority.

We will stand with fellow institutions facing political pressure and remain a field united by shared values and principles.

From 21-22 November, the Fall of Freedom initiative, led by artists and cultural workers, activated a nationwide wave of creative resistance. Over two days, galleries, museums, libraries, comedy clubs, theaters and concert halls across the country hosted over 600 exhibitions, performances and public events that reflected a determination to continue speaking and creating freely in the face of authoritarian policy.²⁵

Though Trump's arts and culture-related executive orders have set the prevailing tone, at least one high-profile incident at the local level also reveals a disturbing shift where established lines of permissible debate are redrawn and politicians seek criminal charges for controversial art.

In early 2025, several photographs from internationally renowned photographer Sally Mann's Im-

mediate Family series were seized by Fort Worth police from an exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The seized photographs were black-and-white portraits of Mann's young children, sometimes nude, in everyday settings.²⁶ When first published 35 years ago, the images sparked debate. However, they have since been exhibited in major museums and are in the collections of leading institutions. The episode may be seen as symptomatic of a chilling rightward cultural shift, where established art is now subject to criminal investigation and the position of contemporary museums as a safe space to question and discuss societal norms is threatened. In recent years, museums have repeatedly faced social controversy but have been shielded from legal action. This may no longer be the case.

Ideological takeover

The US administration's rush to transform culture and the arts follows a similar attempt to impose compliance onto universities. Pressures on both art and educational institutions include coercion via funding; the institutionalisation of ideological oversight; and threats to DEI programs. This is all part of a broader agenda that also includes an executive attempt to grab control over information and suppress dissent, at the same time as sources independent of government power are discredited and denied access.

We are witnessing an attempted ideological takeover comparable to that of the McCarthy era. But that was the Cold War battlefield and the real enemy was supposedly external. Today it is an internal coup, reversing developments that were democratically achieved in the last 50 years—going backwards with regards to the rights of women and people of color, the rights of gays and lesbians and those of transgender individuals. There were social battles fought and won democratically before these rights were established and before schools began to teach history and social studies critically. The Trump administration has set to reverse history by decree, to put gays and transgender people in the closet denying their existence, keep women at home, make people of color invisible and the racism they are subjected to a non-issue. And as society reels from these aggressions of the administration, from ICE raids and environmental threats, the enormous concentration of

economic and political power in the hands of a few at the expense of millions continues.

Workers across the cultural field play a crucial role in shaping and preserving democracy and, more broadly, help determine the moral future of the country. While the current situation is alarming, the United States also has a long tradition of defending civil freedoms and fighting to expand them. As many freedoms that were taken for granted are now challenged, the cultural field is uniting and mobilising in resistance, which may, after all, be the unexpected silver lining.

²⁶ B. Boucher, "Sally Mann Photos Reportedly Seized From Texas Museum Exhibition," *Artnet News*, 8 January 2025, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/sally-mann-photos-seized-fort-worth-museum-2595888> (accessed 9 January 2026).

DAY OF THE DEAD: *ARTISTS CAUGHT BETWEEN WAR AND CARTELS*

Each year, on 2 November, Day of the Dead, a tradition observed across Latin America honouring deceased loved ones and celebrating their lives, Freemuse remembers and honours the lives of artists who have been killed. From the devastation of the war in **Gaza** to violence linked to airstrikes in Iran and cartel killings in **Mexico**, artists—painters, musicians, and performers—lost their lives while documenting, resisting, or simply living within conflict zones. Their deaths reflect a broader global pattern in which artistic expression comes with risks under repression and violence.

Between November 2024 and the end of 2025 Freemuse recorded 28 killings of artists worldwide. More than half of these—15—were musicians, all but two of whom were victims of criminal gangs in the Americas, in Mexico, Peru and Colombia. The other two were rappers caught in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Wars also accounted for nine deaths: five in Gaza, where artists were killed under bombardment and are counted among the tens of thousands of deaths since October 2023, and four in Iran, where artists died in Israeli airstrikes during the so-called “12-Day War.” Establishing the full number of victims amid the fog of war, in these countries and elsewhere, is extremely difficult, and the information gathered by Freemuse is likely to be only partial. The true toll may be significantly higher.



Image: Cartel Urbano

In the final days of 2025, a new atrocity unfolded in Iran as nationwide protests erupted, leading to the killing of numerous demonstrators in late December and January 2026—among them many artists—though the total number remains impossible to determine, particularly as documentation became even more difficult to obtain following the outbreak of a new war in February 2026.

In a poignant reminder that dissident artists have long been a target for murder, almost 50 years after his disappearance in 1976, the body of Brazilian pianist **Francisco Tenório Cerqueira Júnior (Tenorinho)** was identified in Argentina. His family can now properly grieve his death. He was one of the many victims of the cruel dictatorships that ruled much of Latin America through the 1960s to the 1980s.

Here are the names of the 28 artists killed in 2024-2025. For the full article on Day of the Dead, go to Freemuse's website¹.

NOVEMBER 2024

PERU – Thalía Manrique Castillo – Cumbia singer; murdered when unknown individuals intercepted the bus in which she was traveling with her orchestra.

DECEMBER 2024

GAZA – Walaa Jumaa al-Afranji – Artist/novelist/calligrapher; killed on 25 December in an Israeli airstrike on her home in Nuseirat.

JANUARY 2025

COLOMBIA – Dávinson Gaviria – Popular-musician and singer; killed on 2 January after finishing a private concert in rural Balboa, Cauca. Armed men opened fire as he was leaving the venue.

COLOMBIA – Javier Alejandro Valencia (“Leandro”) and Juan David Ramírez Rodríguez – Young dancers and community leaders; found dead on 20 January after being reported missing. The killings, one involving torture, were widely condemned by national and international bodies.

RUSSIA – Vadim Stroykin – Singer-songwriter and guitar tutor; anti-war activist. Died on 5 February after falling from his St. Petersburg apartment during a police search. Authorities claimed suicide; friends disputed this as suspicious.

FEBRUARY 2025

DRC – Freddy Mukuza – Rapper; he was shot dead in Goma, on 22 February, while the city was occupied by the M23 rebel group.

DRC – Delphin Katembo Vinywasiki (Delcat Idengo) – Singer/rapper; he was killed on 13–14 February in Goma, in what was described by the culture ministry as an assassination, while filming a music video.

MARCH 2025

GAZA – Durgham Qreiqeh (aka Dorgham Quraiqi/Qreiqea) – Visual artist and community arts worker; he was killed on 18 March in an Israeli airstrike on his home in Shuja’iyya, Gaza City. His wife and brothers also died.

PERU – Paul Flores – Lead singer of Armonía 10; he was shot dead 16 March when gunmen attacked the band’s bus as they were returning from a performance.

APRIL 2025

GAZA – Dina Khaled Zaurub – Portrait artist; she was killed 12 April in an Israeli airstrike on a displaced persons camp west of Khan Younis. Known for charcoal/graphite portraits memorialising victims.

MAY 2025

MEXICO – Grupo Fugitivo (Francisco Xavier Vázquez Osorio; Nemesio Antonio Durán Rodríguez; Víctor Manuel Garza Cervantes; José Francisco Morales Martínez; Livan (Liván) Edyberto Solís de la Rosa) – Abducted and murdered late May near Reynosa, Tamaulipas, after being hired for a performance. Authorities later announced multiple arrests tied to a Gulf Cartel faction.

GAZA – Ibtisam Nassar – Retired actress; killed on 20 May in an Israeli airstrike on Nuseirat. A day earlier, she had posted a Facebook eulogy for her husband and two children, killed in a prior strike.

SOUTH AFRICA – Sqiniseko Mvelase – Maskandi music reviewer; killed on 29 May while livestreaming from his home. His death was linked to Maskandi music rivalries and he had received prior threats over alleged bias.

JUNE 2025

MEXICO – Julio Eusebio Labra – Lead singer, Conquistadores de la Sierra; he was shot dead on stage on 1 June at El Huamuchilito, Emiliano Zapata (Morelos).

IRAN – Parnia (Parniya) Abbasi – Poet; killed between 12–13 June with her family in an Israeli airstrike on a residential block in Tehran (Sattarkhan).

IRAN – Mansoureh Alikhani – Painter; she was killed on 14 June, in Tehran during Israeli strikes.

IRAN- Saleh Bayrami – Graphic designer; killed on 15 June, in an Israeli airstrike while he was driving through Quds Square in the Tajrish neighbourhood in northern Tehran.

IRAN – Mehrangiz Imanpour – Artist and painting instructor; she was killed on 24 June by the blast shockwave from the Evin Prison attack in Tehran.

GAZA – Amna al-Salmi (female visual artist); and **Ismail Au Hatab** (male photographer/filmmaker); killed on 30 June in an airstrike on Al-Baqa café, Gaza City.

JULY 2025

ISRAEL – Awdah Hathaleen – Activist/teacher and contributor to the international award-winning documentary *No Other Land*; he was shot dead on 28 July by an Israeli settler in Umm al-Khair (Occupied West Bank).

SEPTEMBER 2025

COLOMBIA – Bayron Sánchez Salazar (“B-King”, 31) and Jorge Luis Herrera Lemos (“DJ Regio Clown”) – Singers; they were found dead on 17 September in Cocotitlán, State of Mexico, a day after last being seen in Mexico City’s Polanco where they were invited to perform. Prosecutors opened a homicide investigation.

OCTOBER 2025

TÜRKİYE – Hakan Tosun – Journalist and documentary director; attacked on 10 October in Istanbul and died on 13 October from head injuries. Known for covering environmental and social issues. His death is considered suspicious, and the case remains unresolved.

After almost 50 years, body of murdered musician finally identified

BRAZIL/ARGENTINA – Francisco Tenório Cerqueira Júnior (Tenorinho) – Bossa nova pianist; disappeared 18 March 1976 (Buenos Aires). Formally identified in mid-September 2025 by Argentina’s forensic team via fingerprint match as a victim of the dictatorship; his bullet-ridden body had been buried unidentified in the Benavidez municipal cemetery.

SILENCING CULTURE: WAR, CENSORSHIP AND THE NEW REPRESSION OF ARTISTS IN EASTERN EUROPE AND SOUTH CAUCASUS

Polina Sadovskaya

- *As Russia continues its war in Ukraine, Ukrainian cultural institutions continue to be destroyed.*
- *Across Eastern Europe and the Caucasus authoritarian shifts marked by nationalist rhetoric, religious mobilisation, and restrictions on protest are increasingly used to censor and control artistic expression.*
- *Reorganisation of cultural institutions by right-wing cultural ministers leads to their artistic censorship and often impoverishment.*
- *The release of Belarusian political prisoners offered some relief, but systemic problems remain.*

The Russian war in Ukraine has lasted more than four years, and the longer it lasts, the more severe attacks on independent artists and cultural institutions are normalised under the pretext of national security. Russian missile strikes keep destroying cultural infrastructure in Ukraine and killing artists, and artists publicly protesting the war or merely reflecting on the war in their art in Russia are designated as foreign agents, extremists and terrorists. In the current climate where conservative right-wing views are on the rise, even countries with previously strong democratic track records are seeing non-state actors, protest legislation, and the use of religious sentiment in the repression of dissenting voices. This affects not only artists but also audiences and supporters, including cases where artworks are used as evidence of criminal offences. “foreign agents” legislation popularised by Russia remains influential beyond

Russia’s borders, including in Georgia and other countries.

The US government’s decision to stop and reevaluate its distribution of foreign aid on 20 January drastically affected independent artists across the world, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus included.¹ Combined with the local “reorganisation” of cultural institutions aimed at controlling and censoring artists in places like Georgia, Slovakia and Hungary, which has been taking place for the past few years, this has made the situation for artistic freedom in the region even more dire. Thanks to the continuous advocacy of the international human rights community and opposition leaders in exile, political prisoners, with a number of artists among them, were released in Belarus; however, it continues to rank among the countries with the highest number of political prisoners per capita in the world.

¹ The text of the US President’s Executive Order ‘Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid’, 20 January 2025, can be found here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/> (23 January 2026).



The studios of Nahirna22, a collective of young artists from Kyiv, was damaged twice in 2025. Photo: Instagram, Nahirna22.

Ukraine: Russian attack on its culture continues

24 February 2026 marked four years since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of Ukrainian artists and cultural figures. In 2025, as in previous years, the cause of death was mostly either due to performing military service or because of Russian attacks on civilian areas.

In 2025, Russia continued carrying out attacks on cultural institutions in Ukraine. For example, the studios of **Nahirna22**, a collective of young artists from Kyiv, was damaged twice in 2025. It was repaired thanks to a crowdfunding campaign and reopened after the first attack in August, just to be hit again in November². No artist was hurt but the second attack forced the founders to move the studios to a safer area.

The Russian forces not only destroyed cultural institutions but also in some cases built their own museums and cultural centers to present the Russian government-approved version of history and the war. Such a museum was opened in December in Mariupol, a Ukrainian city that has been occupied by Russian forces since 2022. It is officially known as Pole Bitvy (Battlefield). In its expositions, it glorifies the current full-scale invasion³.

Russia: Solidarity is punished

Inside Russia, cultural institutions that dare to show art containing messages against the full-scale invasion of Ukraine face the censorship of museum exhibitions and persecution of its top management and artists.

Labeling artists and cultural professionals “extremists” and “terrorist” has become commonplace in

² S. Kishkovsky, ‘Artist Studios in Kyiv Damaged by Russian Drone Strike for Second Time’, *The Art Newspaper*, 17 November 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/11/17/artist-studios-in-kyiv-damaged-by-russian-drone-strikeagain> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³ S. Kishkovsky, ‘An Entertainment Pavillion On Bones: New Russian Museum Opens in Occupied Mariupol’, *The Art Newspaper*, 8 December 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/12/08/new-russian-museum-opens-occupied-mariupol-ukraine> (accessed 25 December 2025).

Russia. Cultural impresario **Marat Guelman**, who was added to the list of “extremists and terrorists” in 2024 is a founder of PERMM museum and the Slovo Novo festival, which has been hosting exiled Russian artists in Montenegro where Guelman has lived since 2015⁴. After the targeting of PERMM, which many think is related to the targeting of Guelman himself, Slovo Novo was added to the list of “foreign agents” in November.

In September, five exiled members of **Pussy Riot** were sentenced in absentia to jail terms of up to 13 years for disseminating “false information” about the Russian military, related to their anti-war protests and performances⁵. In December, a Moscow court ruled that Pussy Riot should be considered an “extremist organisation.”⁶ *“The paradox is that rapists and murderers in Russia get 3-4 years, sometimes spending less than a year in prison before signing a military contract, killing Ukrainians and then they return freely into society, with PTSD, and may end up back in prison for yet another killing ... Meanwhile, activists receive monstrous sentences for their opinions,”* said Diana Burkot, a member of Pussy Riot to Hyperallergic. Any association with Pussy Riot can now lead to persecution in Russia.⁷

The fact that not only artists themselves but their admirers can be persecuted in Russia is proved by the notable case of a street band from St. Petersburg called Stoptime.

On 11 October, the band attracted significant audiences on the city’s main street while singing the songs of popular exiled, anti-war artists **Monetochka** and **Noize MC**, who are considered “foreign agents” in Russia. Subsequently, a few days later, guitarist **Sasha (Alexandr Orlov)**, drummer **Vlad (Vladislav Leontyev)** and their lead singer **Naoko (Diana Loginova)**, who are all 18 years old, were detained and subsequently charged with 12 to 13 days of arrest for “organising a mass gather-

ing of people”, which allegedly “blocked pedestrians from passing”⁸.

Naoko also got separate charges for “discrimination of the army” for performing the song *Svetlaya Polosa* (Bright Streak) by Noize MC which, according to police, is “popular among Ukrainians who listen to it during the bombing.”⁹ On 27 and 28 October, immediately upon their release after fully serving their sentences, Sasha and Naoko were re-arrested and sentenced to another 13 days of arrest.¹⁰ Vlad, after being released, was rearrested and sentenced to another 12 days on 30 October.¹¹

Following the Stoptime members’ initial arrests, many street artists across Russia started playing the same songs in their support. On 21 October, *Paper Media* reported about the first arrest of Stoptime’s supporters: **Evgeniy Mikhailov, (Zhen’ka Radost)**, from Yekaterinburg who was sentenced to 14 days of detention for “hooliganism” and “discreditation of the army” for obscene language in the Noize MC song, which he performed.¹² On the same day in Moscow, police detained a single protester with a sign that read “Music is not a crime”¹³; he was later released. The second arrest of Naoko



Stop Time members guitarist Sasha (Alexandr Orlov) and lead singer Naoko (Diana Loginova), both 18, were detained and later sentenced to 12 to 13 days of arrest for ‘organising a mass gathering of people’. Photo: Instagram, Naokoomusic.

⁴ L. Muñoz-Alonso, ‘Russian Dissident Leaves for Montenegro, Plans a New Space’, *Artnet*, 8 January 2015 (accessed 15 February 2025).

⁵ M. Pontone, ‘Pussy Riot Members Sentenced to Russian Prison in Absentia’, *Hyperallergic*, 18 September 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/pussy-riot-members-sentenced-to-russian-prison-in-absentia/> (accessed 25 December 2025).

⁶ S. Kishkovsky, ‘Pussy Riot Branded ‘extremist organization’ by Russian Court’, *The Art Newspaper*, 15 December 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/12/15/pussy-riot-branded-extremist-organisation-by-russian-court> (accessed 25 December 2025).

⁷ See footnote 5

⁸ A. Nemtsova, ‘Moscow Can’t Stop the Music’, *The Atlantic*, 30 September 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/09/russia-banned-music-putin/684396/> (accessed 25 December 2025).

⁹ ‘В полиции посчитали, что песня Noize MC «Светлая полоса» дискредитирует армию, так как её слушают украинцы во время атаки дронов’, *Rotonda Media*, 20 October 2025, <https://t.me/rotondamedia/7769> (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹⁰ ‘Exile tour. Naoko of Stoptime street band performs in Lithuania with Noize MC and Monetochka after weeks in jail for playing their songs in St Petersburg’, *Mediazona*, 21 December 2025, <https://en.zona.media/article/2025/12/20/stoptime> (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹¹ ‘Барабанщика «стоптайм» отправили под новый арест за концерт, которого не было’, *Paper Media*, 30 October 2025, https://t.me/paperpaper_ru/63008 (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹² ‘В Екатеринбурге задержали уличного музыканта, который выступал в поддержку «стоптайм»’, *OVD-Info*, 21 October 2025, <https://ovd.info/express-news/2025/10/21/v-ekaterinburge-zaderzhali-ulichnogo-muzykanta-kotoryy-vystupal-v> (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹³ ‘В Москве силовики задержали пикетчика, вышедшего в поддержку певших песни «иноагентов» музыкантов’, *RusNews*, 21 October 2025, <https://t.me/rusnews/76058> (accessed 25 December 2025).

and her fellow musicians was also followed by arrests of their supporters.¹⁴ On 10 November, Vlad was released while Sasha and Naoko received their third sentences of another 13 days. On 23 November, Naoko and Sasha were released and left the country¹⁵. On 20 December, musicians from Stop-time performed on stage together with Noize MC and Monetoshka in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Artworks “offensive” to religion continue to be criminalised

Freemuse has long been concerned about the use of laws that protect against “offence” to religion to prosecute artists. This continued in 2025. One case is that in Perm, a city in the Ural Mountains, where a criminal case was launched in March against **Nailya Allakhverdiyeva**, the director of the PERMM contemporary art museum, for “offending the feelings of religious believers.” The prosecution was prompted by citizens’ appeals to various law enforcement agencies. The charge was laid in accordance with a law passed after members of the Pussy Riot art group were imprisoned for a “punk prayer” they performed at Moscow’s Christ the Saviour Cathedral in 2012¹⁶. The artworks that were mentioned as proof of Allakhverdiyeva’s “guilt” are Tatiana Anoshina’s installation *Blue Towns*, *Angel with Trumpet* by Sergey Gorskov, and *Paradisi* by Konstantin Zvezdochetov. The work by Anoshina, with blue medical rubber bulbs of various sizes, mounted on glass jars, that resemble the domes of churches, apparently annoyed the “religious believers” most of all¹⁷.

In January 2025, performance artist **Pavel Krisevich** was released from prison. He had been sentenced in 2022 to five years for hooliganism after making a performance of shooting himself with a blank cartridge on Red Square. Following his sentencing, his detention was repeatedly suspended, he was designated a “foreign agent,” and subjected to a series of short-term “carousel arrests” in late 2024. In late December 2025, he was released from pretrial detention and left Russia for Montenegro¹⁸.

Belarus: Political prisoners released but the problem is not solved

Similarly to Russia, authorities in Belarus are increasingly applying designations of “extremist” to cultural initiatives, theater troupes and musical bands. This designation criminalises not only the creators but also their audience, donors and consumers. On 10 July 2025, the folk-punk band Dzieciuki was designated an “extremist formation”. The band often uses lyrics about Belarusian history, mentioning events such as the Kalinouski uprising, and anti-imperial narratives, which could be seen as an alternative to the Soviet Russian discourse promoted by the government.¹⁹



Dzieciuki was designated an ‘extremist formation’, with lyrics on Belarusian history and anti-imperial themes that challenge the government’s Soviet Russian narrative. Photo: Facebook, Dzieciuki.

Moreover, the Belarusian regime went even further. It has deemed that artistic works themselves—songs, paintings or performances—serve as the primary evidence in cases of severe criminal charges, such as “inciting hatred” or “rehabilitation of Nazism”, thus penalising the act of creativity itself. In August 2025, prominent Belarusian artists **Ihar Rymašėŭski** and **Ludmiła Ščamialova** were convicted after police officers found a painting by Ščamialova during a search of another person’s home. The canvas contained no prohibited symbols and had no direct political context. According to witness testimony, security forces “simply didn’t like the painting” and it became the trigger for a search

¹⁴ “Музыкантов задержали на Сенной площади после повторных задержаний «стоптайм»”, *Paper Media*, 28 October 2025, <https://t.me/paperpaper-ru/62934> (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹⁵ “Вокалистка «Стоптайм» Наоко уехала из России”, *Meduza*, 23 November 2025, <https://meduza.io/news/2025/11/23/pevitsa-naoko-i-gitarist-aleksandr-orlov-iz-gruppy-stop-taym-pokinuli-rossiyu> (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹⁶ S. Kishkovsky, ‘Russia Tightens Screws on Freedom of Expression’, *The Art Newspaper*, 27 May 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/05/27/russia-tightens-screws-on-freedom-of-expression> (accessed 25 December 2025).

¹⁷ Василиса Остапенко, ‘Под суд за деревянного ангела: против экс-директора музея PERMM возбудили дело об оскорблении чувств верующих’, *Vottak*, 27 March 2025, <https://vot-tak.tv/85842371/permm> (accessed 12 January 2026).

¹⁸ Ilya Azar, ‘«Буду либо продавать картины, либо работать на заводе» Акционист Павел Кричевич за 2025 год: отсидел, освобожден, стал «иноагентом», устроил акцию, попал под «карусельные аресты» — и уехал из России. Вот его интервью», *meduza*, 31 December 2025, <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/12/31/budu-prodavayt-kartiny-libo-rabotat-na-zavode> (accessed 5 February 2026).

¹⁹ ‘Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, January – September 2025’, *PEN Belarus*, 3 November 2025, <https://penbelarus.org/en/2025/11/03/manitoryng-parushennyau-kulturnyh-pravou-i-pravou-chalaveka-u-dachynenni-da-dzeyachau-kulturny-belarus-studzen-verasen-2025-goda.html> (accessed 25 December 2025).

of the artists' own home. On 23 August 2025, the Minsk City Court sentenced the couple to 1 year and 2 months of imprisonment in a general-regime penal colony.²⁰

On 13 December, 123 Belarusian political prisoners, including musician and opposition leader **Maria Kalesnikava**, composer and screenwriter **Kiryl Vevel** and musician **Artsiom Makavei**, were freed. Nils Muižnieks, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, noted that those released were expelled to Ukraine or Lithuania. However, on the day of the release it remained unclear whether and how many of those released wished to remain in Belarus or how many possessed passports or other identity documents. The overall number of people designated by human rights defenders as political prisoners still in detention remains at over 1,100, which makes Belarus one of the countries with the highest number of political prisoners per capita in the world, Muižnieks stressed.²¹

Georgia's ongoing shift away from Europe and democratic values

The mass protests against a "foreign agents" type of legislation and the government's decision to block EU integration continued in Georgia. On 28 November, the daily protest rallies on the main Rustaveli street reached the one-year mark²². More artists and writers were reportedly tortured, detained and imprisoned on disproportionately harsh charges for participating in these protests. After being severely beaten in detention but released afterwards in late 2024²³, poet **Zviad Ratiani** was arrested once again in June for allegedly slapping a police officer at a protest rally. On 9 October, he was sentenced to two years in prison. Actor **Andro Chichinadze** and comedian Onise Tskhadadze, who were detained in December 2024, faced trial together with seventeen other protesters for "group violence" and received sentences ranging from two to two and a half years in prison. Opera

singer **Paata Burchuladze**, one of the organisers of the ongoing demonstrations, was arrested in October²⁴ and as of February 2026 he remained in custody.²⁵

Artists in Georgia can be an easy target for police because of their popularity and immediate visibility when they join the protests. These events suggest a systemic deterioration in respect for civil liberties, reflected in the growing criminalisation of peaceful protest and a rise in judicial practices that appear selective and politically driven. A number of artists received short prison sentences in 2025: film director **Giorgi Lifonava**, theater director **Giorgi Savaneli**, artist **Lado Tsibakhashvili**, painter **Levan Margiani**, designer **Ia Darakhvelidze**, and former PEN Georgia president poet **Paata Shamugia**. All were sentenced to three to eight days administrative arrest for "illegal blocking of the road," which potentially may lead to years in prison in case of a second time arrest. Documentary filmmaker **Giorgi Mrevlishvili** was detained by police while taking his child to a doctor. He was sentenced to seven days of administrative arrest in connection with a protest that had happened earlier. "In the past year, the pace of government repression has accelerated, as if the regime is in a hurry to achieve something. Everyone who protests against this dictatorship expects to face arrest, beating or torture at any moment," said Paata Shamugia to Freemuse. "Change rarely follows a predictable timeline, but the spirit of resistance is itself a form of hope, even when circumstances seem darkest"²⁶.

In December, Freemuse and the International Association of Arts Critics (AICA) submitted a report to the United Nations urging member states and Georgia's government to address increasingly repressive laws and actions that undermine artistic freedom, protest rights and cultural expression in Georgia as part of the country's upcoming Universal Periodic Review.²⁷

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Ibid.

²¹ 'Belarus: Freeing political prisoners does not end policy of repression, warns UN expert', OHCHR Press Releases, 17 December 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/12/belarus-freeing-political-prisoners-does-not-end-policy-repression-warns-un> (accessed 25 December 2025).

²² 'Georgia marks a year of protests, Global Voices' OC Media (reprinted in Global Voices), 7 December 2025, <https://globalvoices.org/2025/12/07/georgia-marks-a-year-of-protests/> (accessed 28 Jan 2026).

²³ See discussion of the case of Zviad Ratiani in 'State of Artistic Freedom 2025', Freemuse, p. 40, available at: https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SAF-2025_web.pdf

²⁴ D. Lee, 'Five Georgia opposition leaders charged with 'coup' attempt after protests', Al Jazeera, 7 October 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/7/five-georgia-opposition-leaders-charged-with-coup-attempt-after-protests> (accessed 25 December 2025).

²⁵ N. Lebrecht, 'Great Bass Singer Is Condemned to Linger in Jail', Slippedisc, 27 November 2025, <https://slippedisc.com/2025/11/great-bass-singer-is-condemned-to-linger-in-jail/> (accessed 25 December 2025).

²⁶ Phone interview with Freemuse, 15 December 2025.

²⁷ 'Artists Under Pressure in Georgia: Freemuse and AICA Call for UN Human Rights Council Members to Raise Artistic Freedom', Freemuse and International Association of Art Critics (AICA), 22 December 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/artists-under-pressure-in-georgia-freemuse-and-aica-call-for-un-human-rights-council-members-to-raise-artistic-freedom> (accessed 14 January 2026).

Slovakia: “Unculturing” culture

Throughout history Slovakia’s artists and cultural figures have stood at the vanguard of the fight for democracy while cultural institutions were attacked under the pretext of necessary budgetary changes²⁸. After dismissing top managers from major artistic institutions such as the country’s flagship art museum the Slovak National Gallery (SNG), the National Theater and the National Museum in 2024, recently appointed Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, a member of the right-wing Slovak National Party, continued intimidating independent artists. While pushing for populist, nationalist art sentiment, the government intimidates and restricts art that allegedly doesn’t fit into the “European-Christian value system.” For example, on 25 August 2025, SNG took down a large installation by Denisa Lehocká breaching her contract, stating it could only be moved with the artist’s permission and risking harm to the work itself²⁹.

However, instead of improving the financial situation of national cultural institutions, Šimkovičová’s reorganization has already led to the loss of some funders. In January, Tatra banka, the SNG’s largest private sponsor, ended its partnership with the gallery, due to the “too tense and unclear situation” at the institution for the bank to approve further support. In the context of shrinking support for cultural institutions globally following US President Trump’s US foreign aid cuts, these developments have hit the artistic community especially hard.

In May, government intervention in the arts prompted numerous organisations and individuals to issue a joint call to the EU to adopt a European Artistic Freedom Act (EAFA) in order to protect creative expression and promote artistic merit. In Slovakia, this work has been led by the group Otvorená Kultúra! (Open Culture!), which earlier released the Bratislava Declaration for Artistic Freedom, calling for EU legislation. According to activists, the EAFA would guarantee artistic rights, ensure citizens’ access to art, safeguard independence of cultural institutions and promote cross-border cooperation³⁰.



Issued in May 2025 at the Open Culture! conference in Bratislava, this declaration calls for a strong legal response to government interference and for the defense of artistic freedom across the EU. Photo: Open Culture!

Hungary: “Operation Starve and Strangle”

In Hungary in 2025, artistic freedom faced increasing pressure within a broader context of democratic backsliding and restrictions on civil liberties. The government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s nationalist Fidesz party, passed a law banning LGBTI+ Pride events—effectively curtailing freedom of assembly and expression for queer communities and allied artists—while empowering authorities to use facial recognition technology to identify participants and potentially penalise them, a move widely criticised as repressive and discriminatory³¹. In May, the government introduced the Transparency of Public Life bill, a proposal that poses a direct threat to artistic freedom in Hungary. By allowing authorities to label organisations that “influence public life” as risks to Hungarian sovereignty, the bill would enable the state to defund, restrict, or dissolve independent cultural institutions, arts organisations, and cre-

²⁸ M. Kompaníková, ‘In Slovakia, a frenzy of cultural repression is under way, as we turn back to Soviet times’, *The Guardian*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/29/in-slovakia-a-frenzy-of-cultural-repression-is-underway-as-we-turn-back-to-soviet-times>; <https://pen.org/report/taming-culture-in-georgia/> (accessed 25 December 2025).

²⁹ S. Kishkovsky, ‘Amid Government Intervention, Slovak Artists and Curators Call for EU Law to Protect Freedoms’, *The Art Newspaper*, 10 October 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/10/10/amid-government-intervention-slovak-artists-and-curators-call-for-eu-law-to-protect-freedoms> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³⁰ ‘Why Europe Needs a European Artistic Freedom Act’, Declaration by the coalition of artistic freedom organisations, Culture Action Europe, 3 November 2025, <https://cultureactioneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Why-Europe-Needs-a-European-Artistic-Freedom-Act.pdf> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³¹ A. Kassam, ‘Hungary bans Pride events and plans to use facial recognition to target attendees’, *The Guardian*, 18 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/18/hungary-bans-pride-events-and-plans-to-use-facial-recognition-to-target-attendees> (accessed 28 January 2026).

ative initiatives. Described by some civil society organizations as “Operation Starve and Strangle,” the proposal would drastically narrow the space for independent artistic expression, encouraging self-censorship and accelerating the erosion of cultural pluralism.³²

Slovenia: Artists fight back

Another tactic used by right-wing government officials against independent artists is that they pervert artistic messages and use them in their own agendas. An example of this is the case of **Maja Smrekar** and her K-9_topology: *Hybrid Family* series, which explores the bond between humans and animals. The far-right Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) used a piece by Smrekar in which she is breastfeeding a dog and disseminated it out of context across more than fifty Slovenian towns, as well as traditional and social media. Their aim was to mobilise opposition to the left-wing government’s plan for a special pension for award-winning artists³³. Without the consent of the artist, the SDS appropriated the image and used it in a propaganda poster³⁴.

“As a result, people began recognising me everywhere. On the street, in shops, at the post office. This constant exposure, combined with a saturated atmosphere of hatred, created a deep sense of loss of control,” said Smrekar to Freemuse. After seeing her name being distorted by the media for three months, and receiving threatening emails and late-night phone calls, Smrekar decided to file a lawsuit. The process may take up to five years, but international solidarity gives Smrekar strength. *“I see this as an exercise for the difficult times that may lie ahead, because I believe we will need exactly this kind of collective strength in the future,”* she adds.

Armenia: No Messiah for the country

In Armenia, a country which is now torn by the escalating conflict between its prime minister and the head of Armenian Apostolic Church³⁵ religious sentiments contributed to the cancellation of art-

ists. In August, the Coca-Cola Music Fest cancelled the performance of the headliner, Iranian Dutch singer **Sevdaliza (Sevda Alizadeh)**, following on-line threats and requests for the artist to be replaced³⁶. Hundreds of people reacted to the latest music video by Sevdaliza for her song *Messiah* where the singer used Christian symbols in an eroticised way. The cancellation of Sevdaliza’s performance in Armenia followed cases involving LA-based punk-rave band **Little Big**, Russian rapper **Morgenshtern** and the death metal band **Vader**, whose concerts were cancelled in Armenia on similar religious grounds in previous years³⁷.

The region keeps deviating from the values of the European Union more to the repressive behavior of authoritarian states. The resistance of artists seems never to burn out but the most visible artistic expression is severely punished. Solidarity among the international community helps reactively, for example, to release political prisoners but doesn’t often solve the problem of systemic repression. The call for European Artistic Freedom Act is another form of resistance but instead of better protection of artists it might push the region’s authoritarian governments more towards a direction opposite from the European Union which has been already happening.



Sevdaliza (Sevda Alizadeh) faced online threats after backlash to her “Messiah” video’s eroticised use of Christian symbols. Photo: Youtube, Sevdaliza.

³² ‘Hungary: Joint open letter on the bill entitled “Transparency of Public Life,”’, Amnesty EU, 23 May 2025, <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/hungary-joint-open-letter-on-the-bill-entitled-transparency-of-public-life/> (accessed 28 January 2026).

³³ P. Oltermann, ‘Slovenia to vote in referendum on artist pension that has fostered culture war’, *The Guardian*, 10 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/10/slovenia-to-vote-in-referendum-on-artist-pension-that-has-fostered-culture-war> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³⁴ ‘Maja Smrekar: When politics and religion control women’s bodies, they control art’, *Freemuse*, 24 September 2025 <https://www.freemuse.org/maja-smrekar-when-politics-and-religion-control-womens-bodies-they-control-art> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³⁵ ‘Armenian prime minister picks fight with church’, *Eurasia.net*, 4 June 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-prime-minister-picks-fight-with-church> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³⁶ A. Barseghyan, ‘Sevdaliza’s performance cancelled in Armenia following uproar from religious circles’, *OC-Media*, 25 August 2025, <https://oc-media.org/sevdalizas-performance-cancelled-in-armenia-following-uproar-from-religious-circles/> (accessed 25 December 2025).

³⁷ N. Hovsepian, ‘Witch hunt but make it Armenian’, *The European Correspondent*, 15 September 2025, <https://european correspondent.com/en/r/witch-hunt-but-make-it-armenian> (accessed 25 December 2025).

TÜRKİYE: ART UNDER THE SHADOW OF SYSTEMATIC CENSORSHIP

Özlem Altunok

- *Systematic restrictions on artistic freedom: Türkiye continues to implement organised and systematic policies restricting freedom of expression, with artists facing censorship, surveillance, bans and legal action under broad interpretations of “public order,” “morality” or counter-terror laws.*
- *Escalation in 2025: While many violations mirrored those of previous years, 2025 saw intensified repression of certain cultural sectors, particularly LGBTI+ artistic expression, under the introduction of policies aimed at protecting family values.*
- *Cartoonists and musicians continue to be targeted: Although the intolerance of critical or satirical artistic expression is a phenomenon that has persisted for years, methods and sanctions are becoming increasingly arbitrary.*
- *Self-censorship entrenched: After nearly 20 years of sustained repression, self-censorship has become ingrained. The failure of cultural and artistic institutions to confront abuses has compounded the problem, weakening collective resistance and solidarity.*

Türkiye has long been subjected to an organised and systematic state policy restricting freedom of expression, shaped by years of intensive censorship and limitations. Artistic freedom has been particularly affected by this environment, leading to Türkiye being of high concern to Freemuse over the years. Although violations of artistic freedom of expression in 2025 largely resembled those of previous years, political developments led to an escalation in certain areas. One of the most significant consequences of this oppressive climate is the normalisation and internalisation of self-censorship among artists.

In November 2024, Freemuse, alongside the Turkish freedom of expression organisation, P24 – Susma, submitted to the UN Human Rights Council a report on the state of artistic freedom in Türkiye¹ for its consideration under the Universal Periodic

Review, which was held in January 2025. Türkiye has expanded counter-terror measures that conflate criticism with terrorism, leading to increased surveillance, bans and cancellations targeting civil society and cultural expression—particularly affecting Kurdish artists and LGBTI+ cultural events under vague “security,” “public order” or “morality” justifications, with limited judicial remedy. Freemuse and P24 – Susma urged Türkiye to strengthen legal protections for artists, cultural workers and audiences. The pattern of harassment and repression of artistic freedom that the two organisations identified in their report continued in 2025. Amid a deepening economic crisis, the March arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, a leading opposition figure and potential challenger to President Erdoğan, ignited widespread protests and claims of political motivation. Approximately 2,000 people were detained nationwide during the

¹ 'Freemuse Highlights Türkiye's Growing Restrictions on Arts and Civil Society', 18 November 2024, Freemuse, <https://www.freemuse.org/freemuse-highlights-turkiyes-growing-restrictions-on-arts-and-civil-society> (accessed 14 January 2026).

protests, and 300 of them were arrested. Among them were:

- Musician **Hüseyin Türküdenizi**, arrested on 22 March and released under judicial controls, including travel restrictions on 14 April and is facing trial.²
- Actor **Cem Yiğit Üzümoğlu** and photographer **Murat Germen** were among the over 2,000 people³ taken into custody for supporting the opposition's call on social media to boycott brands linked to the government. Üzümoğlu and Germen were released, yet over 300 others remained detained.⁴
- Actors **Aybüke Pusat**, **Boran Kuzum**, and **Furkan Andıç**, who starred in TRT state television productions, lost their roles for supporting the boycott.⁵

High-profile cultural figures targeted under anti-terror laws

Artists who take a critical stance toward the government have long been subjected to political pressure. They, along with other well-known figures in the cultural and artistic sphere, became even more of a target during the state of emergency imposed in Türkiye between 2016 and 2018.⁶

The state of emergency, which was set in place following the 2016 coup attempt⁷, was effectively made permanent in 2018 with Law No. 7145. This legal framework expanded the government's powers, enabling the systematic silencing of opposition and critical voices. Cultural and artistic actors were frequently targeted, censored or punished under counterterrorism laws on charges such as "terrorist organisation propaganda" or "membership in a terrorist organisation."



Osman Kavala, philanthropist and founder of Anadolu Kültür, has been imprisoned since November 2017 in a case that has drawn global attention.

Photo: Osman Kavala's website.

An emblematic case that has captured the world's attention, philanthropist and founder of the cultural organisation Anadolu Kültür,⁸ **Osman Kavala**, has been in prison since November 2017. In April 2022, he was sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment under Articles 309 and 312 of the Turkish Penal Code for "espionage and using violence to disrupt the constitutional order" during the 2013 Gezi Park protests.⁹ No evidence has been presented to suggest that Kavala committed any of the crimes attributed to him. Despite the European Court of Human Rights' 2022 ruling¹⁰ that Türkiye violated the European Convention on Human Rights, Kavala has been detained for eight years. Film producer **Çiğdem Mater** (an Anadolu Kültür consultant) and documentary filmmaker **Mine Özerden** (board member), who were sentenced to 18 years in prison in the same case, have been in prison since April 2022 on charges of "aiding Kavala in overthrowing the government."¹¹

In 2025, Kavala was awarded Germany's Goethe Medal for his contributions to cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. In his acceptance speech, which was read by his wife at the ceremony, he stated: "*In the face of the haunting*

² 'Tuncelili Sanatçı Hüseyin Türküdenizi'nden Gözaltı Tutuklama ve Teşekkür Mesajı', 14 April 2025, Tunceli EMEK Gazetesi, <https://www.tunceliemek.com.tr/haber/24616547/tuncelili-sanatci-huseyin-turkudenizinden-gozalti-tutuklama-ve-tesekkur-mesaji> (accessed 6 February 2026).

³ 'İmamoğlu protestolarında tutuklu sayısı 301 oldu, gençler bayramı cezaevinde geçirecek', Sözcü, 30 March 2025, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2025/04/03/boykot-sorusturmasinda-gozaltina-alinan-11-kisi-adli-kontrol-sartiyla-serbest-birakildi> (accessed 18 February 2026).

⁴ 'Boykot soruşturmasında gözaltına alınan 11 kişi adli kontrol şartıyla serbest bırakıldı', Euronews Türkçe, 3 April 2025, <https://tr.euronews.com/2025/04/03/boykot-sorusturmasinda-gozaltina-alinan-11-kisi-adli-kontrol-sartiyla-serbest-birakildi>; 'Fotoğraf sanatçısı ve mimar Murat Germen serbest bırakıldı', BirGün, 10 April 2025, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/nazim-hikmet-in-yezeni-murat-germen-serbest-birakildi-614176> (accessed 18 February 2026).

⁵ 'Actor, others detained over support for opposition-led boycott', Bianet, 3 April 2025, <https://bianet.org/haber/actor-others-detained-over-support-for-opposition-led-boycott-306107> (accessed 6 February 2026).

⁶ 'Turkey ends state of emergency after two years', BBC News, 18 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44881328> (accessed 14 January 2026).

⁷ 'Turkey's state of emergency ended but the crackdown on human rights continues', Anadolu Kültür, 1 Feb 2019, <https://amnesty-tuerkei.de/2019/02/turkeys-state-of-emergency-ended-but-the-crackdown-on-human-rights-continues> (accessed 14 January 2026).

⁸ Anadolu Kültür, 'Home' (English), <https://www.anadolukultur.org/EN/> (accessed 14 January 2026).

⁹ The 2013 Gezi Park protests began as opposition to plans to redevelop Gezi Park in Istanbul and quickly grew into a much broader movement defending civil liberties and democratic participation before being repressed; subsequent trials of activists, including prominent civil society figure Osman Kavala, have been internationally condemned as politically motivated.

¹⁰ 'Grand Chamber Judgment in Kavala v Türkiye (Article 46 § 4)', European Court of Human Rights, 11 July 2022, https://www.osmankavala.org/images/documents/judicial/ahm/20220711_GrandChamberJudgment.pdf (accessed 14 January 2026).

¹¹ 'Türkiye: Highest Court's Decision in Gezi Park Case Condemned', PEN International (online), <https://www.pen-international.org/news/trkiye-highest-courts-decision-in-gezi-park-case-condemned> (accessed 22 January 2026).

*problems of today—wars, acts of aggression, migration, and oppressive policies—I believe that it is more important than ever for us to stand up and work for the advent of a genuinely universalist humanism ... this ideal could be constructed through arts and literature, the writings of Goethe have a very special meaning and relevance in the context of the realities of our times.*¹²

Another case concerns talent manager **Ayşe Barım**, who was initially detained on allegations of monopolisation in the television sector and later arrested in January 2025, on charges of “aiding an attempt to overthrow the Government of the Republic of Türkiye by force and violence” by allegedly directing artists to participate in the Gezi Park protests twelve years earlier. Barım faces a potential prison sentence ranging from 22 years and six months to 30 years. Her prosecution is widely interpreted as both a warning to public figures and an attempt to exert control over the Turkish television industry, which has gained significant international visibility in recent years.¹³

Following the ceasefire declared on 1 March in the context of the Turkey–PKK conflict, visible pressure on Kurdish artists has decreased. However, Kurdish musician **Pinar Aydınlar**, who has faced similar legal proceedings for years, was arrested in May 2025 and freed pending trial on charges of “membership in a terrorist organization” and “making propaganda for a terrorist organization.” The charges relate to her membership of the People’s Democratic Congress (HDK), a civil society platform in Turkey linked to Kurdish political activism, but which operates legally. On 9 December she was sentenced to six years and three months in prison. She is free pending appeal.¹⁴ Pinar’s public profile as a well-known singer is a reason for her being singled out by the authorities.

Humour under attack

Cartoonists in Türkiye have over the years been targeted and prosecuted for works satirising the government, and for mentioning religion or offending public morals.

One prominent case from 2025 involved the satirical magazine *LeMan*, which was subjected to intense censorship following allegations that a cartoon it had published “depicted the prophets Muhammad and Moses.” A cartoon depicting two figures named Muhammed and Musa greeting each other with “Selamün Aleyküm” and “Aleyhem Salom” above a bombed city became the focus of campaigns by ultra-religious groups and government officials after it spread on social media in June.¹⁵

Although the management of *LeMan* stated that the cartoon did not depict the Prophet, disinformation spread rapidly, mobilising conservative networks and religious activists. Demonstrations outside the magazine’s offices included calls for the implementation of Sharia law. Five employees, including the cartoonist, were arrested on charges of “insulting religious values” and “openly inciting the public to hatred and hostility.” The editor in chief also faced charges but was abroad. The relevant issue was confiscated, and access to the magazine’s website and social media accounts was blocked.



LeMan cartoonist Zehra Ömeroğlu was acquitted after nearly five years on trial over a cartoon deemed “obscene.” Photo: Courtesy of Ömeroğlu.

¹² ‘Goethe-Medaille 2025 Dankesrede Osman Kavala’, Goethe-Institut, 28 August 2025, https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf352/20250828-goethe-medaille_dankesrede-osman-kavala.pdf (accessed 14 January 2026).

¹³ L.Karakaş, ‘Ayşe Barım’ın tutuklanması bir gözdağıdır’, Marksist.org, 28 January 2025, <https://marksist.org/ayse-barimin-tutuklanmasi-bir-gozdagidir/> (accessed 14 January 2026).

¹⁴ ‘Folk singer Pinar Aydınlar sentenced to over 6 years in prison on ‘terrorism’ charges’, Bianet, 9 December 2025, <https://bianet.org/haber/folk-singer-pinar-aydinlar-sentenced-to-over-6-years-in-prison-on-terrorism-charges-314338> (accessed 6 February 2026).

¹⁵ ‘Erdogan slams cartoon as ‘vile provocation’; Turkish magazine denies Prophet Mohammed depiction’, France24, 1 July 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250701-erdogan-slams-cartoon-vile-provocation-turkish-magazine-denies-prophet-mohammed-depiction-leman> (accessed 14 January 2026).

While five defendants were released in September after appealing their detentions cartoonist **Doğan Pehlevan** remains imprisoned, due to a separate case for allegedly “insulting the president.”¹⁶

Another *LeMan* cartoonist, **Zehra Ömeroğlu**, was acquitted in June 2025 after being on trial for nearly five years over a cartoon titled¹⁷, which had been deemed “obscene.” Ömeroğlu, in an interview with Freemuse, drew attention to the decline in tolerance towards artistic expression, stating, **“Don’t touch this, don’t touch that; we were left with dry, empty pages. Self-censorship has permeated so deeply that I don’t think most artists are even aware of it. It’s essential to recognise this and strive for balance; otherwise, one may become unable to express anything at all.”** As a female cartoonist, she believes that the charges of obscenity against her were intentional and gender based. **“My male colleagues did not face such treatment for creating similar content. While some have been prosecuted for defamation or political cartoons, I, too, have produced harsh political commentary. However, I was judged not for this but for obscenity. I suppose they believe my morality is below their standards for women!”** she states.¹⁸

The Year of the family

A significant development was the declaration of 2025 as the “Year of the Family” by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In his announcement,¹⁹ Erdoğan cited declining birth rates and framed “the LGBTI+ issue” as one of the most serious threats to the institution of the family. This is an escalation in a country where Pride Marches and Pride Month events have been banned for more than a decade.

This was further entrenched with a debate on a draft law²⁰ that includes provisions aimed at “protecting the institution of the family” and criminalising expressions deemed contrary to “biological sex at birth” or “general morality.” However, the

ruling AKP later removed the LGBTI+-targeting provisions from the draft due to public backlash.

Nevertheless, throughout the year, state sanctions reflecting this perceived “threat” to the family became increasingly visible. For example, Türkiye’s queer festival, Pembe Hayat Kuirfest,²¹ which has been held since 2011, was banned on the grounds of “protecting public order, general health and morals, and the rights and freedoms of others.” And the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), which has long imposed fines and removed content from digital platforms for allegedly promoting homosexuality or undermining family values, intensified its interventions. RTÜK Chair Ebubekir Şahin stated, in relation to an investigation into the popular television series *Kızılıçık Şerbeti* (Cranberry Sorbet), that the institution would not remain indifferent to content that could “harm the family structure,” explicitly referencing the “Year of the Family.” In the TV episode in question, two siblings’ spouses were depicted as falling in love with each other. Subsequently, the series’ writers altered the script, effectively resorting to self-censorship.



Türkiye’s queer festival Pembe Hayat Kuirfest was banned on grounds of ‘public order, general health and morals, and the rights and freedoms of others’. Image: Kuirfest promotional poster.

¹⁶ Ö. Altunok, ‘Court rules for release of cartoonist Doğan Pehlevan in *LeMan* case’, *Expression Interrupted*, 14 November 2025, <https://www.expressioninterrupted.com/court-rules-for-release-of-cartoonist-dogan-pehlevan-in-leman-case> (accessed 14 January 2026).

¹⁷ Ö. Altunok, ‘Türkiye: Zehra Ömeroğlu and the price of humour’, <https://www.freemuse.org/turkiye-zehra-omeroglu-and-the-price-of-humour> (accessed 14 January 2026).

¹⁸ Z. Ömeroğlu, ‘Cartoonist Zehra Ömeroğlu – ‘We were left with dry, empty pages’’, interview by Ö. Altunok for Freemuse, 15 July 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/cartoonist-zehra-omeroglu-we-were-left-with-dry-empty-pages> (accessed 14 January 2026).

¹⁹ ‘Turkey’s ‘year of family’ becomes year against LGBTI’, *Duvar English*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-year-of-family-becomes-year-against-lgbti-news-65764> (accessed 14 January 2026).

²⁰ ‘Türkiye: Leaked proposals that would criminalize LGBTI people ‘must never see the light of day’’, *Amnesty International*, 17 October 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/turkiye-leaked-proposals-that-would-criminalize-lgbti-people-must-never-see-the-light-of-day/> (accessed 14 January 2026).

²¹ Pembe Hayat KuirFest, ‘Home’, <https://www.pembehayatkuirfest.org/> (accessed 14 January 2026).

Throughout the year, RTÜK also censored numerous films and series released on digital platforms. In the final month of the year, the series, *Jasmine*, about a sex worker was removed from HBO Max and fined the maximum administrative penalty for allegedly contradicting “national and spiritual values, general morality, and the principle of protecting the family.”²² Netflix’s Italian dating series, *Too Hot to Handle: Italy* was similarly fined and removed from the platform on grounds of “obscenity.”²³

On 18 September, access to the song *Perperişan* by gay musician Mabel Matiz was blocked by the Ministry of Family and Social Services on the grounds that it “disrupted public order and general health.” Following citizens’ complaints that the song’s lyrics were “contrary to Turkish family traditions and customs,” the Ministry of the Interior filed a criminal complaint, leading to an investigation. The artist faces charges of “facilitating the publication of obscene content,” with a potential sentence ranging from six months to three years in prison²⁴.

Members of Manifest, a popular music group consisting of six young women, were sentenced to three months and 22 days in prison on charges of “indecent behaviour and exhibitionism” following their +18 age-restricted concert in September. Although they were released pending the court decision announced on 15 December, social media content related to the concert was blocked on the grounds of “national security and public order,” leading to the cancellation of the group’s tour in Türkiye.²⁵

In a rare positive development, a court overturned the ban on the exhibition *Turn and See Back: Revisiting Trans Revolutions in Turkey*, which had been opened at Depo, an art institution founded by Osman Kavala, and subsequently banned due to “social sensitivities.” The court ruled that the ban violated the guarantee of freedom of expression under the Turkish Constitution Article 26.



A court overturned the ban on the exhibition *Turn and See Back: Revisiting Trans Revolutions in Turkey*, ruling it violated freedom of expression.

Photo: Promotional poster for the exhibition, DEPO, Istanbul.

Asena Günal, director of Anadolu Kültür, which includes Depo, shared her views²⁶ on the matter with Freemuse. While she found the decision encouraging, warned that pressure on LGBTI+ visibility and expression is likely to intensify saying, “Everything related to LGBTI+ visibility is being banned.”

The 11th Judicial Package which proposes the introduction of criminal penalties targeting Türkiye’s LGBTI+ community, included provisions framed as “protecting the institution of the family,”²⁷ was withdrawn following significant public backlash and was not enacted. While judicial reform efforts have continued, the most controversial elements of that original draft were shelved²⁸. This episode is notable because sustained public criticism—by civil society, professional groups, artists, and ordinary citizens—acted as a meaningful counterweight to both state pressure and non-state actors advocating censorship or religiously framed legal norms, demonstrating that public mobilisation can still influence policy outcomes, at least temporarily.

²² “Turkey bans HBO Max series about sex worker” *Bianet*, 19 Dec 2025, <https://bianet.org/haber/turkey-bans-hbo-max-series-about-sex-worker-314730> (accessed 22 Jan 2026).

²³ “RTÜK fines streaming platforms, orders removal of films over “anti-family” content”, *Bianet*, 18 September 2025, <https://bianet.org/haber/rtuk-fines-streaming-platforms-orders-removal-of-films-over-anti-family-content-311665> (accessed 22 January 2026).

²⁴ “Turkish singer Mabel Matiz faces travel ban in obscenity probe over song lyrics”, *Turkish Minute*, 23 Sept 2025, <https://turkishminute.com/2025/09/23/turkish-singer-mabel-matiz-faces-travel-ban-in-obscenity-probe-over-song-lyrics> (accessed 22 Jan 2026).

²⁵ “Prison sentences sought for music group Manifest over “obscene acts””, *bianet* 7 October 2025, <https://bianet.org/haber/prison-sentences-sought-for-music-group-manifest-over-obscene-acts-312331> (accessed 22 January 2026).

²⁶ “A Fragile Victory for Artistic Freedom in Türkiye”, *Freemuse*, 6 November 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/a-fragile-victory-for-artistic-freedom-in-turkiye> (accessed 14 January 2026).

²⁷ “Türkiye: Leaked proposals that would criminalize LGBTI people ‘must never see the light of day’”, *Amnesty International*, 17 October 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/turkiye-leaked-proposals-that-would-criminalize-lgbti-people-must-never-see-the-light-of-day/> (accessed 14 January 2026).

²⁸ “Turkey removed anti-LGBTI+ provisions from the legislative package”, *Minority Azerbaijan*, 7 December 2025, <https://minorityaze.org/en/1773-turkey-removed-anti-lgbti-provisions-from-the-legislative-package> (accessed 14 January 2026).

Security, morality, and silence

Violations of artistic freedom of expression in Türkiye persist, shifting in form depending on political conditions. State actions have become increasingly arbitrary and are frequently justified through vague concepts such as “security,” “public morality,” or “terrorist propaganda.” At the same time, non-state actors—particularly conservative and religious groups—have exerted growing influence over the public sphere, shaping discourse and at times reinforcing state action. The silence of cultural and artistic institutions in the face of all these violations is also noteworthy. Together, these dynamics create an environment that narrows creative spaces, limits criticism, intensifies polarisation, and reinforces self-censorship.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA REGION:

POLICING CREATIVITY: THE WIDER THE ACCESS, THE STRICTER THE REGULATION

Lisa Sidambe

- *Social censorship and censorship by a social media platform contributed to the shrinkage of artistic freedom in the civic space, notably in Nigeria.*
- *Togo artist sent to a psychiatric hospital by authorities for criticising the Head of State online, signalling the severity of some punitive measures imposed for critical dissent.*
- *Judgments by West Africa's regional court and Malawi's Constitutional Court affirmed the right to freedom of expression, contributing to continental case law on the impermissibility of arbitrary restrictions.*

The digital era has demonstrably enabled the expansion of wider democratic participation, offering citizens both additional and alternative spaces in which they can shape and inform the economic, political, social and cultural affairs of their countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Facebook, while broadening the creative thrust and reach of artists, have equally provided general citizenry, particularly younger populations with restricted access to formal and traditional structures of cultural life, with an accessible and interactive space of creative expression. As the region continues to encounter a combination of authoritarian leadership and deteriorating democracy, social media platforms have translated into spaces of liberation, a refusal to be silenced, and a demand for greater freedoms. Within this context, regional and international multilateral institutions have continued to emphasise the need for the protection of online expression. In 2021, notably, a United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on the Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet condemned human rights violations and abuses for online expression; affirmed that rights

exercised online and offline should be granted the same protection; obligated states to foster online safety; and further condemned domestic laws, policies and practices that either prevent or disrupt freedom of expression guarantees.¹

These collective efforts, however, are yet to realise practical translation in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Critical dissent and expressions that are deemed to insult, contradict and undermine religion, culture and moral sensitivities have a long-standing history of being targeted for censorship, predominantly through criminal law, religious law, and censorship regulations. In the digital era, the criminalisation of such expressions has become even more entrenched due to their increased visibility and accessibility. Existing laws, despite their restrictive nature which Freemuse has consistently challenged, have in some instances been re-interpreted to legitimise a crackdown on online expression, while in other instances, new laws and regulations have been formulated specifically for the regulation of online platforms and expressions. Beyond these direct forms of regulation, authorities have, in numerous instances,

¹ 'Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 13 July 2021: The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet', Human Rights Council, 26 July 2021, A/HRC/RES/47/16, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3937534?ln=en&v=pdf> (accessed 1 December 2025).

also extended their mandate to the ‘policing’ of the physical public image of artists and creative content creators who have significant online followership and visibility, notably through targeting them for fashion choices and other forms of public conduct deemed to contradict established social and moral values. In 2025, Freemuse documented a large number of cases related to the use of digital lawfare in Sub-Saharan Africa, a phenomenon in which laws and judicial processes were instrumentalised to arbitrarily target expressions and individuals challenging authorities, social norms and cultural values online. Members of the public, weaponising democratic participation and their right to complain to authorities, were also implicated in violations and abuses targeting online expressions deemed undesirable.

Adamant authorities: Artistic criticism criminalised



Niffer was arrested on treason and conspiracy charges. This case is widely linked to her viral TikTok dance mocking the President of Tanzania’s election speech. Photo: Facebook, MMI News.

In the 2025 State of Artistic Freedom report, Freemuse expressed concern over a worrying trend in which criminal law is applied in some Sub-Saharan African countries to legitimise the fining, imprisonment, prosecution and arbitrary detention of individuals who create artistic works or disseminate such works as an expression of critical dissent and the criticism of public officials.² Freemuse highlighted that this practice, evidenced by cases documented in **Malawi, Cameroon, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan** and **Angola** in 2024, contradicted international freedom of expression guarantees which prohibit the criminalisation of dissent and the insulation of public officials from a higher degree of scrutiny.

In 2025, this concerning trend continued, notably in **Tanzania** and **South Sudan**. In **Tanzania** on 27 October 2025, two days before the country’s general election, entrepreneur and social media activist **Niffer** (given names **Jenifer Jovin**) was arrested on charges of treason and conspiracy to overthrow the government, with prosecutors alleging that between August and October 2025 she had incited the public to purchase protective clothing in preparation for planned anti-government protests.³ The actual reason for her arrest however was widely suspected to be linked to a TikTok video in which she had danced to a satirical song mocking the President’s election speech. Her video had attracted over two million views within two days, becoming a viral message that sparked critical public debate about the President’s leadership and election promises.⁴ The public rallied behind her release under an online campaign asserting that dance is not a crime.⁵ She was released on 3 December 2025, following the dropping of all charges against her.⁶ This targeting of TikTok expressions in Tanzania emerged against a backdrop of **Shadrack Chaula**, a portrait painter, still remaining missing since August 2024,⁷ following his conviction for a TikTok video in which he burnt President Samia Suluhu Hassan’s portrait.⁸ In **South Sudan**, comedian **Amath Jok** was arrested by National Security Services on 11 November 2025, and detained for four days on allegations that she had insulted President Salva Kiir during

² ‘The State of Artistic Freedom- 2025’, Freemuse, https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SAF-2025_web.pdf, pp. 13 – 15 (accessed 1 December 2025).

³ ‘Over 140 Tanzanians face treason in wake of election day protests’, The Chanzo Initiative, 7 November 2025, <https://thechanzo.com/2025/11/07/over-140-tanzanians-face-treason-charges-in-wake-of-election-day-protests/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

⁴ ‘Outrage as Tanzanian influencer charged with treason for a TikTok dance?!’, Maisha TV Kenya, 7 November 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87x79ZuGL8M> (accessed 1 December 2025).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ H. Jumanne, ‘Tanzania’s DPP drops treason charges, releases cosmetics entrepreneur ‘Niffer’ and Mika Lukas Chaval’, The Citizen, 3 December 2025, <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/national/tanzania-s-dpp-drops-treason-charges-releases-cosmetics-entrepreneur-niffer-and-mika-lucas-chaval-5285366> (accessed 4 December 2025).

⁷ ‘Activists vanish as repression grows in Africa’, African Digital Democracy, 18 September 2025, <https://disinfo.africa/activists-vanish-as-repression-grows-in-africa-30483126e691> (accessed 1 December 2025).

⁸ H. Mathias, ‘Artist who was arrested and later released after burning President Samia’s picture goes missing’, The Citizen, 7 August 2024, <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/national/artist-who-was-arrested-and-later-released-after-burning-president-samia-s-picture-goes-missing-4718114> (accessed 1 December 2025).

a TikTok live stream in which she jokingly called the President a “big thief wearing a hat.”⁹ She was rearrested shortly after her release, on grounds that the arresting authority had not sanctioned her release.¹⁰ Insulting or ridiculing the President is an offence criminalised under Section 76 of South Sudan’s Penal Code Act 2008. The arbitrary application of this law in the criminalisation of critical artistic expression has been condemned by some sections of civil society for violating constitutionally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and freedom of opinion, and under circumstances that are viewed as not meeting the minimum qualification of defamation.¹¹

New entrants in 2025: A clampdown on artists’ critical dissent in Somalia, Togo and Kenya

In yet another case at the intersection of TikTok expression and critical dissent, four TikTokers in **Somalia, Omar Isse Salad, Mahamad Omar Yirid, Amin Mohamed Hassan and Abdisalan Eynashe Ibrahim**, were arrested and detained for a video in which they danced to a modified version of the President’s 2022 campaign song.¹² Their TikTok activity took place within a Somali political climate where young people are widely utilising the platform to comment on public affairs and public officials, even as the government has reportedly contemplated banning the platform on several grounds including efforts to curb misinformation.¹³ Authorities alleged that the four had used derogatory language and danced in a way that ridiculed the President, in violation of the constitution and national laws which protect the honour and dignity of the President.¹⁴

Their TikTok activity took place within a Somali political climate where young people are increas-

ingly using the platform to comment on public affairs and public officials, even as the government has reportedly considered banning it on various grounds, including efforts to curb misinformation.

Togo, with its turbulent political environment and deteriorating human rights record, has experienced mounting waves of protests against economic decline and constitutional changes allowing President Faure Gnassingbe to serve without term limits and without standing for public election.¹⁵ Artists are among the scores of human rights activists who have continued to be arrested for critical dissent in a country in which civic space is rapidly shrinking. Musician **Aamron** and poet **Affectio** have faced multi-layered forms of harassment and lawfare for daring to be critical. Aamron was arrested and detained on 26 May 2025 for a social media video in which he called for a satirical rallying against President Gnassingbe.¹⁶ His arrest fuelled already scheduled Gen-Z-led protests in Lomé as young people, mainly in their twenties, mobilised against restrictions on free expression and the broader undermining of constitutionally guaranteed rights. On 5 June 2025, from a psychiatric facility to which he had been transferred by the police on grounds that his actions had been motivated by mental instability, Aamron issued a public apology for his remarks,¹⁷ presumably under duress.¹⁸ Despite this contrition, he was rearrested on 19 September 2025 and charged with inciting the public, spreading false information and insulting the President.¹⁹ He was released the following day under judicial supervision and the submission of his passport to the police. Poet Affectio on the other hand, was in pre-trial detention from 12 January 2025,²⁰ and reportedly released on pardon on 31 December 2025,²¹ for *Do your part*, a poem he published on social media addressing the oppression and injustice perpetuat-

9 S. Jha, ‘Comedian Amath Jok rearrested after her ‘big thief’ insult at Kiir goes viral’, MSN, November 2025, <https://www.msn.com/en-in/entertainment/bollywood/comedian-amath-jok-rearrested-after-her-big-thief-insult-at-kiir-goes-viral/ar-AA1QHs07> (accessed 1 December 2025).

10 ‘Comedian Amath Jok rearrested alongside singer and TikToker’, Radio Tamazuj, 17 November 2025, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/comedian-amath-jok-rearrested-alongside-singer-and-tiktoker> (accessed 1 December 2025).

11 Ibid.

12 F. Hanshi, ‘TikTokers arrested for insulting Somalia’s president in a dance video’, BBC, 16 September 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crmek8wgjdgo> (accessed 1 December 2025).

13 Ibid.

14 ‘Mogadishu TikTokers arrested allegedly insulting Somalia’s president’, TRT Afrika, 16 September 2025, <https://www.trtafrika.com/english/article/af7fae6ad776> (accessed 1 December 2025).

15 E. Kaglan, ‘Togo protests signal youth anger at dynastic rule – but is change possible?’, Al Jazeera, 4 July 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/4/togo-protests-signal-youth-anger-at-dynastic-rule-but-is-change-possible> (accessed 1 December 2025).

16 ‘Togolese poet, who police said was ‘arrested for treatment’, apologises for criticising president’, TRT Afrika, 5 June 2025, <https://www.trtafrika.com/english/article/b8e228340fbd> (accessed 1 December 2025).

17 Ibid.

18 ‘Togo: Artiste arrested again, passport confiscated’, Media Foundation for West Africa, 20 September 2025, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/togo-artiste-arrested-again-passport-confiscated/> (accessed 16 February 2026).

19 Ibid.

20 ‘Togo: Congolese poet Affectio’s place is not in prison’, Africivistes, 4 February 2025, <https://africivistes.com/en/togo-a-poets-place-is-not-in-prison/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

21 ‘In Togo, four figures behind Turnons La Page’s victory in 2025’, Turnons La Page, 8 January 2026, <https://www.tournonslapage.org/en/actualites/au-togo-quatre-figures-de-la-victoire-de-tournons-la-page-en-2025> (accessed 28 January 2026).

ed by the Togolese government.²² The authorities deemed the poem to be inciteful and charged him with undermining the internal security of the state. In a statement, the Media Foundation for West Africa condemned his prolonged pre-trial detention, citing that “it fits a broader pattern in which critical voices are systemically remanded in custody pending trial.”²³

In May 2025, the government of Kenya presented a report²⁴ on its human rights record under the United Nations Universal Periodic Review mechanism. In it, the government expressed a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and public assembly. A day after the country’s review, on 2 May 2025, four filmmakers, **Nicholas Wambugu, Brian Adagala, Mark Denver Karubiu and Christopher Wamae** were arrested on allegations that they had contributed to a BBC documentary *Blood Parliament*, whose screening in Kenya had been arbitrarily banned by authorities without reasons given.²⁵ The documentary, which had been released on YouTube,²⁶ chronicled events of 24 June 2025 where police had used excessive force against protesters who had invaded parliament to express dissatisfaction over proposed tax hikes.²⁷ The studios of the filmmakers were also raided, with technical equipment confiscated. The four were released the following day on a cash bail of Ksh10,000 each (approximately 68 euros),²⁸ pending further investigations and following the BBC’s confirmation that they were not linked to the documentary.²⁹

Weaponisation of control: How a social media company censored a critical artist

Freemuse has consistently condemned social media platforms for regulations that censor artists and artistic expressions. Beyond the taking down of content deemed problematic and seen to violate

‘community standards’, these platforms are increasingly imposing additional punitive measures such as the complete suspension of social media accounts, sometimes banning the creation of new ones after suspension.

Days after the release of his song *Open Letter to Donald Trump* on 29 November 2025 on TikTok, **Nigerian musician Eedris Abdulkareem** encountered the suspension of both his Instagram and Facebook accounts without any reasons given.³⁰ The song’s lyrics criticise Nigeria’s leadership for focusing on self-enrichment at the expense of addressing corruption and a deepening security crisis, with calls for President Donald Trump to intervene for the restoration of good governance.³¹ The musician’s song *Tell your Papa* addressed to President Tinubu’s son was also banned by the National Broadcasting Commission in April 2025, on grounds of its criticism of the president’s economic policies.³² The crackdown on Abdulkareem’s social media accounts has compounded the censorship he has encountered, sharply decreasing accessible spaces of expression.



Cover of banned song, Tell Your Papa. Image: Eedris Abdulkareem X account.

²² 'MFWA call for the immediate release of Togolese poet detained for 11 months', Media Foundation for West Africa, 10 December 2025, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/mfwa-call-for-the-immediate-release-of-togolese-poet-detained-for-11-months/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 'Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review Kenya', Human Rights Council, 25 June 2025, A/HRC/60/10, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4086989?y=pdf> (accessed 1 December 2025).

²⁵ M. Simiyu, 'Filmmakers police link to BBC 'Blood Parliament' story released after night arrest', NTV Kenya, 3 May 2025, https://ntvkenya.co.ke/news/filmmakers-police-link-to-bbc-blood-parliament-story-released-after-night-arrest/#google_vignette (accessed 1 December 2025).

²⁶ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz0f1yyf_eA for the full documentary.

²⁷ W. Muia, 'Pressure mounts to probe Kenya police and army after BBC expose', BBC, 29 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy9vrz4q1v8o> (accessed 1 December 2025).

²⁸ C. Kubwa, 'DPP granted more time to decide on charges for four filmmakers linked to BBC's 'Blood Parliament' documentary', The Eastleigh Voice, 28 May 2025, <https://eastleighvoice.co.ke/national/156274/dpp-granted-more-time-to-decide-on-charges-for-four-filmmakers-linked-to-bbcs-blood-parliament-documentary> (accessed 1 December 2025).

²⁹ M. Simiyu, 'Filmmakers police link to BBC 'Blood Parliament' story released after night arrest', NTV Kenya, 3 May 2025, https://ntvkenya.co.ke/news/filmmakers-police-link-to-bbc-blood-parliament-story-released-after-night-arrest/#google_vignette (accessed 1 December 2025).

³⁰ R. Ayodele, 'Instagram, Facebook suspend Eedris Abdulkareem's pages after release of song inviting Trump', Daily Post, 2 December 2025, <https://dailypost.ng/2025/12/02/instagram-facebook-suspend-eedris-abdulkareem-s-pages-after-release-of-song-inviting-trump/> (accessed 10 December 2025).

³¹ Ibid.

³² A. A. Abiola, 'Eedris Abdulkareem breaks silence on the NBC's ban of his song', The Eagle Online, 14 April 2025, <https://theeagleonline.com.ng/eedris-abdulkareem-breaks-silence-on-nbcs-ban-of-his-song/> (accessed 1 December 2025).



Abubakar Usman Kilina. Photo: Daily Post online.

Furthermore, Nigerian authorities have also taken steps to stifle digital expression amid mounting challenges to the online regulatory mandate of the National Film and Video Censors Board under existing censorship laws. On 14 May 2025, the Board introduced a new measure obligating creators of any content longer than three minutes to submit such content for censorship review before its circulation on YouTube and TikTok.³³ This measure has emerged as a form of regulation intended at additionally stifling online expression by limiting artists' ability to circulate their works through alternative platforms that are not directly controlled by the state. While this has a direct bearing on the

dissemination of critical and dissenting artistic works that are most often targeted for censorship, it is equally a prohibitive measure that prevents the general public from exercising their right to seek and receive information, including content that may be critical or unsettling.

Public influence changing the dynamic of artistic freedom

The immediate and repeated accessibility of artists, content creators and artistic expressions online has altered the dynamics of artistic freedom in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has empowered members of the public to be influential in determining who and what should be targeted for censorship and sanctioning, often on grounds of morality or societal values. In more extreme scenarios, some members of the public have launched physical attacks, including killings, targeting those whose creative content contradicts their views. Conversely, when artistic creations have gained wider public support and become viral sensations, authorities have banned these works and removed them from circulation on social media, to clampdown on their impact. In 2025, Freemuse recorded several cases in at least two countries that exemplified this growing trend.

- Acting on public comments, **Nigeria's** Kano State Censorship Board, on 4 January 2025, revoked actress **Samha Inuwa's** licence on grounds that the 'public' was angered by her "revealing dress and provocative videos" posted online.³⁴ She was banned from artistic activities for a year for violating Islamic values and principles. In the same month and similarly citing public complaints, the Board banned a musician, **Usman Sojaboy**, and two actresses, **Shamsiyya Muhammad and Hasina Suzan**, for an undefined period. The ban was based on allegations that the three artists had violated Islamic values and cultural norms in a video whose contents were deemed to promote immorality.³⁵ Likewise, in reaction to the miming and virality of **Hamisu Breaker's** song *Amanata* on social media, the Kano State Islamic Police (Hisbah) banned the song from circulation, for "obscene language," and the "promotion of fornication," content that they argued contributed to the erosion of public morals.³⁶

³³ V. A. Bello, 'Film board to censor over 3-minute content on YouTube, TikTok', *Daily Trust*, 15 May 2025, <https://dailytrust.com/film-board-to-censor-over-3-minute-content-on-youtube-tiktok/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

³⁴ C. Afigbo, 'Kano censorship board suspends Kannywood actress for the 365 days: "Her dressing flout guidelines"', *Legit*, 5 January 2025, <https://www.legit.ng/entertainment/celebrities/1633972-kano-censorship-board-suspends-kannywood-actress-365-days-dressing-flout-guidelines/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

³⁵ 'Kano censorship board bans Kannywood singer Sojaboy and two actresses over 'immoral video content'', *Sahara Reporters*, 20 January 2025, <https://saharareporters.com/2025/01/20/kano-censorship-board-bans-kannywood-singer-sojaboy-and-two-actresses-over-immoral-video> (accessed 1 December 2025).

³⁶ U. M Hassan, 'Censoring the uncensored: The irony behind Kano Hisbah ban on Hamisu Breaker's song', *Solace Base*, 3 May 2025, https://solacebase.com/censoring-the-uncensored-the-irony-behind-kano/#google_vignette (accessed 1 December 2025).

- In **South Africa**, in a case illustrating how online communities can be clustered into rival groups, **Sqiniseko Mvelase**, a TikTok reviewer of traditional folk music known as Maskandi, was shot dead at his home while broadcasting on a TikTok livestream in which music was the subject.³⁷ Mvelase had often been criticised for being a biased reviewer by some factions of Maskandi music rivalries, and had, in 2024, been reportedly kidnapped for “biased” music views expressed online.³⁸

Authorities policing fashion that challenges defined boundaries

Throughout 2025, the Sub-Saharan Africa region continued to be confronted with questions about what counts as public indecency, especially in relation to fashion showcased through online comedy and creatives’ appearances at events. Clothing or appearance is used as a form of creative expression or communication, especially in the performing arts, and is thus protected under the rights to freedom of expression and cultural participation.

As the public debated, authorities employed criminal law and other regulations to punish those whose exploration of fashion pushed back against defined boundaries of what is morally acceptable.

- In **Nigeria**, in June 2025, actor and TikTok **Abubakar Usman Kilina** was sentenced to one year of imprisonment with the option of paying a fine, for creating TikTok skits that included cross-dressing.³⁹ In the same month, TikTok **Tsulange (given name Umar Hisham Fagge)** was detained on charges of creating, recording and sharing a comedy skit in which he was bathing on a public road wearing a woman’s brassiere.⁴⁰ In both cases, authorities argued that the individuals had violated religious norms and cultural values.
- In **Ethiopia**, following the hosting of the November 2025 Ethiopia Creative Awards, a platform that celebrates excellence in digital storytelling, six TikTokers, both male and female, were detained for “indecent dressing”, including carrying a “man-bag”, wearing a

partially unbuttoned shirt exposing the chest, and not wearing an undergarment under a blazer.⁴¹ The detained TikTokers were from various creative genres showcased online, including fashion and dance. Authorities alleged that their dressing at the event had “violated cultural norms” and promoted a “shallow culture.”⁴² The diverse public reactions following their arrest intensified tensions between commitments to human rights protections and the strong impulse to defend what is framed as national values.⁴³



Some of the Ethiopia TikTokers arrested for dressing indecently. Photo: BBC images credited to @Krinfuld Instagram, @Evan TikTok and @Jahnnny TikTok

Courts playing a critical role in the interpretation of laws governing free expression

Both domestic and regional courts play an instrumental role in the interpretation of laws governing free expression. However, access to courts to challenge the constitutionality of existing laws remains costly and inaccessible to many. Despite this, the limited freedom of expression cases that have been litigated have had the broader effect of providing clarification on the conformity of these laws to international law, standards and practice.

In 2025, Freemuse recorded two cases in which the judiciary affirmed the right to freedom of expression.

In April 2025, West Africa’s regional court, the **ECOWAS Court of Justice**, ruled that the blasphemy

37 C. Khuzwayo, ‘TikToker shot dead while livestreaming with fans’, IOL, May 2025, <https://iol.co.za/sunday-tribune/news/2025-05-31-tiktoker-shot-dead-while-livestreaming-with-fans/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

38 Ibid.

39 N. Ismail, ‘Court sentences TikToker to one year in prison over video’, Daily Post, 19 June 2025, <https://dailypost.ng/2025/06/19/court-sentences-tiktoker-to-one-year-in-prison-over-video/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

40 L. Abdulmalik, ‘Kano court remands TikToker for public indecency in viral skit’, The Star, 21 June 2025, <https://www.thestar.ng/kano-court-remands-tiktoker-for-public-indecency-over-viral-skit/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

41 H. Temuari, G. Gebru and A. Etana, ‘Ethiopia arrests nine TikToker creators in social media crackdown’, BBC, 12 December 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c23e1jld9p7o> (accessed 17 December 2025).

42 ‘Ethiopia arrests six social media stars over “indecent attire” at Creative Awards event’, The Voice of Africa, 12 December 2025, https://thevoiceofafrica.com/2025/12/12/ethiopia-arrests-six-social-media-stars-over-indecency-at-creative-awards-event/#google_vignette (accessed 17 December 2025).

43 Ibid.



Musician Yahaya Sharif Aminu sentenced to death for 'blasphemous' song.
Photo: The musician's Facebook account.

laws of **Nigeria's** Kano State are inconsistent with the country's international legal obligations on the rights to freedom of expression and fair trial.⁴⁴ Section 210 of the Kano State Penal Code and Section 382(b) of the Kano State Sharia Penal Code Law in particular were said to be repressive, vague and permitting excessive punishments that include the death penalty.⁴⁵ This could have a significant impact in the case of musician **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu**, who was convicted for blasphemy under these provisions in 2020 for a song shared on WhatsApp, and who continues to face the death penalty while appealing his sentence.⁴⁶

In a matter involving a constitutional challenge of a law permitting criminal defamation in **Malawi**, the country's High Court constituted by a panel of three judges unanimously ruled that Section 200 of Malawi's Penal Code, which legitimises such defamation, is unconstitutional and amounts to a disproportionate and unjustified restriction on the right to freedom of expression.⁴⁷

Creative expression at risk

artists and creative content creators alike, are showing great resolve, resistance and a commitment to democratic participation despite operating in environments where their creative expressions are continuously threatened. The cases documented by Freemuse in Sub-Saharan Africa

in 2025, while painting a gloomy picture for the region's state of artistic freedom, are laced with positive glimmers of how creative expression continues to find space and voice as a trusted medium of communication.

However, the ease and frequency at which criminal law has been the primary option of recourse, by government authorities, for expressions deemed critical and in violation of moral standards, is of concern. Criminal prosecution and threats of criminal prosecution have had the consequence of further shrinking the platforms citizens can access to express themselves, impart information, access information, and seek information. As online expression is characterised by the rapidness of creation, the expansion of platforms, and the increasing number of creators, the arbitrary application of criminal law and other regulations to restrict online expression will continue to escalate unprecedentedly. Unless states commit to meaningful legal reform and ensure that laws, policies and enforcement practices affecting artistic expression are brought into line with international freedom of expression standards, we will see the continued erosion of civic space and the silencing of artists whose work plays a vital role in democratic life across the region.

⁴⁴ U. Chioma, 'Legal opinion concerning the ECOWAS court ruling nullifying blasphemy laws in Kano State', *The Nigeria Lawyer*, 18 April 2025, <https://thenigerialawyer.com/legal-opinion-concerning-the-ecowas-court-ruling-nullifying-blasphemy-laws-in-kano-state/> (accessed 2 December 2025).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ 'Yahaya Sharif-Aminu v. Attorney General,' *Columbia University Global Media Freedom of Expression*, <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/commissioner-of-police-v-yahaya-sharif-aminu/> (accessed 17 December 2025).

⁴⁷ 'CPJ welcomes defamation criminalisation in Malawi', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 21 July 2025, <https://cpj.org/2025/07/cpj-welcomes-defamation-decriminalization-in-malawi/> (accessed 1 December 2025).

PERSISTENT VIOLATIONS AND EMERGING RESPONSES: CONTESTING ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN LATIN AMERICA

Diana Arévalo

- *Persistent restrictions on artistic freedom: In 2025, artists and cultural workers faced ongoing censorship, harassment and violence. Musicians representing popular music genres remained particularly vulnerable, and continued to face threats, extortion and lethal violence.*
- *Legal and institutional controls: National governments and subnational authorities increasingly used vague or discretionary laws to regulate artistic content in public spaces, education and cultural funding*
- *Censorship of LGBTI+ and art “challenging” religion: Religious and moral conservatism, amplified by political actors or institutions, led to cancellations, removals and judicial suspensions of artworks touching on these themes.*
- *Emerging resistance and advocacy: Despite threats and repression, cultural communities mobilised institutional and civic resistance.*

In 2025, artists and cultural workers across Latin America continued to experience restrictions on their rights to create, speak and move freely. Efforts to control narratives, assert authority over territory and public space, and impose dominant moral or political frameworks continued to shape who can speak, what can be said, and under what conditions. This reflects a troubling continuity, in which violations are repeated year after year, normalising censorship, harassment and attacks against those who express dissenting or disruptive views. Particularly alarming is the ongoing violence against artists in popular music, who continue to face threats and killings amid structural impunity and insufficient state protection.

LGBTI+ expressions challenging the boundaries of public morals

Across the region, in 2025, LGBTI+ artistic expressions were censored on the grounds of “religious values,” “public morals” or “respect for faith.” Religious conservatism, often amplified through

political actors and public institutions, continued to undermine artistic freedom and restrict the visibility of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, particularly within educational settings, public spaces and state-affiliated cultural institutions.

In **Peru**, the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (Pontifical Catholic University of Peru) in Lima, banned the play *María Maricón*¹ from being presented at the Saliendo de la Caja Festival². The play, which was scheduled to be staged on 30 and 31 January, explored the relationship between religion and gender identity through a reinterpretation of Virgin Mary and other saints. Its title and promotional materials triggered strong reactions from conservative sectors, including the Peruvian Episcopal Conference and the mayor of Lima, who publicly described the work as an “insult to the Catholic Church.” In response, the play’s creator, Gabriel Cárdenas, stated that his intention was not to attack religion but to narrate his experience as a gay man, excluded from the Church³.

¹ A title that engages with the reappropriation of a Spanish slur historically directed at gay men, now used by parts of the LGBTI+ community as a form of resistance and self-identification.

² L. Paucar, “María Maricón”, la censurada obra de teatro que provocó el rechazo de Rafael López Aliaga, religiosos y otros políticos”, *Infobae Perú*, 15 January 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2025/01/14/maria-maricon-la-obra-de-teatro-que-provoca-el-rechazo-de-rafael-lopez-aliaga-religiosos-y-otros-politicos/> (accessed 20 November 2025).

³ A. Aguilar, “Organizadores de la obra de la PUCP sobre cancelación: ‘Rechazamos las expresiones de odio de grupos religiosos’”, *Infobae Perú*, 16 January 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2025/01/15/maria-maricon-responde-a-cancelacion-de-la-obra-de-la-pucp-rechazamos-las-expresiones-de-odio-de-grupos-religiosos/> (accessed 20 November 2025).

In **Mexico**, works touching on homosexuality in public and institutional spaces were censored and altered. On 10 February, the mural *Los parachicos* by urban artist Tesk Tesk was erased in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, in southern Mexico⁴. The mural was first covered with white paint by a local activist known for defending traditional customs, and later further vandalised, resulting in its complete removal. The work depicted two *parachicos* (iconic masked dancers associated with the Fiesta Grande de Chiapa de Corzo) kissing in front of an ancient historic fountain.



Tesk Tesk's mural *Los parachicos* in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, was first painted over by a local activist and later further vandalised, leading to its complete erasure. Photo: El Universal.

Later that month, on 20 February, the group exhibition *Desajustes* opened at the Museo Sebastián, a municipal museum in the city of Chihuahua, in northern Mexico. According to the Comité de la Diversidad Chihuahua (Chihuahua Diversity Committee), authorities from the Institute of Culture of the Municipality of Chihuahua ordered the modification of the work *Dos mujeres besándose en un ATM* (*Two women kissing at an ATM*) by artist **Leticia Gámez**, forcing the removal of the word “women” from the accompanying poem to avoid explicit reference to a lesbian relationship. The mayor of the city of Chihuahua denied that censorship had occurred, but argued that municipal cultural spaces should “privilege family content.”⁵

Religious pressure also led to the removal of works by visual artist **Fabián Cháirez**, whose practice critically engages with Catholic iconography through “homerotic” and homoerotic imagery. On 6 September, four of his works were removed from the exhibition *Del Barrio, Lógicas Maricas* at the State Pinacoteca of Tlaxcala, a public cultural institution, following protests by religious groups. The Tlaxcala State Ministry of Culture confirmed the removals, stating that the decision was taken in response to social media pressure, including a petition with more than 5,300 signatures demanding “respect for religious freedom.”⁶

On 15 April, the exhibition *La segunda venida del Señor* (*The Second Coming of the Lord*) also by Cháirez was suspended by order of the Sixth District Court in Administrative Matters, a federal judicial body in Mexico City. The exhibition, hosted at the Mexico City Museum, consists of nine oil paintings created between 2018 and 2023, portraying Catholic figures in homoerotic scenes⁷. The April suspension came after an initial judicial order issued in February 2025, when the exhibition—then presented under the title *The Coming of the Lord*—was shown at the San Carlos Academy of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)⁸.

A similar episode occurred on 11 September, when the University of Guanajuato in central Mexico, prematurely closed the exhibition *Iconoclasia* by student **Edder Damián Martínez Reséndiz**, following pressure from conservative groups and representatives of the Catholic Church. The exhibition featured sculptural reinterpretations of crucified figures that critically examined religious iconography in Western culture⁹.

4 F. Martín Pérez, ‘Vandalizan el mural de Los parachicos realizado por el artista Tesk Tesk en Tuxtla, Chiapas; afirman que la pintura es un ‘atentado’ contra las tradiciones’, *El Universal*, 16 February 2025, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/vandalizan-el-mural-de-los-parachicos-realizado-por-el-artista-tesk-tesk-en-tuxtla-chiapas-afirman-que-la-pintura-es-un-atentado-contra-las-tradiciones/?outputType=amp> (accessed 20 November 2025).

5 A. Juárez, ‘Denuncian censura y lesbofobia en exposición del Instituto de Cultura del Municipio’, *LaParadoja.com.mx*, 22 February 2025, <https://laparadoja.com.mx/2025/02/denuncian-censura-y-lesbofobia-en-exposicion-del-instituto-de-cultura-del-municipio> (accessed 20 November 2025).

6 M. Ángel Lara, ‘Religiosos logran censura de exposición pictórica en Tlaxcala’, *ABC Tlaxcala*, 11 September 2025, <https://abctlax.com/religiosos-logran-censura-de-exposicion-pictorica-en-tlaxcala/> (accessed 20 November 2025).

7 ‘Segunda suspensión por orden judicial de exposición del artista mexicano Fabián Cháirez’, *Swissinfo* (18 April 2025), <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/segunda-suspension-por-orden-judicial-de-exposicion-del-artista-mexicano-fabian-chairez/89182307> (accessed 20 November 2025).

8 E. Rosete, ‘Un juez ordena a la UNAM cerrar la exposición ‘La venida del señor’ del artista Fabián Cháirez por ‘vulnerar la libertad religiosa’, *EL PAÍS México*, 7 March 2025, <https://elpais.com/mexico/2025-03-06/un-juez-ordena-a-la-unam-cerrar-la-exposicion-la-venida-del-senor-del-artista-fabian-chairez-por-vulnerar-la-libertad-religiosa.html> (accessed 20 November 2025).

9 Y. Gasca Ramírez and Carmen Pizano, ‘Cede UG a presiones y clausura exposición de símbolos religiosos’, *POPLab.mx*, 11 September 2025, <https://poplab.mx/posts/cede-ug-a-presiones-y-clausura-exposicion-de-simbolos-religiosos/> (accessed 20 November 2025).



The University of Guanajuato closed Edder Damián Martínez Reséndiz's *Iconoclasia* after pressure from conservative groups and Catholic Church representatives. Photo: Instagram, Galería Jesús Gallardo.

Law as a weapon: Legislative and judicial pathways for censoring artistic expression

Across Latin America, national governments and subnational authorities are deploying legal and regulatory frameworks as tools to control, restrict or deter artistic expression. Frequently framed under ostensibly legitimate objectives such as “protecting children,” “defending morality,” or “preventing crime,” these frameworks introduce vague, overly broad or discretionary standards that enable content-based censorship in public space, education and cultural funding. Such legal pathways often target artistic practices that challenge dominant moral, political, or social narratives, creating a climate of legal uncertainty and self-censorship in the arts and cultural spheres.

In **Peru**, this trend took shape through Bill No. 3383/2022-CR¹⁰, approved by the Commission of Culture and Cultural Heritage of Congress and promoted by a member of the far-right conservative party *Renovación Popular*. It proposes amendments to several national laws to prohibit artistic expression in public spaces that include what it calls “violent, erotic, or obscene content,” claiming it is necessary to protect children and adolescents. However, it does not clearly define this, raising serious concerns of arbitrariness and selective enforcement, particularly against performance art, music and visual arts shown in public or community settings.

In **Brazil**, this trend unfolded across both state and municipal levels, revealing how moral and security-based arguments are replicated and adapted across different layers of government. At the state level, for example, in Amazonas, prohibits the performance of songs in schools that “devalue people, incite violence, humiliate women, or express prejudice.”¹¹ These broad and subjective criteria place artistic content under heightened scrutiny within educational environments.

At the municipal level, in Campo Grande, capital of Mato Grosso do Sul, a bill was introduced prohibiting the use of public funds to hire artists whose work is deemed to “promote organised crime or drug use.”¹² The proposal establishes contractual clauses and financial penalties for non-compliance, effectively institutionalising content-based exclusion from public cultural funding.

The debate gained national visibility after a similar initiative was sponsored in São Paulo by Councillor Amanda Vettorazzo (*União Brasil*), a right-leaning party associated with conservative and liberal-economic sectors. The bill seeks to prevent the city from contracting artists whose performances are framed by authorities as promoting or “making an apology for” conduct associated with criminal behaviour, including organised crime and drug use¹³. Similar bills were introduced in several other Brazilian municipalities, including Rio de Janeiro, Goiânia and Salvador, targeting artistic perfor-

¹⁰ Centro de Noticias del Congreso, ‘Comisión de Cultura debate dictamen sobre la nueva Ley del artista’, *Comunicaciones del Congreso de la República del Perú*, 28 April 2025, <https://comunicaciones.congreso.gob.pe/noticias/comision-de-cultura-debate-dictamen-sobre-la-nueva-ley-del-artista/> (accessed 5 November 2025).

¹¹ Draft bill (Projeto de Lei), Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Amazonas (SAPL – Sistema de Apoio ao Processo Legislativo), <https://sapl.al.am.leg.br/media/sapl/public/normajuridica/2025/13833/7381.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2026).

¹² ‘Lei Anti-Oruam: projeto que proíbe contratação de artistas que fazem apologia ao crime tramita em MS’, *G1 Mato Grosso do Sul*, (20 February 2025), <https://g1.globo.com/ms/mato-grosso-do-sul/noticia/2025/02/20/lei-anti-oruam-projeto-que-proibe-contratacao-de-artistas-que-fazem-apologia-ao-crime-tramita-em-ms.ghtml> (accessed 25 January 2026).

¹³ ‘Projeto ‘anti-Oruam’: Se faz apologia ao crime, não terá espaço, diz Nunes’, *CNN Brasil*, 11 February 2025, <https://mbl.org.br/noticias/o-que-e-o-projeto-anti-oruam-protocolado-por-vereadora-de-sao-paulo> (accessed 6 November 2025).

mances at publicly funded events or restricting content in schools¹⁴. The controversy revolves around the lack of clarity regarding what constitutes advocacy for criminal behaviour, since many artists use their music to portray the reality of the peripheries.

There has been similar legislation in **Mexico**, where several state congresses including those of Aguascalientes, Michoacán¹⁵ and Querétaro have promoted legislation restricting or banning the public performance of ‘narcocorridos’ and ‘corridos bélicos’, popular musical genres associated with narratives of organised crime¹⁶. These initiatives target lyrics that are allegedly an “apology for crime” or “incitement to commit a crime,” this despite long-standing cultural, academic, and artistic debates that recognise these musical styles as testimonial, narrative and symbolic expressions within Mexican society¹⁷.

Another attempt to regulate artistic lyrical narratives in 2025 emerged in **Colombia**. Senator Karina Espinosa Oliver, from the Colombian Conservative Party, publicly announced the draft legislation #LeyLetrasDecentes (Decent Lyrics Law)¹⁸. It seeks to “regulate the dissemination in the media of musical lyrics or video clips that undermine human dignity,” claiming to protect children, adolescents and women. Once again its core concepts such as “human dignity,” “degradation,” and “sexual objectification” are undefined.

Organised crime and the persistent silencing of popular music

While the previous section examined how legislative and judicial frameworks are being used to regulate and censor musical expression linked to the narco world, legal instruments are not the only forces shaping the silencing of popular music in the region.

Across Latin America, music has become one of the most endangered forms of artistic expression, as musicians face multiple violations of artistic

freedom, including threats and intimidation, censorship through coercion, forced cancellations of performances, extortion, armed attacks and killings. These violations, frequently perpetrated by organised criminal actors and occurring in contexts of territorial control and weak institutional protection, have been consistently documented over recent years and have intensified.

During 2025, Freemuse and the cultural and journalistic platform Cartel Urbano documented at least 40 violations against musicians, most of them directly linked to organised crime and extortion networks, and in the context of widespread violence turning musical performance into a high-risk activity in certain territories.

Popular and regional genres, including cumbia, corridos and their subgenres, have been particularly affected. Deeply embedded in local identities and social life, these musical forms are frequently targeted due to the artists’ public visibility and the fact that concerts often take place in territories disputed or controlled by criminal groups.

Killings: In 2025, at least 11 musicians were killed, reflecting an environment in which criminal violence, territorial control and persistent impunity continue to place artists at extreme risk, particularly when they perform in contexts affected by organised crime:

- **Mexico:** The extreme risks faced by musicians in northern Mexico were further illustrated by the case of **Grupo Fugitivo**, a group based in the state of Tamaulipas. On 25 May, five members of the band were reported missing after losing contact with their families following a private performance in Reynosa, a border city near the US border. On 29 May, five burned bodies were discovered on the outskirts of the city, later identified as the missing musicians¹⁹. Authorities announced the arrest of nine individuals allegedly linked to the Gulf Cartel “Los Metros” faction, in connection with the crime²⁰.

¹⁴ “‘Lei Anti-Oruam’, official project text, LeiAntiOruam.com (Portal do Projeto de Lei Anti-Oruam), <https://www.leiantioruam.com/> (accessed 6 November 2025).

¹⁵ ‘Reforma sobre apología del delito en Michoacán criminaliza expresiones ambiguas, advierten periodistas’, (Infobae México, 29 May 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2025/05/29/reforma-sobre-apologia-del-delito-en-michoacan-criminaliza-expresiones-ambiguas-advierten-periodistas/>) (accessed 25 January 2026).

¹⁶ Corridos are a traditional form of Mexican regional music that narrate social realities, historical events and life on the margins, and have evolved into contemporary sub-genres such as narcocorridos, corridos tumbados and corridos bélicos. These variants blend the classic narrative form with modern musical influences and address themes ranging from drug trafficking and violence to aspirational narratives, precarity and everyday life in marginalised contexts, reflecting changing social and cultural dynamics in Mexico and beyond.

¹⁷ NOTE: See below for more details on censorship of musicians.

¹⁸ ‘Radican proyecto para regular letras que cosifican y promueven violencia’, CWMAS.com.co, 6 August 2025, <https://cwmas.com.co/colombia/2025/08/06/radican-proyecto-para-regular-letras-que-cosifican-y-promueven-violencia/> (accessed 5 November 2025).

¹⁹ I. Ríos, ‘Confirman muerte de integrantes de Grupo Fugitivo, desaparecidos en Tamaulipas’, Heraldo de México, 29 May 2025, <https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/espectaculos/2025/5/29/confirman-hallazgo-de-cuerpos-de-integrantes-de-grupo-fugitivo-703039.html> (accessed 10 December 2025).

²⁰ ‘Mexican police arrest suspect in killing of five band members’, BBC News, 3 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clvgr1v6z2mo> (accessed 10 December 2025).

- **Peru:** On 15 March, **Paul Flores**, lead singer of the renowned cumbia band *Armonía 10*, was shot dead in Lima after armed men opened fire on the band's tour bus²¹. The killing occurred in a context of escalating violence against cumbia and chicha musicians in Peru, which Freemuse had already documented and publicly warned about two weeks earlier, in its *Music Freedom Day* reporting²², highlighting the growing exposure of these artists to threats and attacks linked to organised crime.
- **Colombia:** On 7 February, singer **Zair Guette** and his manager **Teddy Vergara** were found dead with signs of torture after a performance in Valle del Cauca, a department in southwestern Colombia²³.



Paul Flores, lead singer of the cumbia band Armonía 10, was shot dead in Lima after armed men opened fire on the band's tour bus. Photo: Instagram, Armonía 10.

Threats, harassment and extortion: Musicians also faced intimidation through threats, harassment and extortion used as forms of pressure:

- **Mexico:** Singers **Natanael Cano**, **Tito Torbellino Jr.** and **Javier Rosas** received death threats displayed in narco-banners placed in public spaces and signed by criminal cells linked to the Los Chapitos cartel warning them to cease their alleged support for a rival criminal group²⁴.
- **Peru:** Cumbia singer **Giuliana Rengifo**²⁵ and members of Armonía 10 publicly denounced extortion attempts against them originating from inside prison facilities following the killing of the band's singer Paul Flores²⁶.

Armed attacks and violence: Musicians were also affected by armed attacks during performances and while travelling between venues, with both artists and audiences being at risk. In several contexts, these attacks are linked to extortion schemes and forced payments ("cuotas") imposed

by organised crime groups, often as a means of controlling who is allowed to perform, providing "protection," or regulating access to territories and venues under their influence.

- **Peru:** Chicha singer Toño Centella survived an explosive attack on a concert venue in Carabayllo, a northern district of Lima, in January 2025²⁷. On 22 October, the iconic cumbia band Agua Marina was attacked while performing at the Peruvian Military Circle, a private social and cultural venue linked to the armed forces, in Lima, leaving five people injured, including two of the band's founding members²⁸.
- **Mexico:** Members of the group *Alfa 7* were victims of an armed assault while returning from a performance in Michoacán, when armed men intercepted their vehicle and stole cash, instru-

²¹ D. Arévalo, 'Peru's artists demand protection following Paul Flores' murder', Freemuse, 1 April 2025, Peru's artists demand protection following Paul Flores' murder - Freemuse (accessed 10 December 2025).

²² D. Arévalo, 'Peruvian cumbia and chicha musicians caught in the crosshairs of organized crime', Freemuse, 5 March 2025, <https://www.freemuse.org/peruvian-cumbia-and-chicha-musicians-caught-in-the-crosshairs-of-organized-crime> (accessed 25 January 2026).

²³ 'Asesinaron al joven cantante barranquillero Zair Guette en el Valle: esto se sabe del crimen', El Colombiano, 14 February 2025, <https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/asesinato-zair-guette-cantante-en-valle-del-cauca-DD26613101> (accessed 10 December 2025).

²⁴ A. Tapia Sandoval, 'Célula de 'Los Chapitos' deja narcomanta contra Natanael Cano y otros artistas; ventilan nexos con 'Los Salazar'', Infobae México, 6 January 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2025/01/06/celula-de-los-chapitos-deja-narcomanta-contra-natanael-cano-y-otros-artistas-ventilan-nexos-con-los-salazar/> (accessed 10 December 2025).

²⁵ 'Giuliana Rengifo exige mayor seguridad: 'Las extorsiones vienen del penal de Río Seco'', Panamericana.pe, 10 February 2025, <https://panamericana.pe/24horas/locales/434834-giuliana-rengifo-exige-mayor-seguridad-extorsiones-vienen-penal-rio-seco> (accessed 10 December 2025).

²⁶ 'Armonía 10 de Walter Lozada denuncia amenazas de muerte de parte de los autores del asesinato de Paul Flores', Infobae Perú, 18 March 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2025/03/18/armonia-10-de-walter-lozada-denuncia-amenazas-de-muerte-de-parte-de-los-autores-del-asesinato-de-paul-flores/> (accessed 25 January 2026).

²⁷ 'Sexto atentado contra cantante Toño Centella durante concierto', SolTV Perú, 3 February 2025, <https://soltvperu.com/sexto-atentado-tono-centella-carabayllo/> (accessed 10 December 2025).

²⁸ R. Gómez Vega, 'Atacado a tiros el grupo peruano de cumbia Agua Marina durante un concierto en un recinto militar', EL PAÍS América, 9 October 2025, <https://elpais.com/america/2025-10-09/atacado-a-tiros-el-grupo-peruano-de-cumbia-agua-marina-durante-un-concierto-en-un-recinto-militar.html> (accessed 10 December 2025).

ments and personal belongings. Although no one was physically injured, the band reported that the attack took place in an area known for the presence of criminal groups²⁹.

Censorship and forced cancellations: The severity of the risks faced by popular musicians has increasingly been reflected in threat-induced cancellations, where performances are suspended not due to an order by the authorities but as a result of intimidation and coercion:

- **Peru:** In February, **Bill Orosco**, a cumbia singer based in Lima, cancelled a concert after receiving extortion threats. Shortly thereafter, an explosive device detonated outside his home, forcing him to cancel all public performances for safety reasons³⁰.
- **Mexico:** On 25 February, the band *Grupo Firme* cancelled their scheduled performance at the Mazatlán Carnival, in the state of Sinaloa, after a decapitated human head accompanied by a written death threat was found near the venue³¹.

Responses and solidarity

Despite the acute danger, a movement of solidarity and resistance has emerged from within the artistic community.

Peru: Following the murder of **Paul Flores**, artists and cultural workers organised demonstrations nationwide (and a March for Peace) under the slogan **#NoQueremosMorir** (*We don't want to die*), demanding protection, effective investigations and concrete guarantees to work safely³². These mobilisations underscore that, even under conditions of extreme insecurity, artists are not only targets of violence but also key defenders of civic space, using their visibility to demand accountability and the protection of cultural rights.

Taken together, these cases show how organised crime, violence and persistent impunity converge to create serious and foreseeable risks for musicians and audiences. Live performances and touring routes have become particularly vulnera-

ble spaces, exposing structural failures to protect artistic freedom in territories under criminal influence. In several cases, authorities indicated that the crimes may have been linked to the coercion of musicians to compose or perform songs glorifying criminal leaders. Such threats, combined with the recurrent absence of police patrols on roads where attacks are common, reinforce a climate of intimidation in which cultural activity now takes place.

Silencing solidarity: Censorship of artistic expressions reflecting a political stance on Palestine

In 2025, there were several cases across Latin America of institutional restrictions on artists and cultural initiatives expressing solidarity with Palestine. These incidents illustrate a growing tendency for public institutions to limit artistic expression in the name of “neutrality,” thereby restricting artists’ right to engage in political issues, and particularly the ongoing situation in Gaza, including accusations of genocide, through their work.



After Paul Flores's murder, artists and cultural workers mobilised across Peru under **#NoQueremosMorir**, demanding protection, accountability and safe conditions to work. Illustration: No Queremos Morir.

In **Brazil**, during Rock Week, a rock festival organised by the Prefecture of São Paulo, the per-

²⁹ 'Músicos de Grupo Alfa 7 sufren asalto en carretera de Michoacán', Milenio, 20 January 2025, <https://www.milenio.com/estados/musicos-grupo-alfa-7-sufren-asalto-carretera-michoacan> (accessed 10 December 2025)

³⁰ J. Arce, 'Bill Orosco bajo amenaza: todo lo que se sabe del caso del cantante de cumbia y qué banda lo extorsionaría', Infobae Perú, 9 February 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2025/02/09/bill-orosco-bajo-amenaza-todo-lo-que-se-sabe-del-caso-del-cantante-de-cumbia-y-que-banda-lo-extorsiona/> (accessed 10 December 2025).

³¹ A. Saavedra, 'Amenazan en Tijuana a Grupo Firme con manta y restos humanos; piden que no se presente en Mazatlán', Vanguardia, 25 February 2025, <https://vanguardia.com.mx/show/amenazan-en-tijuana-a-grupo-firme-con-manta-y-restos-humanos-piden-que-no-se-presente-en-mazatlan-CF15102527> (accessed 10 December 2025).

³² C. Zúñiga, 'Marcha por la paz: artistas y agrupaciones musicales víctimas de extorsión salen a las calles a exigir más seguridad', Infobae Perú, 28 March 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2025/03/28/marcha-por-la-paz-en-vivo-artistas-y-agrupaciones-musicales-victimas-de-extorsion-salen-hoy-a-las-calles-a-exigir-mas-seguridad/> (accessed 10 December 2025).

formance of the band *Sophia Chablau e Uma Enorme Perda de Tempo* was abruptly ended after the group projected the message “Palestina Livre” (Free Palestine) and flags of countries from the Global South onto an LED screen. According to the artists, the event’s technical team cut the sound and switched off the screen, effectively forcing the performance to end³³. Days later, the Municipal Theatre Foundation (Fundação Teatro Municipal)—also under the São Paulo Prefecture—cancelled the Festa Literária Pirata das Editoras Independentes (FLIPEI), claiming that the literary festival had “exclusively ideological content with an undeniable electoral bias.”³⁴ According to the organisers, the decision occurred in the context of discomfort expressed by municipal authorities regarding the festival’s programme, which included scheduled interviews with Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, known for his critical scholarship on Israel, and Brazilian activist Thiago Ávila, who had previously been detained in Israel following humanitarian actions related to Gaza.

In **Argentina**, the San Martín Cultural Centre in Buenos Aires cancelled, without formal justification, a virtual workshop titled “¿Cómo crear después de Gaza?” (How to Create after Gaza?) by theatre director Marina Otero³⁵. The organisers were instructed to rename it “How to Create in the Darkness of the Present?” due to the “sensitivity” of the topic. Similarly, the Fileteadores Association reported the removal of works from the exhibition *Fileteado*³⁶ *es Patrimonio*, after authorities ordered that pieces containing political messages about public education and the war in Gaza be taken down before the opening at the headquarters of the National Secretariat of Culture³⁷.

In **Bolivia**, during the opening of the collective exhibition *Alma y Tradición*” (*Soul and Tradition*) a work by artist **Jaime Tereba** was removed without notice or consent, allegedly due to its references to global conflicts and anti-war symbolism³⁸.

Case Studies: Paraguay and Ecuador

The case studies from **Paraguay** and **Ecuador** are presented separately, as they do not align with the four main patterns identified in this chapter. They are nevertheless highlighted to show how artistic dissent from underground or independent cultural spaces, and critical engagement with government narratives, can expose artists to censorship, criminalisation or punitive interventions.

Paraguay: Criminalising underground culture and dissent

On 1 September, **Juan Sebastián Coronel Bareiro**, cultural manager and head of the La Chispa Cultural Centre in Asunción, was sentenced to nine months in prison with a two-year suspended sentence after being prosecuted for “air pollution and harmful noise emissions.” The prosecution had initially requested four years of effective imprisonment. The case centred on La Chispa, an independent cultural space associated with alternative artistic scenes and grassroots activism³⁹.

The defence denounced unequal treatment and that the process reflected bias against the centre’s audiences, composed largely of LGBTI+ communities, racialised groups and artists with non-hegemonic aesthetics⁴⁰.



Juan Sebastián Coronel Bareiro of La Chispa Cultural Centre received a suspended nine-month sentence in a case that sparked protests in support of the independent cultural space. Photo: Instagram, La Chispa Cultural.

³³ 'Prefeitura de SP interrompe show da Semana do Rock após ato pró-Palestina', *Rolling Stone Brasil*, 12 July 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com.br/paraguay-juicio-contra-un-centro-cultural-clave-para-la-diversidad-y-el-arte/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

³⁴ 'Flipei 2025: censura da Prefeitura de São Paulo', *Editora Elefante*, 4 August 2025, <https://editoraelefante.com.br/flipei-2025-censura-da-prefeitura-de-sao-paulo/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

³⁵ 'El Cultural San Martín censura a Marina Otero por mencionar a Gaza en el título de su taller', *ANRed*, 11 September 2025, <https://www.anred.org/el-cultural-san-martin-censura-a-marina-otero-por-mencionar-a-gaza-en-el-titulo-de-su-taller/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

³⁶ Fileteado porteño is a traditional decorative painting style from Buenos Aires, characterised by ornate lettering, floral motifs, scrolls and symbolic imagery. Originating in the early 20th century on buses, carts and shop signs, it later evolved into a recognised urban art form and element of local cultural identity, and was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2015.

³⁷ D. Gigena, 'Polémica entre fileteadores porteños y el Palacio Libertad por obras pro Palestina', *La Nación*, 11 September 2025, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/cultura/polemica-entre-fileteadores-portenos-y-el-palacio-libertad-por-obras-pro-educacion-publica-y-nid11092025/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

³⁸ 'Grave. Fundación Simón I. Patiño censura la obra de Jaime Tereba por denunciar el genocidio en Gaza', *La Izquierda Diario*, 30 September 2025, <https://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Fundacion-Simon-I-Patino-censura-la-obra-de-Jaime-Tereba-por-denunciar-el-genocidio-en-Gaza/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

³⁹ J. Quintana and M. Silvero, 'Paraguay: Juicio contra un centro cultural clave para la diversidad y el arte', *Agencia Presentes*, 12 August 2025, <https://agenciapresentes.org/2025/08/12/paraguay-juicio-contra-un-centro-cultural-clave-para-la-diversidad-y-el-arte/> (accessed 16 December 2025).

⁴⁰ 'Cultura no es delito: el caso del Centro Cultural La Chispa llama a la acción y la solidaridad', *EA.net.py*, 13 August 2025, <https://ea.net.py/cultura-no-es-delito-el-caso-del-centro-cultural-la-chispa-llama-a-la-accion-y-la-solidaridad/> (accessed 16 December 2025).

Ecuador: Contesting official narratives and critical artistic expression

Cases documented in Ecuador reveal a context marked by two clearly differentiated dynamics affecting artistic freedom.

The first dynamic concerns intimidation and censorship by conservative and non-state actors, targeting artworks that engage with historical memory, accountability or criticism of state institutions. It was visible during the 17th Cuenca Biennial⁴¹, where threats were issued forcing the removal of *Son de Las Malvinas*, an artwork by Ecuadorian visual artist Fernando Falconí that references the case of the four children from Las Malvinas⁴² and addresses themes of memory, marginalisation and state responsibility. The threats, attributed to a conservative non-state group, framed the piece as an affront to the Armed Forces and “national values.” In this case, however, the response constituted an act of institutional resistance: the Biennial’s organisers filed a complaint before the Office of the Prosecutor General and refused to remove the artwork, keeping it on display until the closing of the event on 1 February 2026.

The second dynamic stemmed from restrictions and censorship within state-affiliated cultural institutions and through interventions by security authorities affecting artistic events in public space. Cartoonist **Vilma Vargas (Vilmatraca)** saw her exhibition *El jardín de las malicias (The Garden of Malice)*⁴³ cancelled by the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana without formal justification, echoing censorship she had previously experienced in 2016⁴⁴. Similarly, at the Kito Underground festival in Quito, security authorities intervened during the performance of Mugre Sur, an Ecuadorian punk/hardcore band known for politically critical content; according to witnesses, officers reduced and then cut the sound while the group performed *Los Cuatro de Malvinas*, and the event was later suspended after

an audience member displayed a sign reading “No, Noboa,” in reference to President Daniel Noboa⁴⁵. Although officials framed the intervention as a security measure, the timing in relation to politically sensitive content raises concerns about censorship.

Alongside these restrictive dynamics, contestation also occurs at the institutional level. In 2025, the National Assembly overwhelmingly voted to shelve the draft Organic Law Regulating Urban Street Art⁴⁶, a proposal that sought to introduce prior-authorisation schemes, classify unauthorised urban art as an administrative and potentially criminal offence, and grant municipalities powers to remove works and sanction artists. Lawmakers concluded that the bill was incompatible with national legislation and international standards on freedom of expression and cultural rights.

Between censorship and violence

the 2025 findings show that artistic freedom in Latin America remains shaped by persistent and overlapping patterns of restriction: conservative and moralising agendas that legitimise censorship from positions of power, and contexts marked by criminal violence and territorial control that expose artists to intimidation and lethal risk, without little protection from the state. While some institutions and cultural actors resist these pressures, the institutional landscape itself is fragmented and often inconsistent, leaving artists and cultural workers to defend space for expression with limited protection and at significant personal cost. These dynamics reinforce fear, inequality and self-censorship across the region.

⁴¹ ‘Intento de censura en la Bienal de Cuenca reaviva el debate sobre libertad artística’, *Expreso*, 26 November 2025, <https://www.expreso.ec/ocio/intento-de-censura-en-la-bienal-de-cuenca-reaviva-el-debate-sobre-libertad-artistica-265878.html> (accessed 6 January 2026).

⁴² The Las Malvinas case refers to the forced disappearance of four boys from the Las Malvinas neighbourhood in southern Guayaquil, who were intercepted and detained by a military patrol on 8 December 2024, according to information reported by the Prosecutor’s Office. Their burned bodies were later found in Taura (Guayas), making this case one of the darkest and most disturbing episodes in Ecuador’s recent human rights history, and raising serious concerns regarding alleged violations by security forces and the State’s duty to investigate, prosecute and guarantee accountability.

⁴³ ‘El jardín de las malicias reinterpreted Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights as a critical allegory of contemporary Ecuadorian politics. The project included political cartoons, animated illustrations, large-format works and pieces created using artificial intelligence tools, developed in collaboration with animators and artisans.’

⁴⁴ ‘Vilmatraca denuncia censura en exposición que iba a mostrar caricaturas’, *Expreso*, 19 July 2025, <https://www.expreso.ec/ocio/vilmatraca-denuncia-censura-exposicion-iba-mostrar-caricaturas-250358.html> (accessed 6 January 2026).

⁴⁵ ‘El comisario controlaba el sonido: Mugre Sur denuncia censura y vigilancia policial al arte en Quito’, *Radio Pichincha*, 28 October 2025, <https://www.radiopichincha.com/comisario-sonido-mugre-sur-censura-vigilancia-policial-arte-quito/> (accessed 6 January 2026).

⁴⁶ ‘Legisladores archivan el proyecto de Ley de Expresiones Callejeras por vulnerar derechos constitucionales’, *Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador*, 21 August 2025, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ec/es/noticia/108674-legisladores-archivan-el-proyecto-de-ley-de-expresiones> (accessed 6 January 2026).

SOUTH ASIA: *DRAWING THE CURTAIN ON GROWING UNREST, AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES FOR ARTISTIC EXPRESSION*

- *South Asia in 2025 witnessed unprecedented socio-political upheaval, from wars and revolutions to civil unrest, creating a climate of uncertainty and fear.*
- *Artistic freedom across the region is under threat, with state actors and non-state groups increasingly restricting expression in both physical and digital spaces.*
- *National security narratives, moral policing, and heightened religious and broader sensitivities are being used to justify censorship and suppress dissenting voices.*
- *Digital platforms, galleries, theatres and independent cultural spaces are shrinking under legal, financial and ideological pressures, driving widespread self-censorship among artists and creative practitioners in the region.*

Recent years have borne witness to increasing socio-political and economic volatility across South Asia, juxtaposing the region's investments in technological, media and cultural advancement with disproportionate acts of censorship, aggression and persecution. Much of this tension reached a boiling point in 2025, with India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan experiencing wars, civil unrest and revolutions, culminating in an atmosphere of uncertainty, frustration and fear among their populations. The political upheavals of 2025, from the post-election anxieties in India, to Nepal's Gen-Z uprising, the India-Pakistan war, and Sri Lanka's mounting economic and environmental crises, have created an atmosphere of profound uncertainty across South Asia.¹

In this climate, state actors increasingly target both digital and physical spaces of expression, tightening control over dissenting and creative voices. These documented and undocumented violations reveal a troubling pattern of persecution, underscoring the urgent need for closer monitoring, especially in countries like Bhutan where data remains scarce.

This chapter includes cases from South Asia noting

that not all countries from the region have been explicitly mentioned. Owing to its size, economic and socio-political dominance in the region, India has been covered with relative significance in shaping the discourse of artistic freedom in the region. Nepal's Gen Z revolution, which may have emerged as a reaction to the Government's decision to ban social media but had its roots in longer standing disquiet over years of corruption and injustice. It served as a reminder of the region's growing volatility and the increasing role of authoritarianism in seeking to curb spaces and opportunities for creative freedom and expression.

With 34 cases of artistic freedom violations documented by Freemuse across four South Asian countries, compounded by numerous undocumented instances of self-censorship and several ongoing legal disputes between artists, creative practitioners and government bodies, 2025 has proven to be a year of reckoning for the South Asian creative and cultural ecosystem—one in which artistic freedom and cultural rights have increasingly found themselves on the chopping block, revealing the fragility of these freedoms under mounting political, social and economic strain.

¹ R. Kuruwita, '2025 in South Asia: A Year of Economic and Political Shocks', *The Diplomat*, 30 December 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/2025-in-south-asia-a-year-of-economic-and-political-shocks/> (accessed 19 January 2026).



Bollywood-backed Indo-Pak films were cancelled or delayed amid pressure to drop Pakistani talent. Photo: Denise Jans on Unsplash.

Pitting artistic expression against nationalist security

Across South Asia, national security narratives are being repeatedly invoked as justification for restrictions on artistic expression, free speech and cross-border cultural exchange. In 2025, this pattern manifested itself across the region in various ways, deeply impacting international creative collaborations and cultural mobility. A notable example of this came in the wake of the armed conflict between India and Pakistan,² that took place in April and May 2025. The escalating hostilities between the countries had become an urgent concern, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear throughout the region and beyond.³ All creative and cultural exchange between the countries abruptly stopped, and ostensibly for the foreseeable future. In the weeks that followed, numerous Indian and Pakistani creators, artists and musicians found themselves the subject of censorship and media bans, and consequently, having their performances and creative content being deliberately scrubbed and removed from streaming platforms.⁴

Coproductions and joint Indo-Pakistan film projects, particularly those financed in Bollywood, were heavily impacted by national security narratives in India, leading to abrupt cancellations of production and postponed releases, alongside pressure being exerted on these projects to recast or remove Pakistani talent. A widely discussed instance involved *Sardar ji 3*, a mainstream commercial film, featuring Pakistani co-star and actress, Hania Amir, that faced severe backlash from the Indian censorship board and audiences; ultimately the film was not theatrically released in India, but released overseas including in Pakistan.

As the above cases illustrate, the Indian censorship board appears to encourage a vague and wide-reaching definition of what constitutes national security concerns in the context of cinematography, reaffirming the power of film as a medium, to shape socio-political discourse in the country.

Censorship and cinema: Arbitrary delays and denials restrict filmmakers

2025 bore witness to a problematic escalation of censorship in cinematographic films and related activities in the region, with several artists and filmmakers from India, Pakistan, Nepal⁵ and Bangladesh⁶ voicing their concerns about the challenges of censorship and artistic freedom in their countries. Aside from the heightened censorship and restrictions imposed in the wake of the conflict with Pakistan in 2025, film censorship in India has become increasingly contentious. India's Central Board frequently demands edits, modifications and cuts to films, often without providing clear and reasonable reasons.⁷ Topics under scrutiny range from caste-based narratives and politically sensitive storytelling to religious imagery and geopolitical fault lines.

Between September and November 2025, filmmakers of the Malayalam-language film *Haal*—a film centered on the interfaith love story of a Muslim boy and Christian girl—were embroiled in legal

² BBC, 'Explainer: India-Pakistan conflict triggers major disinformation war', BBC Monitoring, 14 May 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0003yhe> (accessed 19 January 2026).

³ 'India and Pakistan tension mounting amid attacks and accusations', Al Jazeera, 9 May 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/9/india-and-pakistan-tension-mounting-amid-attacks-and-accusations> (accessed 9 December 2025).

⁴ 'Culture becomes a casualty of India-Pakistan conflict', South China Morning Post, 30 June 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3316349/culture-becomes-casualty-india-pakistan-conflict?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article (accessed 9 December 2025).

⁵ G. Dev Panday, 'Struggle against censorship in Nepali cinema', The Kathmandu Post, 16 December 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/movie-review/2025/12/16/struggle-against-censorship-in-nepali-cinema> (accessed 19 January 2026).

⁶ R. Rahman Misha, 'Films should provoke thought, not propaganda: Imtiaz Barshon', The Daily Star, 17 December 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/entertainment/tv-film/news/films-should-provoke-thought-not-propaganda-imtiaz-barshon-4059976> (accessed 19 January 2026).

⁷ J. Shah, 'Silenced, Stalled, Cut: Biggest Censorship Controversies of 2025', Times of India, 31 December 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/silenced-stalled-cut-biggest-censorship-controversies-of-2025/articleshow/126269373.cms> (accessed 19 January 2026).

battles with The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which had demanded up to 15 censorship cuts⁸, including the censoring of a scene depicting the consumption of beef biryani.⁹ The film was finally cleared for release in late December 2025, with a UA 16+ censor certification from the CBFC.¹⁰

Referencing national security concerns, cinematographic works such as *Punjab 95*¹¹ encountered prolonged clearance delays, forced edits and muted releases due to their thematic engagement with state violence, political dissent and structural discrimination. The film by Honey Trehan and starring Diljit Dosanjh follows the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, who exposed mass disappearances and extra-judicial killings in Punjab during the militancy era. It remains stuck pending censorship certification with reportedly 127 demanded cuts since its submission to the CBFC in December 2022. *Punjab 95* was also removed from the 2023 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) lineup by the TIFF organising team, without providing an official reason, aside from TIFF sharing that the removal was requested by the film team.¹²

Film festivals in 2025 in India were also no stranger to censorship. In December 2025, the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting arbitrarily denied screening permissions for 19 films from the lineup of the 30th edition of the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) organised in Thiruvananthapuram—a censorship move that was surprisingly refused by the Kerala State Government, where the state’s Minister of Culture reaffirmed the screening of the entire IFFK’s cinema lineup.¹³ Among the cancelled films were four films including a film by Palestinian film-makers, *Once Upon a Time in Gaza*, the Egyptian political thriller, *Eagles of the Republic*, the Vietnamese historical war drama, *Tunnels: Sun in the Dark*, as well as, one film from Israel, and two Indian films on the sub-

ject of casteism. After strong reactions from the Kerala government and discussions between state and Union authorities, a few films were eventually granted censor exemption.

More examples of similar censorship in cinema point to a troubling trend of rising transnational censorship in the region. December 2025’s *Dhurandhar* a Bollywood spy thriller film set against the backdrop of India-Pakistan’s long standing political tensions, was banned in six Gulf countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—on the grounds that the film promoted an “anti-Pakistan” messaging.¹⁴ Additionally, on 12 December, the Pakistan People’s Party filed a case in a Karachi court over the film’s alleged unauthorised use of Pakistan’s former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto’s images, and its portrayal of party leaders as supporters of terrorism.¹⁵ At the end of December, censorship-related controversy emerged over an



Theatrical poster for *Haal* (screenshot from The New Indian Express).

⁸ A. Pa, ‘Citing ‘hidden agenda’, CBFC denies certification to Malayalam film ‘Haal’ with interfaith love plot’, *The Print*, 10 October 2025, <https://theprint.in/india/citing-hidden-agenda-cbfc-denies-certification-to-malayalam-film-haal-with-interfaith-love-plot/2761158/> (accessed 20 January 2026).

⁹ Biryani is a popular and traditional rice dish, found in many cultures of South Asia. The preparation of beef biryani is both common and native to the state of Kerala. However, beef consumption is also often deemed as sacrilegious, due to the sacred status of the cow as per several narratives of Hindu culture. Thus, it can be argued that beef consumption may be interpreted as religiously sensitive.

¹⁰ ‘Trailer of Shane Nigam’s ‘Haal’ OUT following CBFC clearance of cuts, Film scheduled for Christmas release’, *Times of India*, 24 December 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/malayalam/trailer-of-shane-nigams-haal-out-following-cbfc-clearance-of-cuts-film-scheduled-for-christmas-release/articleshow/126156127.cms> (accessed 20 January 2026).

¹¹ The Hindu Bureau, ‘Diljit Dosanjh’s ‘Punjab 95’ stuck in censor board limbo with 127 demanded cuts’, *The Hindu*, June 4 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/diljit-dosanjhs-punjab-95-stuck-in-censor-board-limbo-with-127-demanded-cuts/article69655518.ece> (accessed 9 December 2025).

¹² N.Ramachandran, ‘Punjab ‘95’ Based on Indian Human Rights Activist Jaswant Singh Khalra Removed From Toronto Lineup’, *Variety*, 11 August 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/film/asia/punjab-95-toronto-jaswant-singh-khalra-1235694523/> (accessed 19 January 2026).

¹³ ‘IFFK 2025: How screening denials in Kerala, last-minute cancellations and 19 films sparked a national row’, *The Statesman*, 17 December 2025, <https://www.thestatesman.com/entertainment/iffk-2025-how-screening-denials-in-kerala-last-minute-cancellations-and-19-films-sparked-a-national-row-1503527026.html> (accessed 19 January 2026).

¹⁴ ‘Six Gulf nations ban Ranveer Singh’s *Dhurandhar* over anti-Pakistan theme: Report’, *India Today*, 12 December 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/entertainment/story/dhurandhar-banned-gulf-countries-anti-pakistan-theme-glbs-2834759-2025-12-12> (accessed 20 January 2026).

¹⁵ Y. Sharma, ‘Why a Bollywood spy film sparked a political storm in India and Pakistan’, *Al Jazeera*, 16 December 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/16/why-a-bollywood-spy-film-sparked-a-political-storm-in-india-and-pakistan> (accessed 20 January 2026).

upcoming 2026 Bollywood film *Battle of Galwan*, with Chinese media criticising it ahead of its release for allegedly distorting the 2020 India–China clash.¹⁶

Alongside pushing the national security narrative, South Asia in 2025 also saw a surge in moral policing and heightened sensitivities around gender and religion, with state and non-state actors increasingly invoking obscenity, indecency and religious sentiment to block or punish artistic expression. This trend is not new in South Asia, but the frequency and severity of these interventions have intensified.

India: Visual artists with targets on their backs over religion, nationalism and gender

Religious fundamentalism continued to shape cultural discourse while antagonising visual artists, even resurrecting earlier controversies to justify new acts of suppression. The legacy of decades-old attacks on the work of internationally acclaimed Indian visual artist, **M.F. Husain**—who had been at the center of multiple controversies over his depiction of Hindu goddesses and ‘Mother India’, which forced him to leave India in 2006 for his safety, ultimately dying in London in 2011—resurfaced in renewed debates about artistic “offense,” emboldening fringe groups and prompting institutional hesitancy around exhibiting works that engage with religious iconography. In January 2025, the Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) found itself at the centre of a widely publicised censorship incident when Delhi Police seized an M.F. Husain drawing of a nude Hindu deity after a complaint alleging “hurt religious sentiments.”¹⁷ The gallery successfully overturned the order and denied the allegations, noting the complainant’s self-declared religious agenda. The incident however, had a profound impact on art markets and exhibition organisers, such as the India Art Fair, which notably adopted a cautious approach towards their curation,¹⁸ reaffirming the increasing tendency to self-censor, in South Asia’s creative and cultural ecosystem.



Poster for Punjab 95 (screenshot from IMDb).

In October 2025, an international exhibition hosted by the Kerala Lalithakala Akademi Kochi, South India, became the site of a shocking act of vandalism¹⁹ when public linocut works by Algerian-French artist **Hanan Bennamar** were destroyed by two local artists—Hochimin PH and Sudhamshu—who described the work as obscene and vulgar.²⁰ This attack on the artworks is particularly tragic and ironic, given that Bennamar’s intention was to critically highlight the racist, nationalist and xenophobic remarks she had received from far-right groups in Norway. The Kerala Lalithakala Akademi claimed that it would file a police complaint in the matter.²¹

Later in December 2025, Kochi would once again be mentioned in the news for censorship and controversy. On 31 December 2025, the artwork *Supper at Nunnery* by artist **Tom Vattakuzhy**, exhibited at the Edam hall of the 2025 Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB), sparked intense backlash from local Christian groups, resulting in a temporary closure of the

¹⁶ FP Entertainment Desk, “Explained: Why Chinese media is targeting Salman Khan’s ‘Battle of Galwan’”, *First Post*, 30 December 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/explained-why-chinese-media-is-targeting-salman-khans-battle-of-galwan-13964085.html> (accessed 20 January 2026).

¹⁷ “Delhi Court orders seizure of 2 ‘offensive’ MF Husain paintings”, *The Times of India*, 22 January 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/court-orders-seizure-of-offensive-husain-paintings-at-gallery/articleshow/117436103.cms>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

¹⁸ K. Jhala, “India Art Fair opens amid a tense Delhi election”, *The Art Newspaper*, February 7 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/02/07/india-art-fair-opens-amid-a-tense-delhi-election>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

¹⁹ “Two miscreants vandalised an artwork titled ‘Go Eat Your Dad’ by Algerian-French artist Hanan Bennamar in an ongoing international exhibition of ‘Estranged Geographies’ in Kerala on 22 October for ‘obscenity’”, *The New Indian Express* (Facebook video), <https://www.facebook.com/thenewindianexpress/videos/two-miscreants-vandalise-algerian-french-artists-exhibit-titled-go-eat-your-dad-1355989882832462/>, (accessed 21 January 2026).

²⁰ “Works by Algerian-French artist vandalised at Kochi art gallery after ‘obscenity’ allegations”, *Scroll*, 23 October 2025, <https://scroll.in/latest/1087959/works-by-algerian-french-artist-vandalised-at-kochi-art-gallery-after-obscenity-allegations>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

²¹ “Must Be Resisted at All Cost’: Outrage as Artist’s Work Vandalised in Kerala Over ‘Obscenity’ Claims”, *The Wire*, 25 October 2025, <https://thewire.in/the-arts/must-be-resisted-at-all-cost-outrage-as-artists-work-vandalised-in-kerala-over-obscenity-claims> (accessed 21 January 2026).

venue and a complaint to state authorities over the alleged misrepresentation of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*.²² A week later, both the curator and artist chose to withdraw the artwork from the exhibition—a decision that was accepted by the KMB, which later reopened the exhibition following the removal of Vattakuzhy's artwork.²³ *Supper at Nunnery*, which is based on the play *Mridvangiyude Durmruthyu*, had already been the subject of controversy back in 2016 thus making it subject to censorship twice in a span of nine years.²⁴

The persecution of artists was not limited to the visual arts and galleries alone, extending its threatening reach to murals and street art as well. Kolkata-based graffiti artist **Chayan Sen** was arrested in September 2025 for creating graffiti that called for armed rebellion, as part of the 2024 "Reclaim the Night" protests, which emerged in response to the brutal rape and murder of a 31-year-old female medical trainee.²⁵ Sen was arrested on the charges that his artwork was a threat to national sovereignty despite reportedly only creating the graffiti on the request of other protestors—his identification and arrest, based on digital surveillance of the area, sets a troubling precedent for the monitoring and persecution of protest artists in the future²⁶, who may find themselves at the frontline site of ideological contestation.



Tom Vattakuzhy's *Supper at Nunnery* triggered backlash at the 2025 Kochi–Muziris Biennale, briefly closing the venue before the work was withdrawn and the exhibition reopened. Image: Tom Vattakuzhy, Facebook.

Pakistan: “Vulgar” women performers banned

Pakistan witnessed an escalation in state-led moral policing that disproportionately targeted women in the performing arts. In the province of Punjab, a sweeping lifetime ban was announced on women theatre actors and dancers who are deemed to be promoting “vulgarity, immorality and indecency” through their performances, with the Punjab government threatening any theatres in violation of this ban, with license revocation.²⁷ In accordance with this notification, in March 2025, three actor-dancers, **Khushbu Khan**, **Nida Chaudhry** and **Afrin Khan**, received a lifetime ban in response to their recent “indecent and vulgar” performances in Lahore theatres.²⁸ These interpretations, asserting that female performers in public cultural spaces violated moral codes, created a chilling effect on women’s artistic participation, shrinking both opportunity and visibility. Last year in an attempt to curtail obscenity in commercial theatre, the Punjab government approved amendments to the 150-year-old Dramatic Performances Act 1876, transferring the administrative affairs of the dramatic performances from the home department to the Information and Culture Department.

Bangladesh: Baul singer accused of blasphemy

In November 2025, Baul singer **Abul Sarkar** was arrested in the city of Manikganj, on charges of blasphemy and for making derogatory remarks about Islamic beliefs that incited communal unrest during a performance²⁹. Recordings of his remarks were reportedly shared on social media, attracting severe backlash and leading to a police complaint being filed by Mufti Md Abdullah, the imam of Ghior Bandar Mosque.³⁰ Protests erupted in the area, following Sarkar’s arrest, including a human chain formed by artists and representatives of cultural organisations calling for the singer’s release

22 M. Viswanathan, ‘Artwork at Kochi-Muziris Biennale sparks backlash from Catholic groups; venue shut temporarily’, *The New Indian Express*, 31 December 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2025/Dec/31/artwork-at-kochi-muziris-biennale-sparks-backlash-from-catholic-groups-venue-shut-temporarily> (accessed 21 January 2026).

23 ‘Artist withdraws artwork from Kochi-Muziris Biennale after protests over ‘Last Supper’ depiction’, *The New Indian Express*, 5 January 2026, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2026/Jan/05/artist-withdraws-artwork-from-kochi-muziris-biennale-after-protests-over-last-supper-depiction> (accessed 21 January 2026).

24 Cris, ‘Art in growing shadow of fear’: Tom Vattakuzhy reacts to the Kochi Biennale row’, *The News Minute*, 3 January 2026, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/art-in-growing-shadow-of-fear-tom-vattakuzhy-reacts-to-the-kochi-biennale-row> (accessed 21 January 2026).

25 The Telegraph Online special correspondent, ‘One arrested for street graffiti promoting violence during ‘Reclaim the Night’ in 2024’, *The Telegraph Online*, 4 April 2025, https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/kolkata/one-arrested-for-street-graffiti-promoting-violence-during-reclaim-the-night-in-2024-prnt/cid/2092351#goog_rewarded (accessed 21 January 2026).

26 D. Ghosh, ‘Bengal artist arrested for 2024 ‘armed rebellion’ graffiti in Jadavpur’, *The Times of India*, 4 April 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/artist-in-cuffs-for-2024-armed-rebellion-graffiti-in-jadavpur/articleshow/119953765.cms>, (accessed 9 December 2025).

27 Z. Tahir, ‘Punjab set for lifetime ban on theatre actors, dancers involved in obscenity’, *Dawn*, 26 January 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1887702>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

28 ‘Pakistan’s Punjab imposes lifetime ban on three stage dancers for ‘vulgarity’’, *The Week*, March 19 2025, <https://www.theweek.in/wire-updates/international/2025/03/19/fes23-pak-punjab-dancers.html>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

29 ‘Baul’ singers are mystic minstrels from Bangladesh and West Bengal who use music and poetry to explore spiritual themes and achieve liberation.

30 Protho Malo staff correspondent, ‘Baul singer Abul Sarkar jailed in Manikganj on blasphemy allegation’, *Prothom Alo*, 21 November 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/puaq8jibxw> (accessed 21 January 2026).

during which three artists were injured.³¹ Though their persecution long predates these events, there is no denying that arbitrary arrests of artists and cultural practitioners from marginalised communities, including Baul musicians, have increased in recent times with the rise of religious extremism.³²

Indian same sex performance cancelled

In April 2025, a government-run cultural centre in the Indian city of Jaipur, abruptly cancelled a dance performance exploring a same-sex relationship after objections from Sanskar Bharati, the cultural wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—a right-wing, Indian organisation. The work, titled *Samaaj*, was scheduled to be staged at the Madhyavarti auditorium in Jawahar Kala Kendra, but was pulled just days before the event.³³

Taken together, these incidents reveal a pattern in which gender, nationalism and religious morality are being increasingly used as grounds to regulate artistic freedom and stifle free expression in the region—a pattern that has also emerged in the digital realm.



Cancelled dance performance *Samaaj*, celebrating same-sex relationships (screenshot from Vimeo).

State actors cracking down on digital expressions

In 2025, the digital landscape across South Asia became one of the most heavily contested terrains for artistic freedom. In the last few years, govern-

ments across the region—in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Nepal—have been introducing new regulations targeting online expression, surveillance and content moderation, all under the guise of public order, national security, or misinformation control.

In Sri Lanka, the introduction of sweeping online safety laws such as the Online Safety Act (OSA) 2024, created broad powers for the state to remove digital content deemed harmful or destabilising—a definition so broad it has been used to silence dissenting artists, journalists, and independent cultural organisations.³⁴ In India, new amendments to IT regulations expanded the government's authority to order social media platforms to take down content that critiqued public institutions, effectively blurring the line between regulation with a certain justification and censorship. Comedians, satirists and spoken-word performers found themselves particularly vulnerable. New advisory guidelines targeted stand-up comedy content, with several performers receiving notices for jokes deemed offensive or politically sensitive.³⁵

In March 2025, stand-up comedian **Kunal Kamra** found himself at the centre of controversy, when a comedy video he recorded at a Mumbai arts venue, *The Habitat* was uploaded to his YouTube channel only to spark immediate backlash from local right-wing political party members, who alleged that the comedian had insulted their party leader during the course of his recorded repertoire.³⁶ In addition to multiple complaints filed against him by representatives and supporters of the local political party, the video also led to party members vandalising the venue, which sought to temporarily shut down operations for fear of the public's safety. Pakistan, in parallel, introduced cybercrime amendments³⁷ that increased penalties for defamation of state institutions, directly impacting artists who use digital media to critique methods of governance or military influence.

Meanwhile, Nepal witnessed both resistance and repression. The Gen-Z-led revolution, which mobi-

31 The Daily Star correspondent Manikganj, 'Baul Abul Sarkar's arrest: 3 protesting artists injured during attack in Manikganj', *The Daily Star*, 23 November 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/baul-abul-sarkars-arrest-3-protesting-artists-injured-during> (accessed 21 January 2026).

32 'Fascism Emerging': Chorus In Bangladesh After 'Baul' Singer's Arrest', NDTV, 25 November 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/bangladesh-news-fascism-emerging-chorus-in-dhaka-after-baul-singer-maharaj-abul-sarkars-arrest-9696108> (accessed 21 January 2026).

33 Scroll staff, 'After complaint by RSS-linked body, Jaipur cultural centre cancels play on same-sex relations', *Scroll*, 29 April 2025, <https://scroll.in/latest/1081791/after-complaint-by-rss-linked-body-jaipur-cultural-centre-cancels-play-on-same-sex-relations>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

34 R. Laknath Jayakody, 'OSA: 'Chilling' impacts on digital/social media content creators', *The Morning*, 19 September 2025, <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/zei4R6ogezfzIYxiMsMc>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

35 S. Kumar Singh, 'India's top court moves to regulate comedians and influencers' speech', *Global Voices*, 6 November 2025, <https://globalvoices.org/2025/11/06/indias-top-court-moves-to-regulate-comedians-and-influencers-speech/>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

36 R. Jain, 'How India's comedians are paying the price for free speech', *Index on Censorship*, 29 July 2025, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2025/07/how-indias-comedians-are-paying-the-price-for-free-speech/> (accessed 22 January 2026).

37 'Pakistan: Amended cybercrime law poses new threats to press freedom', *International Press Institute*, 7 March 2025, <https://ipi.media/pakistan-amended-cybercrime-law-poses-new-threats-to-press-freedom/>, (accessed 10 December 2025).

lised through social media, highlighted the enormous power of digital platforms in amplifying youth-led demands for accountability. The protests that had erupted across Nepal, were in response to the then government's initiative to ban social media platforms, in a bid to restrict free speech and artistic freedom. Notably, much of Nepal's Gen-Z led protest culture included not just slogans or rallies, but creative expression; street theatre, murals, rap, pop-culture memes, and songs, thereby making art itself a medium of resistance and community-building. An illustrative example is the use of the *Jolly Roger of the Straw Hats* flag from the popular Japanese manga *One Piece*, which became synonymous with the protests in Nepal after already emerging as a symbol of protest in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, France and Slovakia—thus acquiring a kind of global notoriety as a pop-culture emblem of Gen-Z movements.³⁸

Shrinking creative spaces

The erosion of artistic freedom in South Asia is further compounded by the shrinking of physical and institutional spaces where artists create, collaborate and present their work. Foreign funding restrictions, national security regulations, and bureaucratic controls have placed considerable strain on cultural infrastructure. Many institutions have faced severe funding cuts, delays in grant approvals, or outright cancellations of long-term cultural programs. These financial restrictions often serve as indirect mechanisms of censorship, constraining the ability of cultural bodies to sustain critical, experimental, or politically engaged work. Though not always documented, there are an increasing number of cultural actors and organisations in South Asia, who find their activities restricted and monitored through their government's usage of foreign agent or foreign contribution regulation laws.

Growing nationalist sentiments have also tightened their grip on civic spaces. Across the region, artist-run spaces, independent galleries and theatre collectives have reported heightened monitoring, difficulties in securing permissions, and growing fear of being targeted for hosting dissenting or politically sensitive works. National security laws have played a significant role in narrowing the operational space for creative organisations.

A climate of fear and growing self-censorship

Throughout 2025, a pattern has emerged across South Asia, revealing that artistic freedom is increasingly under strain; with pressure from above by state actors and from below by growing moral, religious, and nationalist powers. The consequence is an expanding climate of self-censorship that affects not only individual artists but also institutions, universities, cultural centers and arts organisations. Many have begun to avoid programming works that could trigger legal scrutiny or backlash, making the absence of expression as telling as the acts of censorship themselves. That artists and artworks have been censored and persecuted for engaging with themes such as gender and religion, alongside being accused of creating anti-nationalist, obscene and/or vulgar works, leads to a silent, yet growing fear among creative communities making them hesitant to continue working with these themes, or to do so at their own risk. As South Asia continues to navigate political upheaval, cultural polarisation, and rapidly changing information ecosystems, vigilance around artistic freedom has become more critical than ever.

³⁸ 'From anime to activism: How the 'One Piece' pirate flag became the global emblem of Gen Z resistance', *The Conversation*, 24 September 2025, <https://theconversation.com/from-anime-to-activism-how-the-one-piece-pirate-flag-became-the-global-emblem-of-gen-z-resistance-265526> (accessed 22 January 2026).

IN AFGHANISTAN

CULTURE GOES UNDERGROUND

Parvin Ardalan

- *Systematic repression of culture and expression continues: Since August 2021, the Taliban have imposed controls over artistic, cultural and everyday forms of expression, formalised through the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.*
- *Criminalisation of artistic and embodied expression: In 2025, there were multiple arrests for music-related activities, the destruction of instruments, and the policing of appearance and dress.*
- *Persistence of resistance and limited international leverage: Despite severe restrictions, underground education, secret musical practices and small-scale private performances continue.*

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has entered a new and intensified phase of repression of artistic and cultural life. Under a harsh interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law), the authorities are targeting not only formal artistic production, but also everyday cultural practices, social behaviour and individual creativity. This system of control forms part of a broader architecture of gendered and cultural apartheid that erases women's voices, bodies and public presence. And it increasingly constrains young people and artists of all genders.

Music and live performance have effectively disappeared from public space, concerts are banned, musical instruments are seized and destroyed, and many artists have been forced into silence, secret activity or exile. At the same time, key elements of Afghanistan's cultural infrastructure are being dismantled. Closure of cinemas and the demolition of landmarks, such as the historic Ariana Cinema in

Kabul in December 2025 illustrate a deliberate effort to erase collective memory, cultural narratives and the country's visual and artistic history.¹

This broader trend has been formalised through the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, adopted in August 2023 and increasingly enforced since 2024. The law grants huge powers to the morality police to intervene in people's cultural, social and even domestic lives. It includes bans on public music, severe restrictions on media content, including images of living beings, and tight limitations on women's presence in public. It has ultimately led to media closures, removal of artworks and a marked increase in arrests linked to cultural expression. Between 2024 and 2025, several documented cases of arrest connected to artistic and cultural activities point to a clear pattern of repression under the Law, including in private homes.

¹ 'Historic Ariana Cinema in Kabul demolished for shopping complex', TBS News, 26 December 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/historic-ariana-cinema-kabul-demolished-shopping-complex-1319561> (accessed 22 January 2026).



Destroying cinemas like Kabul's Ariana erases cultural memory.

Photo by Masoud Akbari, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

- In January 2025, four people in a village in Kunduz province were arrested for gathering to play the dambura—traditional stringed instrument—and later sentenced to more than a year in prison.²
- In May 2025, at least fourteen individuals in Takhar province were detained while performing music and singing in a private residence, and the authorities have provided no information about their legal status.³
- In December 2025, Taliban authorities in the same province announced the arrest of twenty-five people for playing music in a residential house, and their whereabouts and judicial situation remain unknown.⁴
- In Nangarhar province, officials confiscated and publicly burned dozens of musical instruments, a highly symbolic act meant to promote fear and to erase music from communal life.⁵

The Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) has condemned a directive issued by Taliban authorities in Urozgan Province banning the publication of images of living beings and prohibiting video interviews. The order, enforced under the Taliban's morality law by the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, requires journalists and media outlets to stop producing visual content depicting people or animals. As a result, local television broadcasting has ceased, with the provincial branch of the national broadcaster switching to radio-only programming. Journalists have been instructed not to conduct video interviews or

² S. Sirat, 'Taliban sentence four Kunduz musicians to 15 months in prison,' Amu TV, 20 January 2025, <https://amu.tv/152021> (accessed 5 February 2026).

³ '14 people arrested for playing music in Afghanistan', The Brussels Times, 10 May 2025, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/1572880/14-people-arrested-for-playing-music-in-afghanistan> (accessed 5 February 2026).

⁴ A. Azizi, 'Taliban detain 25 people in Takhar over music', Amu TV, 30 December 2025, <https://amu.tv/218698/> (accessed 22 January 2026).

⁵ Taliban destroy 657 musical instruments in Nangarhar', The Afghan Times, 10 December 2025, <https://theafghantimes.com/arts-culture/2025/12/10/taliban-destroy-657-musical-instruments-in-nangarhar/> (accessed 22 January 2026).

publish photographs, significantly limiting media operations. AFJC states that the ban restricts independent journalism and reduces public access to information. The organisation notes that similar restrictions have been introduced in several other provinces, contributing to a broader decline in media freedom across Afghanistan.⁶

The repression extends beyond conventional artistic practice to more indirect or emerging forms of cultural expression. In December, four young men in Herat were called for questioning by the morality police for wearing outfits inspired by the British television series *Peaky Blinders*. In a BBC report on the incident, a Taliban spokesman said the four men's clothing "... has no Afghan identity at all and does not match our culture. Secondly, their actions were an imitation of actors from a British movie. Our society is Muslim; if we are to follow or imitate someone, we should follow our righteous religious predecessors in good and lawful matters". He added that they had undergone a "rehabilitation programme". The men are said to have told the authorities that they were unaware that they had violated any laws, and that they would no longer do "anything like this again".⁷

While clothing choices are not typically framed as classic "artistic freedom" cases, in this context they represent a form of creative and embodied expression. The young men's dress can also be read as a subtle rejection of coercion and domination, echoing similar cases where authorities have criminalised hairstyles or dress codes in other regions. Such cases underline how control of the body and of visual codes is used as a tool to suppress artistic and cultural freedom.

Despite sustained pressure, however, Afghan cultural resistance persists. Underground education initiatives for girls and women, secret musical practices and small-scale performances in private spaces show that artistic freedom has not been completely extinguished. Afghan society, particularly as regards women and the younger generations, has changed since the Taliban's first period in power from 1996 to 2001. The new generation is increasingly unwilling to accept total silence and enforced cultural uniformity.

A report published by the World Association Against Torture (OMCT) in 2025 describes how women and girls excluded from education, work and public life, have responded by turning to clandestine painting as both survival strategy and non-violent resistance, working from their homes and a discreet gallery under constant threat of raids, censorship, and closure. Their artwork documents gender-based discrimination and daily human rights abuses while preserving cultural heritage and projecting resilience and hope. Each painting is treated as a quiet refusal of enforced silence and a message to other Afghan women that "we are still here" and that the current period of oppression will not last forever if courage and solidarity are maintained.⁸

At the international level, the establishment of an independent investigative mechanism on Afghanistan by the UN Human Rights Council in 2025⁹ signals growing global concern about the scale of human rights violations in Afghanistan. The mechanism's mandate to collect, preserve and analyse evidence of serious international crimes, opens a potential pathway toward future accountability for abuses, including those affecting artists and cultural workers. Continued political support, adequate resourcing, and cooperation from states, international institutions and civil society will be essential if the mechanism is to contribute meaningfully to addressing the repression of artistic and cultural freedoms in Afghanistan.



Afghan women artists continue to paint in secret as an act of survival, cultural preservation, and non-violent resistance under Taliban restrictions. In this painting, a banner reads, "Bread, Job, Freedom". Image: OMCT

⁶ 'AFJC Condemns Ban on Publication of Images of Living Beings and Video Interviews in Urozgan Province', Afghan Journalists Centre (AFJC), 7 January 2026, <https://afjc.media/english/index.php/news/inside-afghanistan/southern-province/urozgan/afjc-condemns-ban-on-publication-of-images-of-living-beings-and-video-interviews-in-urozgan-province> (accessed 25 February 2026).

⁷ M. Zubaide and M. Bubalo, 'Taliban warn Afghans who wore "un-Islamic" Peaky Blinders outfits', BBC, 12 December 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cedx6lqy9670> (accessed 22 January 2026).

⁸ 'Refused Silence! Four Years Since The Taliban Took Over Afghanistan Again', OMCT Blog, 14 August 2025, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/blog/refused-silence-four-years-since-the-taliban-took-over-afghanistan-again> (accessed 25 February 2026).

⁹ 'Establishment of independent investigative mechanism for Afghanistan answers the call of Afghan victims, says UN expert', Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 7 October 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/establishment-independent-investigative-mechanism-afghanistan-answers-call> (accessed 22 January 2026).

MYANMAR:

ARTISTIC FREEDOM AND STATE REPRESSION

- *Systematic repression of artistic freedom: Since the February 2021 coup, Myanmar’s military authorities have engaged in widespread and systematic violations of artistic freedom, including killings, arbitrary detention, censorship, and legal harassment of artists and cultural workers. Repression operates both through formal censorship laws and through an expansive surveillance apparatus.*
- *Lawfare as a tool of control: A growing body of repressive legislation— anti-terrorism laws, election-related offences, and amendments to media and film laws—has been weaponised to criminalise artistic expression, dissent, and even humanitarian cultural activity.*
- *Escalating severity of punishment: Artists face increasingly severe reprisals, having been subjected to long prison sentences, and targeting through digital surveillance and third-party denunciation.*
- *Artists living abroad in enforced exile have even faced the revocation of their citizenship, a reflection of the state's intensifying strategy to silence cultural dissent both inside and outside Myanmar.*

In 2025, Myanmar was scheduled to undergo its next examination under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The UPR is a peer-review mechanism through which all UN Member States are assessed on their compliance with, and commitments to, international human rights standards, including those arising from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other core treaties. The review, however, was postponed until 2027¹ to the ongoing question of Myanmar’s representation at the UN. The postponement of the review was followed by a scathing report by Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, accusing the military junta of a campaign of extreme violence and oppression, creating a “*devastating humanitarian and human rights crisis and fail[ure] to consolidate control over the country*” and “*making a desperate bid to manufacture a façade of*

legitimacy by holding sham elections”.² Subsequently, parliamentary elections that concluded in January 2026 with a landslide victory for the ruling junta, were widely denounced by rights groups civil as “fake” and a “sham”.³



Myanmar’s artists face repression through criminal and security laws since the February 2021 coup. Photo: Pyae Sone Htun, Unsplash.

¹ UPR Info, ‘Revised timeline for Myanmar’s fourth UPR cycle’, UPR-Info.org, 5 June 2025 <https://upr-info.org/en/news/revised-timeline-myanmars-fourth-upr-cycle> (accessed 31 January 2026).

² ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar: Advance unedited version’, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, UN Doc A/80/490 (20 October 2025) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a80490-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar-advance> (accessed 31 January 2026).

³ “This is a fake election”: Polls close in Myanmar but voters have little doubt junta proxy will prevail’, The Guardian, 26 January 2026 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/26/this-is-a-fake-election-polls-close-in-myanmar-but-voters-have-little-doubt-junta-proxy-will-prevail> (accessed 31 January 2026).

Freemuse had prepared a submission to the UPR process, documenting serious and systematic violations of artistic freedom following the military coup of 1 February 2021, which marked the beginning of the current military regime in Myanmar. In light of the postponement of the review, the organisation will re-submit its report when—and if—Myanmar’s review will proceed. Nevertheless, given the gravity and persistence of violations faced by artists and cultural workers in Myanmar through the entire post-coup period 2021 to date, Freemuse has chosen to publish a summary of its findings covering these four years of uninterrupted military rule. This overview is intended to ensure that the experiences of Myanmar’s artists are not rendered invisible while formal accountability mechanisms remain stalled.

A shifting landscape: From structured censorship to pervasive surveillance

Historically, Myanmar has maintained systems of artistic control. Since the February 2021 military coup, that repression has evolved. While formal censorship laws remain in place, particularly relating to film, media, and publishing, many artists have not primarily been targeted for violating artistic regulations as such. Instead, they have been charged under broadly defined criminal or security legislation, counterterrorism and election laws, rather than regulation relating to cultural policy.

Added to this, the availability of the internet has enabled an alarming expansion of state surveillance. Repression now functions through a two-fold mechanism:

1. Formal artistic censorship through legislation; and
2. State surveillance and denunciation networks, which monitor, expose, and frame artists as security threats.

In many cases, exposure putting artists at risk was amplified by pro-regime social media channels, online informants, and nationalist social media actors who publicly accused artists of supporting terrorism or undermining state interests.



Filmmaker Shin Daewe’s life sentence for an unlicensed drone was reduced to 15 years in 2025. Photo: Shin Daewe, X.

Disinformation campaigns frequently precede arrests. The very nature of artistic work dependent on public visibility, audience engagement and dissemination makes artists uniquely vulnerable in a digitally monitored environment. Visibility can now increase the risk of exposure to arrest, imprisonment and violence.

One of the most draconian pieces of legislation is Article 505(A) of the Myanmar Penal code. The new provision to the law was inserted in February 2021 and, while ostensibly aimed at curbing incitement among the public and spreading false news, it is frequently applied by the junta to accuse artists of incitement because of their online activities. It was used to crack down on anti-coup protestors in the days following the coup and a number of artists were also targeted. Since then, numerous other artists, not referred to in this report, have been punished under this law, even when their works or activities were not overtly political. It carries a three-year maximum sentence.⁴

Misuse of anti-terrorism legislation

Anti-terrorism legislation has become a central tool, alongside Penal Code article 505 A for silencing artists, rights activists and journalists. The 2014 Counter-Terrorism Law⁵ has been repeated-

⁴ '505A Act of Revenge: Review of Myanmar Coup Speech 'Crimes', Free Expression Myanmar, 31 January 2022, <https://freeexpressionmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/505a-act-of-revenge-1.pdf> (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁵ 'Pyidaungsu Hluttaw No. 23/2014 – The Counter-Terrorism Law', Myanmar Law Library, 2014 <https://myanmar-law-library.org/topics/myanmar-banking-law/aml-cft-regulations/pyidaungsu-hluttaw-no-23-2014-the-counter-terrorism-law.html> (accessed 31 January 2026).

ly applied to peaceful expression, documentation and criticism of state violence.

Raid on the fundraising exhibition

Documentary filmmaker **Shin Daewe** was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2023 for the alleged illegal possession of an unlicensed drone. She was charged with “funding and abetting terrorism,” despite drones being commonly used in documentary filmmaking. Observers widely believe the sentence was imposed in retaliation for her work documenting environmental harm and civilian suffering during the armed conflict. Her sentence was reduced to 15 years in prison under an amnesty in January 2025.⁶

In May 2025, an art exhibition organised to raise funds for those affected by the March 2025 earthquake was raided and forcibly closed, with five attendees arrested. Pro-regime channels on Telegram (an instant messaging and social media service) had accused the exhibition of “undermining state dignity” and claimed it was raising funds for terrorist activity without any evidence of wrongdoing.⁷ The lack of official justification for the action illustrates how disinformation campaigns calling for a crackdown can trigger a state response, in effect functioning as a parallel enforcement mechanism against artistic expression.

Killings of artists

Since the military coup, Myanmar has experienced an extreme escalation in violence against civilians. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, thousands of people have been killed between 2021 and 2025⁸ in air and ground assaults, the burning and shelling of villages and towns to quell resistance from opposition groups, during the violent suppression of peaceful protests, and deaths in custody following arrest. Within this broader pattern of widespread violence, Freemuse documented in its 2023 report the killing of at least ten artists in the year following the coup.⁹ While one artist was not targeted but died as “collateral damage” during an artillery strike, the remaining cases involved extra-

judicial executions or deaths in circumstances that may amount to war crimes. Most of these cases have not been investigated and there has been no accountability for the perpetrators.

State repression and the absence of justice

Phyo Zeya Thaw, a prominent hip-hop artist, former political prisoner, and elected parliamentarian with the National League for Democracy (NLD)—the party led by Aung San Suu Kyi that formed the civilian government prior to the military coup—was arrested in November 2021. He was convicted under vaguely defined anti-terrorism provisions in a closed military court and executed in July 2022 alongside three other activists. Four years later, there remains no justice for Phyo Zeyar Thaw. In 2024, his wife, Ma Thazin Nyunt Aung, also a hip-hop artist, continued to express her grief for her husband, whose body was never returned to his loved ones to allow a proper burial. In an interview she said: “*Every year I tell myself, and sometimes my friends, here comes July. The anniversary of injustice.*”¹⁰ It should be noted that Phyo Zeyar Thaw’s case



Phyo Zeyar Thaw, executed in July 2022. Photo: Phyo Zeya Thaw, Instagram.

⁶ ‘Myanmar’s junta cuts filmmaker’s life sentence to 15 years as part of wider amnesty’, Radio Free Asia, 9 January 2025 <https://www.rfa.org/english/myanmar/2025/01/09/myanmar-filmmaker-prison-sentence> (accessed 31 January 2026).

⁷ ‘Five arrested in raid on Mandalay art gallery holding fundraiser for quake victims’, Myanmar Now, 27 May 2025 <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/five-arrested-in-raid-on-mandalay-art-gallery-holding-fundraiser-for-quake-victims> (accessed 31 January 2026).

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar’, UN Doc A/79/550, UN.org, 25 October 2024 <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/550> (accessed 31 January 2026).

⁹ ‘The State of Artistic Freedom 2023’, Freemuse, June 2023 <https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/saf-2023-compressed.pdf> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹⁰ N. Nyein, ‘Myanmar junta hangs two leading democracy activists’, The Irrawaddy, 25 July 2022 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-hangs-two-leading-democracy-activists.html> (accessed 31 January 2026).

differs from others in this report in that he was explicitly targeted for his political leadership in the resistance. By contrast, numerous artists have been criminalised despite not directly challenging the regime in overtly political ways.

Arrests, detention and ill-treatment of artists

The February 2021 coup triggered nationwide peaceful protests, which were violently suppressed by the military junta. Security forces employed lethal force, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearances. Artists played a visible role in resistance efforts and were consequently subjected to targeted repression. In 2023, Freemuse documented the cases of at least 83 professional artists detained since the coup, including writers, poets, actors, musicians, filmmakers, comedians and visual artists.¹¹ Nineteen artists were sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to over twenty years. While many were later released under amnesties, the legal framework enabling such repression remains fully intact.¹² In many instances, arrests followed online denunciation campaigns or digital monitoring of social media posts. Surveillance, rather than artistic censorship procedures, frequently resulted in prosecution. The dire situation has continued, as exhibited by a UN report published in June 2025, which estimated that more than 21,000 political prisoners remain behind bars.¹³

Seven years for ridiculing a junta election propaganda film

Just prior to the 2026 elections, a new Law on the Protection of Multiparty Democratic General Elections from Obstruction, Disruption, and Destruction (Election Protection Law) was enacted, criminalising speech or protests deemed to disrupt the electoral process, and carrying lengthy prison terms.^{14 15} A UN report released in January 2026 states that over 400 people were arrested under the Election Protection Law over the month-long election period of 28 December to 25 January and

heavy sentences had already been passed, mostly for minor offences, such as criticism of the election online.¹⁶

Among those detained were three artists targeted for their critical comments. Their arrests were carried out after the launch of a 30-minute promotional film made by Myanmar's military council as part of its pre-election campaign, titled *Those Who Will Ride the Waves of History*. The film portrayed anti-coup protests and resistance as violent and socially destructive and suggested that critics had been influenced by foreign actors. Its satirical treatment of youth resistance and the civil disobedience movement provoked widespread backlash against the actors who took part in the film and led to the arrests of individuals who criticised the film online. Far from quieting dissent, the film sparked anger and reignited calls for a boycott of the elections.¹⁷



Actor Kyaw Win Htut sentenced to seven years for criticising a military film.

Photo: Kyaw Win Htut, Facebook.

¹¹ 'The State of Artistic Freedom 2023', Freemuse, June 2023 <https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/saf-2023-compressed.pdf> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹² 'Myanmar post-coup legal changes erode human rights', Human Rights Watch, 2 March 2021 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/02/myanmar-post-coup-legal-changes-erode-human-rights> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹³ 'Myanmar Human Rights', Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland, ECOI, 18 June 2025 https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2131435/2025_06_Myanmar_Human_Rights.pdf (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹⁴ 'Myanmar military government sets long prison terms for election protests', Aljazeera, 30 July 2025 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/30/myanmar-military-government-sets-long-prison-terms-for-election-protests> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹⁵ 'Myanmar Junta Using New Election Law to Crack Down on Dissent Ahead of Sham Elections', Fortify Rights, 10 December 2025 <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-2025-12-10/> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹⁶ 'Myanmar: Military-controlled ballot exacerbates violence and social tension', OHCHR, 29 January 2026 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/myanmar-turk-says-military-controlled-ballot-exacerbates-violence-and-social> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹⁷ 'Promotional film sparks wave of anger and boycott against Myanmar Military Council ahead of elections', Arakanna, 2025 <https://en.arakanna.net/news/myanmar-news/promotional-film-sparks-wave-of-anger-and-boycott-against-myanmar-military-council-ahead-of-elections> (accessed 31 January 2026).

Just two days after the film was launched on 25 October, film director **Mike Tee**, actor **Kyaw Win Htut**, and comedian **Ohn Daing** were taken from their homes and charged under the Election Protection Law.¹⁸ They were subsequently sentenced to seven years in prison each, a sentence condemned by the UN in December.¹⁹ They were targeted for posting comments on social media criticising the film and deriding the actors who had taken part in it.

Film director Mike Tee had previously been imprisoned in March 2022 when he was arrested for his allegedly critical social media posts. Suffering from colon cancer, he was amnestied later that year on the condition that he would be required to serve the rest of his sentence should he commit another “crime”. He will now have to serve his remaining prison term, as well as any imprisonment he faces with the additional charges under the Election Protection Law.²⁰



Director Zin Wine, awaiting a humanitarian visa in Thailand, is stateless after fleeing Myanmar. Photo: Zin Wine, Facebook.

Film censorship and legislative restrictions

In 2022, amendments to the Motion Picture Law significantly increased penalties for producing or screening films without prior authorisation. In 2024, further regulations were introduced to penalise online distribution of non-approved films, extending maximum sentences to three years in prison and a fine of 2 million kyats (c. €800). Furthermore, clauses were added that criminalise “disrespectful remarks about the state,” “actions that harm the interests of the nation,” and “engaging in activities contrary to the law.”²¹

Authorities justified these measures, stating that films “often contain content, including actions and dialogues, which contravene the country’s policies, religious sentiments, ethnic harmony, legal framework, and cultural norms, rendering them unsuitable for family viewing”²².

Even where prosecutions have been limited, the broadened and vaguely worded offences have had a pronounced chilling effect. Industry observers report increased self-censorship among directors, producers, and streaming platforms, with many avoiding themes related to politics, the military, ethnic conflict, or social protest. As a result, creative expression has narrowed, and a number of filmmakers have shifted to working abroad or distributing content anonymously online.²³

Revocation of citizenship

Burmese artists living in exile now face a new risk as the regime has been reaching out beyond its borders in an attempt to quash cultural dissent. On 18 June 2025, the junta revoked the citizenship of 13 high-profile artists living abroad who continued to oppose the coup through their work. The decision, taken in accordance with Article 16 of the 1982 Citizenship Law, follows earlier cases in which artists were stripped of their nationality for allegedly acting against state interests. This can render them stateless in their places of exile, limiting their freedom of movement. Among them are:

¹⁸ P. Tar, ‘Movie director, actors arrested for scoffing at election propaganda film’, *The Irrawaddy*, 2025 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/movie-director-actors-arrested-for-scoffing-at-election-propaganda-film.html> (accessed 31 January 2026).

¹⁹ ‘Myanmar: Turk warns against violence and intimidation ahead of military elections’, OHCHR, December 2025 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/12/myanmar-turk-warns-against-violence-and-intimidation-ahead-military> (accessed 31 January 2026).

²⁰ P. Tar, ‘Movie director, actors arrested for scoffing at election propaganda film’, *The Irrawaddy*, 1 August 2025 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/movie-director-actors-arrested-for-scoffing-at-election-propaganda-film.html> (accessed 31 January 2026).

²¹ ‘Myanmar film industry faces censorship and crackdown under military rule’, *Radio Free Asia*, 24 December 2024 <https://www.rfa.org/english/myanmar/2024/12/24/myanmar-film-industry-censorship> (accessed 31 January 2026).

²² ‘Information Ministry issues warning on broadcasting movies contrary to Myanmar culture’, *Global New Light of Myanmar* (published by the Ministry of Information Myanmar), 1 April 2024, <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/information-ministry-issues-warning-on-broadcasting-movies-contrary-to-myanmar-culture/> (accessed 27 February 2026).

²³ ‘Military order attempts to control online films’, *Human Rights Myanmar*, 13 March 2024, <https://humanrightsmyanmar.org/military-order-attempts-to-control-online-films/> (accessed 27 January 2026).

- **Zin Wine**, a film director who was jailed twice before fleeing to Thailand in 2022. He has no legal right to stay in Thailand. With the stripping of his citizenship, he is now stateless, and fears leaving his temporary home as he is struggling to get a humanitarian visa that would enable him to leave Thailand to join his family in Australia.²⁴
- Singer **Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein**, one of Myanmar's most well-known pop stars, fled in 2021 after the junta issued a warrant for her arrest after her song *Tears*, which featured footage of the crackdown on anti-coup protests, went viral. She was stripped of her citizenship and now lives in France.²⁵
- **Thura Aung (Daung)**, a film and television star, and critic of the junta, was in Thailand on a film shoot during the coup and is now in the Czech Republic. He was stripped of his citizenship in 2022 and spoke of the challenges he faces: "*Whenever I travel, immigration officers question me, ... I am afraid of the police because I am not a citizen of any country.*"²⁶

Repression beyond borders

Myanmar's post-coup landscape is a hostile environment for artistic freedom. Through a combination of abusive prosecutions and sweeping censorship laws, artists are targeted not only for expressing political dissent, but for satire, humanitarian engagement, online commentary, and even for their refusal to support state propaganda. The revocation of citizenship of artists in exile extends repression beyond Myanmar's borders and has the unfortunate impact of rendering some cultural workers stateless and vulnerable. Sustained international attention and accountability remain urgently necessary to prevent further erasure of artistic voices and cultural resistance.

²⁴ 'Myanmar junta revoking citizenship of actors, singers and other celebrities', ABC News, 22 Sept 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-23/myanmar-celebrities-left-stateless-after-criticising-junta/105787574> (accessed 27 February 2026).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ W. Jackson, 'Myanmar celebrities left stateless after criticising junta', ABC, 23 September 2025 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-23/myanmar-celebrities-left-stateless-after-criticising-junta/105787574> (accessed 31 January 2026).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Artistic freedom is an essential part of freedom of expression and cultural rights. It also fosters a culture of questioning, which is essential for a healthy democracy, allowing artists to challenge power and promote dialogue. The violations documented in this report show the need for stronger protection of artists and more consistent action against censorship, intimidation, and repression. Freemuse makes the following recommendations:

GOVERNMENTS:

1. **Respect, protect and fulfil the right to artistic freedom** in law, policy and practice, without discrimination of any kind, and promote a culture of respect for artists and openness to diverse and critical voices.
2. **Repeal or amend laws used to suppress artistic expression**, including blasphemy laws, insult provisions, and vague national security, public morality, counterterrorism, foreign agent and other laws that are used to criminalise artists and their work.
3. **Ensure that any restriction on artistic expression meets international human rights standards**, and meets the tests of legality, legitimacy, necessity and proportionality under Article 19 of the ICCPR.
4. **End prior censorship and abolish censorship bodies** that prevent artworks from being published, performed, exhibited or distributed.
5. **Immediately and unconditionally release artists detained solely for exercising their right to artistic freedom**, and drop charges brought against them in retaliation for their artistic work.
6. **Investigate threats, attacks and other acts of intimidation against artists**, including online abuse, and hold both state and non-state perpetrators accountable. States should also fulfil their responsibility to prevent attacks by non-state actors and to foster a safe and open environment in which artistic expression can be exercised freely.
7. **Remove discriminatory barriers to artistic expression and participation in cultural life**, particularly those affecting women LGBTI+ persons, and racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL BODIES:

8. **Recognise artistic freedom as a core human rights issue** within international and regional mechanisms addressing freedom of expression, cultural rights, and civic space.
9. **Press states to reform laws and practices that violate artistic freedom**, and provide technical support to bring national frameworks into line with international standards.
10. **Strengthen protection for artists at risk**, including through monitoring, reporting, emergency support, and public advocacy.

CIVIL SOCIETY, CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND ARTISTS:

11. **Expand collaboration to monitor and document violations of artistic freedom**, especially in contexts where shrinking civic space and funding cuts have weakened reporting capacity.
12. **Build stronger solidarity and response networks** among artists, cultural institutions, and human rights organisations to support those facing censorship, threats or persecution.
13. **Promote public understanding of artistic freedom** as essential to democratic participation, cultural diversity, and open societies.

AUTHORS

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Diana Arévalo is a consultant and researcher specialising in artistic freedom and cultural rights in Latin America. With over six years of experience in human rights, she has led research, monitoring, advocacy, and protection strategies for at-risk cultural actors, including relocation processes and capacity-building for local organisations. She currently serves as Latin America Researcher at Freemuse and Coordinator of Bulla, the Artistic Freedom Observatory of Cartel Urbano Foundation, and is co-founder of Artemisas Foundation, which promotes democracy by supporting women's political participation in Colombia. She holds a MA in International Relations from the University of CEMA and a BA in Government and International Relations from Externado de Colombia University.

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

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Mariana Tzabiras (Editor)

Marianna Tzabiras is a human rights researcher and advocate and she has been a part of the Freemuse Annual Report team since 2020. It has been an honour for her to work with such dedicated and insightful colleagues and to learn from them. She has had a long history with the IFEX free expression network and is on the board of Peace Brigades International, an organisation that supports threatened human rights defenders, particularly in Latin America. Marianna is passionate about non-violence, migrant rights, and the healing power of art. She splits her time between Toronto, Canada and Athens, Greece.

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Sara Whyatt is Research Director at Freemuse. A campaigner and researcher on freedom of artistic expression and human rights, she works on projects exploring the ways that artistic freedom is curtailed across the world. She provides her expertise to arts and human rights organisations working to support threatened artists. She is a member of the Expert Facility for UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Promotion and Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, and an advisor to the Council of Europe's Free to Create | Create to be Free program.

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