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# GLOBAL PEACE HUB

## Overlooked Crises

Stories & Reflections From  
Youth Peacebuilders in 2023

## **Overlooked Crises - Stories & Reflections From Youth Peacebuilders**

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Formatted by Karin Klerby Blomqvist

Graphics generated with DALL-E ChatGPT.

Published December 22, 2023

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The Global Peace Hub (GPH) is a part of Föreningen för utvecklingsfrågor (FUF)

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## Preface

The year of 2023 was certainly a year of crises. The average temperature in the world reached a record high level, the conflict between Israel and Hamas erupted – which led to historically many killed women and children, the rise of disinformation and fake news proceeded, and the democratic space continued to shrink in many parts of the world. And these are just a few examples. Besides this, there were many crises, conflicts, and issues that were never illuminated – neither in media nor in the social debate in general.

This is one of the purposes of this publication – to shed light on topics that are forgotten, overlooked or usually not reported on. The other purpose is to highlight youth's perspectives on these topics, and to build bridges between youth in different parts of the world. Not only by publishing texts by youth, but also by connecting youths in different countries for interviews – as we have done for three of the texts in this publication.

This leads to one of FUF's main objectives – to support youth who are interested in global development. Every year, we help strengthen hundreds of youth's networks and competencies, and we provide platforms for them to present their analyses and express their opinions. It is the young people who will bear the future consequences of the ongoing crises, not least climate change, so it is only natural that they should be given space to participate in the social debate about global development, and contribute to shaping the world in a positive direction.

Enjoy the reading!



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## Chapters

1.	<i>Peacemaking in the Cloud</i> By Abhishek Sharma, <b>India</b> .....	7
2.	<i>A Crisis Within the Disability Rights Movement</i> With Esmá Gumberidze, <b>Georgia</b> .....	12
3.	<i>Youth Help to Achieve Peace in the Philippine Region Bangsamoro</i> With Ronnie Arap, <b>Philippines</b> ,.....	18
4.	<i>Nurturing Peace from Within</i> By Aya Albadarneh, <b>Jordan</b> .....	24
5.	<i>Unravelling Democracy: Guatemala's Struggle to Maintain Human Rights</i> With Nathaly Mejia, <b>Guatemala/Sweden</b> .....	28
6.	<i>#EndSARS: Was it Worth it?</i> By Oluwafisayo Olorunfemi, <b>Nigeria</b> .....	34



## Chapter 1: Abhishek Sharma, India



### Peacemaking in the Cloud

#### *An analysis*

Today, the internet has become an essential tool to access a collection of civil rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to public information, and economic rights. Thus, it has become necessary that citizens have access to the physical and technical infrastructure to practice peace. However, even with access to these infrastructures, as in the case of Myanmar, the state holds the power to constrain and violate citizens' rights in the digital sphere – which hampers their ability to practice and engage in advocacy for peace.

Digital Peacebuilding is quite a recent phenomenon in academia; researchers study how to leverage digital means and tools to further peace in post-conflict and conflict societies. This is a state-led and civil society-driven process. However, there are cases where the state, instead of being the mediator, may emerge as the perpetrator. In other words, the state may weaponize digital tools and cyberspace (e.g. social media) to further its interests and crack down on its citizens' human rights, rather than safeguard them. In cases like this, the state



violates human rights and uses technological tools to suppress, constrain, and manipulate citizens' right to practice their fundamental rights.

### **Digitalisation as a Tool for Peace in Myanmar**

To be successful in peace movements, it is crucial to invest in necessary tools, such as internet access. As the internet has become an essential tool for human rights, through supporting freedom of speech, access to public information, and economic rights, the practice of peace now requires that citizens have access to physical and technical infrastructures. However, control over these infrastructures remains in the state's hands. To propagate solidarity, hope, and national cohesion through the internet in times of suffering, citizens depend on the state, who, in some cases, is the oppressor.

Let's take the recent example of Myanmar, where we have seen the state weaponizing control over the internet and shrinking spaces of peace and solidarity for youth. The case in Myanmar has been particularly intriguing due to its impact on the lives of its citizens, particularly marginalized people like Rohingya Muslims. They were directly affected by a systematic process of dehumanization through [social media](#), which later transformed into an ethnic cleansing. However, this was pre-coup d'état when the civilian government still had much regulating power and a stronger say in the functioning of the state.

With the coup d'état however, their influence diminished, and the trend of dehumanization and repression has topped post-coup. Now, citizen rights are taken away in physical and virtual domains alike. For example, Myanmar has [seen](#) the most prolonged internet shutdown in the Asia-Pacific. Some regions, like Kachin, experienced the shutdown for months, while other regions experienced it for almost a year in 2022. For some, internet disconnection can even [have](#) a profound impact on citizens lives, be it their economic means of earning, access to education, and health services. Amidst heavy digital restrictions, citizens have tried to [create](#) solidarity to make peace through messaging apps such as Bridgefy and Firechat, which were used during Hong Kong and Thailand protests.

Bridgefy, which allows sending offline messages using Bluetooth, was downloaded in Myanmar around 600,000 times, showing the populations' resilience against digital authoritarianism. Some citizens have [switched](#) to VPNs and browsers that enable anonymous browsing, like Tor. Others are even using the dark web to access mirror sites of social media applications. However, many citizens are not safe despite using more secure alternative methods and applications. Some who were able to use the internet have been systematically

targeted through “doxxing” (when revealing information is posted by others) by pro-junta accounts, that often involve abusive and misogynistic language to target women.

Amidst the targeting of citizens, the state has also threatened telecommunication and social media companies to get access to information that helps them crack down on citizens. Still, some, like the company behind the instant messenger app Telegram, have stood up on the side of citizens by establishing protocols that ensure citizens' safety. Yet, much more needs to be done. Stands taken by non-state actors give more confidence to other private players operating in these situations and encourages them to take a principled position that upholds the respect for human rights. Actions like these, that clearly show support to citizens and their rights to access digital tools, sets an important precedent to follow. Therefore, initiatives followed through global public and private efforts are likely to create spaces that are critical to further solidarity, playing an essential role in peace-making.

### **Digitalisation and its Importance in Conflict Regions**

The digital sphere encapsulates social media, the internet, and online services; it functions as a reflection of the socio-political dynamics of a society. We can see projections of the tensions between various stakeholders within the state through how the digital sphere is controlled, politicized, and even regulated.

In today's world, the internet and digital tools are particularly important in conflict situations. When mobility is restricted, this medium becomes a critical tool to empower individuals, victims, and marginalized communities as they interact, share, and express solidarity. Amidst the violence, this medium offers alternative views and perspectives and can have a healing effect. The distinction between offline/online may be just a Zoom call for many, but for some, it is a matter of inclusivity, safety, security, and empowerment. Access to digital tools helps erase stereotypical identity markers. Powerful adversaries can use this to protect and empower citizens and help them create a community of people that share an experience, purpose, and vision. In addition, it accelerates the pace of movements through better organization and brings more opportunities. Although digital tools can also be used for bad purposes, this can be countered by a widespread use of internet tools, as their widespread use is likely to create more positive effects than negative.

Hence, utilizing digital tools as a medium of constructing and engineering peace must be one of the focuses in conflict and post-conflict situations, especially in places where physical safe spaces have become or are becoming obsolete. In such digital social movements, global citizens play an even more critical role, to advocate for the implementation of the right to

internet access and respect for human rights in digital spaces. Access to these digital tools matters because it is not until citizens have them that efforts to maintain peace and social movements can be sustained.

*This is an analysis. The writer is responsible for the opinions expressed in the text.*

**Abhishek Sharma** is a youth rights activist and Ph.D. researcher at Delhi University, India. His research interests include digital and environmental peacebuilding in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Age:** 27

**Current Location:** New Delhi, India

**Current Occupation:** Advocacy Member, OGIP and Asia Youth Advocacy Team Member, Asia Pacific

**Previous Studies:** MA (International Relations)

**A field he is passionate about:** Music and learning languages, currently I am learning Korean and Mandarin language.



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## Chapter 2: Esma Gumberidze, Georgia



### **A crisis within the disability rights movement**

#### *An interview*

**Esma Gumberidze, 29, is an activist veteran. She was born blind, and she has spent many years of her youth advocating for disability rights. This has not been an easy task in Georgia, where corruption burdens civil society – the disability rights movement in particular.**

"Georgia is very much overlooked", says Esma Gumberidze, 29, on the theme of this report.

She refers to the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, which did not receive as much Western media coverage as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"But", Esma Gumberidze continues, "there is also a crisis within the disability rights movement".



In [August 2008](#), a five-day war unfolded between Russia, Georgia, and two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Approximately [850 people died](#), and more than [100,000 civilians](#) fled their homes. An [EU fact-finding mission](#) subsequently concluded that although Georgia's initial attack on South Ossetia sparked the war, both parts overreacted, exacerbating the situation. In January 2016, an [International Criminal Court \(ICC\) investigation](#) was opened. In June 2022, the [ICC issued](#) arrest warrants on three de facto South Ossetian officials for crimes against Georgian civilians. A Russian major general would also have been indicted, if he had not deceased in 2021. In December 2022, the [ICC concluded](#) that no further arrest warrants would be issued. The investigation has been called "[the ICC's most delayed](#)" by Georgian activists, and the suspects are yet to be prosecuted. Historically accumulated tension between Georgia and Russia thus continues to linger.

Esma was born blind. Despite her young age, she has many years of experience in advocating for, among other things, disability rights. In Georgia, activists face many difficulties in getting through with their lobbying efforts.

"We are watchdogging rather than cooperating", Esma Gumberidze says about the relationship between activists and the Georgian regime.

### **Corruption hinders the disability rights movement**

Given the high prevalence of corruption in Georgia, the Georgian government is considered a kleptocracy, according to [Transparency International Georgia](#). That is, government officials steal government funds to stay wealthy and in power. There is "near total impunity for high-level corruption", Transparency International writes.

Corruption encumbers the disability rights movement in particular, Esma Gumberidze points out. People with disabilities depend on their so-called service providers to get the assistance they need, for example, a wheelchair, a white cane, or sign language interpreters. These services are often held under monopoly by the Georgian state. This subordination impedes disabled people from combating corrupt service providers. Disabled activists can only whistle-blow if they can access the information required to disclose corrupt practices. And the service providers control that access.

"Many disabled people are afraid of speaking up because they are afraid that they will be deprived of these services", says Esma Gumberidze.

The investigative bodies of Georgia rarely scrutinize the disability sphere, according to Esma Gumberidze. When she confronted the Georgia State Audit Office during a meeting about

In November 2023, [the European Commission](#) recommended the European Council to grant **Georgia EU candidate membership status** contingent on nine conditions, including anti-corruption policies, judicial reform, and improved human rights protection. But these reforms would likely damage the ruling party, Georgian Dream, so it is doubtful whether they will be implemented, according to the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#).

corrupt service providers, they told her that they had to prioritize areas of larger expenditures. Her experiences match the reports from [Transparency International Georgia](#).

Esma Gumberidze also emphasizes the burden of stereotypes on the disability rights movement. Not only via harmful stereotypes against people with disabilities, but there is also a misconception that those who work with disability issues are good people by default, "which is not necessarily the case", she says.

### **Easier to Silence Disabled Activists**

The participation of disabled people in civil society is much easier to prevent, Esma Gumberidze stresses, compared to other civil society actors.

The government silences non-disabled activists by threatening them, beating them up, or even prosecuting them, she says. [Amnesty International](#) recently accused the Georgian regime of using "selective justice" in the "politically motivated prosecution of political opponents and critical media".

However, for people with disabilities, the Georgian regime does not need to go that far. "Not providing us with the services that we need on time is enough to limit participation", says Esma Gumberidze.

Yet another obstruction to the disability rights movement in Georgia is that there are no persons with disabilities in political opposition.

[Rati Ionatamishvili](#), a Member of Parliament (MP) for the ruling party, Georgian Dream, is a wheelchair user. He is the only one out of [140 MPs](#) with a disability. Every time the political opposition probes about the equality of disabled people, he invokes his lived experience as disabled to end the debate, according to Esma Gumberidze.



The [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) was adopted in 2006. It was ratified by Georgia in 2013, and it entered into force in 2014. Georgia also ratified an [optional protocol](#) to the CRPD in 2021, allowing people with disabilities to submit complaints to the CRPD Committee. Importantly, [Article 11](#) of the CRPD stipulates the importance of ensuring the "protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict".

### **A heterogeneous group of activists: "Better to stay together"**

The disability rights movement is a heterogeneous sphere. It includes people with physical, intellectual, social, and mental disabilities. This lumping together of differing disabilities into one large disability rights movement, is how the movement came about historically in Europe and the U.S., when they joined forces for a larger common issue of monetary compensation for disabilities, Esma Gumberidze explains. There are different ways of thinking about the diversity of these activists.

On a smaller scale, different disabilities require different types of assistance. Simply put, blind people lobby for audible traffic lights, and deaf people lobby for better visibility in traffic lights.

"But on a bigger scale, we all need assistive devices, we all need inclusive education", says Esma Gumberidze.

Some also have multiple disabilities, she adds. If there were separate movements for separate disabilities, then not only would it weaken the aggregated voice of people with disabilities, but it would also enable the Georgian government to compare different disabilities expenditure-wise, for example, by statuating that being blind is worse than being deaf.

"So, it is better to stay together", concludes Esma Gumberidze.



The peacebuilder **Esma Gumberidze**

**Age:** 29

**Current location:** Tbilisi, Georgia. Born and raised in Georgia

**Current occupation:** Disability rights activist

**Previous studies:** Undergraduate degree in law from the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

**A field she is passionate about:** Disability rights



The writer **Agnes Durbeej-Hjalt**, 23, is a master's student in economics at the Stockholm School of Economics. She has been an editor-volunteer for the Swedish Development Forum since the spring of 2022.

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## Chapter 3: Ronnie Arap, Philippines



### Youth help to achieve peace in the Philippine region Bangsamoro

#### *An interview*

In the Philippines, the Bangsamoro conflict is not new, but has been in the making for several hundred years. The conflict is mainly between the majority Muslim population in the Bangsamoro region, and the Catholic majority in the rest of the country. It is characterized by its violence and longevity, but also by dedication from Filipinos and the international community to build a long-lasting peace. Youth have been instrumental in the past decades and shown their power in conflict resolution. Instrumental to this process have been youth, who have throughout the conflict showcased their power in conflict resolution.

Stemming from issues of land rights, corruption, and family feuds, the Bangsamoro region, in the southwestern portion of the Philippine Island Mindanao, has a conflict-ridden past.

Beginning 300 years ago, the country was divided by Spanish colonizers, who pitted Northern and Southern Filipinos against each other. Fast-forward 200 years, and several groups had emerged from the Bangsamoro region wanting to secure their land rights from the Philippine government. This process has resulted in armed conflict, whole communities that have been forced to flee their homes, and discrimination towards the minority Muslim population.

After a [contentious peace treaty](#) was signed in 1996 between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippines government, it led to one of the MNLF allies, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), rejecting the treaty and separating from the MNLF alliance. In 2014, MILF established its own peace treaty, which consisted of a comprehensive plan for socio-economic improvement, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), as well as community development in the region. A key issue for the peace agreement to succeed is DDR, which ensures that previous militia groups get disarmed and reintegrated into their communities. However, it necessitates that jobs are created and that ex-fighters are welcomed back into communities, [according to the International Crisis Group](#).

Ronnie Arap is a Global Peace Hub participant, and former manager for the Independent Decommissioning Body. The independent body was created by the Philippine government and MILF, with the aim to oversee the decommissioning process of MILF forces and weapons. Ronnie Arap highlights the important job youths have been doing - both in the room as stakeholders and agenda-setters, and outside the room in aiding the peace process implementation.

"We really are a part of the big picture, there's always youths in the discussion", says Ronnie Arap.

The implementation of the 2014 peace agreement will continue to require engagement of youth, especially [as they comprise 28 percent of the country's population](#). They are also key in "(re)building societal trust, social cohesion and leading reconciliation across generations", according to the [UN Global Policy Paper on Youth Participation](#).

#### **The 2014 Peace Treaty: Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro**

In 2019, a public vote was held which granted the Bangsamoro region a degree of autonomy through self-rule. This was accomplished due to the land-mark peace treaty in 2014, which the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was a key driver of. [The International Crisis Group \(ICG\)](#), an independent NGO working towards prevention and resolution of armed conflict, argues that the peace treaty should be accomplished by 2025, as parliamentary elections the same year will mark the start of full regional autonomy.

Throughout the conflict span, the inclusion of youth from an early stage has made working towards sustainable peace as successful as it is today, says Ronnie Arap. In the Bangsamoro region, youths have been able to bring grassroots-level insights and help digitalize the peace process to make it easier and faster. Moreover, youth played a substantial role in pushing for an autonomous Bangsamoro region, as well as aiding the 2014 peace agreement. Their support in [planning and implementing the agreement](#) meant that they could effectively mediate conflicts between different clans, and highlight a gendered perspective that brought to light domestic violence. However, challenges do remain.

"The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration is successful, but still ongoing", says Ronnie Arap.

Pockets of violence erupt from groups that distrust the government and feel like the peace process is unsuccessful. An especially violent one occurred in 2017, spearheaded by an Islamic youth insurgency group. The [ICC reports](#) that the five-month battle between a pro-ISIS group and Philippine government forces is an example of the gravest threat to this peace process. If fighters are not decommissioned and service provisions not administered, peace process skeptics are more easily recruited to ISIS-linked groups.

Ronnie Arap argues that the main causes of insurgency violence are ideological and due to financial dissatisfaction. Some feel that the un-Islamic direction of the peace process is wrong, and some ex-militants are not reintegrated enough to earn a livable wage without turning back to violence. Ronnie Arap also says that [without continued support for normalization programmes](#), reintegration of ex-militants will be unsuccessful.

#### [Philippine normalization programmes](#)

One component of the 2014 peace treaty, which is a part of the DDR programme, is to reintegrate ex-militants and boost economic development in the Bangsamoro region. According to the ICC, this is partly done through "camp transformation", which is turning formerly economically depressed areas into peaceful communities that integrate into economic and civic life. Many of the MILF camps are targets for camp transformation as they consist of ex-militias. However, the ICC reports that camp transformation is occurring at a slow pace, due to a lack of implementation and hindering political realities.

Whilst there are setbacks, Ronnie Arap stresses how sustainable peace in the region will continue to require seeing youths as agents of change. This way, they will help build a brighter future, rather than the alternative.



The peacebuilder **Ronnie Arap** is a Project Specialist at the United National Development Programme

**Age:** 34

**Current Location:** Cotabato City, Philippines

**Current Occupation:** Project Specialist at UNDP Philippines

**Previous studies:** Master's degree in Information Systems. Also studied DDR, Peacebuilding, and Human Resource Development.

**A field he is passionate about:** ICT in peace processes.



The writer **Axel Selin** studies the master's programme in Development Studies at Lund University, and is an Intern at FUF.

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## Chapter 4: Aya Albadarneh, Jordan



### Nurturing Peace from Within

#### *A chronicle*

**When understanding violent conflicts, one has to unpack both the broader contexts and the local, personal causes behind them. Here, a need is unearthed to create opportunities for understanding and acceptance – which is the foundation for long-lasting peace.**

There is a vast range of conflict that incites violence – division and opposition along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, tribe, generation, nationality, and borders. We often have the tendency to look at these conflicts from a broader political perspective, ignoring individual and local aspects that exist within the frameworks of violent conflict. We must be aware of the local and personal meaning and causes behind violent conflicts as they arise. Such contexts are inherently important in understanding the ways in which conflict can be transformed. However, perhaps more importantly, we must pay attention to the personal, local factors that inspire people to become peacebuilders, who have the power to transform conflict in their communities and help lead them toward sustainable peace.

I live in a suburb of Amman, the capital of the Kingdom of Jordan. During the height of the influx of Syrian refugees, three years following the war outbreak in 2011, I often witnessed social disconnectedness firsthand, as youth of Jordanian and Syrian backgrounds were stuck together in a confined space at a school nearby during the change of shifts – morning school shift for Jordanians, afternoon school shift for Syrians. They did not accept one another because they were never given the opportunity to understand one another. Divisions between the two groups were even made clear through ethnically divided classes. Emphasis was placed on the differences, ignoring the fact that they had many more similarities. Observing these moments ignited a spark in me and inspired me to participate in creating brighter stories for the next youth generations.

I know what it is like to not yet know oneself fully; be unaware of my deepest passions or of what drives and inspires me most. However, through working with a global non-profit peacebuilding organisation, Generations For Peace, I found a passion I never knew I had: community work.

Within my programming work, the door was opened to opportunities to learn about ourselves and other individuals in our community, accepting those who are different from us. It starts

from within – within us, our peer groups, our schools, clubs, community centres, and religious institutions. Any setting that plays a role in the surrounding community can be transformed into a place that fosters tolerance, promotes acceptance, and thus builds peace. In the classroom and on school campuses, I have seen the use of vehicles like Sport and Arts For Peace, a programme with activities that aim to raise awareness of peace and social cohesion, function as an effective entry point for engaging with youth within local communities. Through them, we have learned of different forms of a local community's 'inner conflict' and uncovered the opportunities to transform it in ways we might never have found or expected, when we spend our time only trying to understand the broader picture from a distance.

Addressing the often-overlooked crisis of ignoring local youth as peacebuilding agents is crucial. On a global scale, we are coming to recognise the important and growing role youth can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Yet we must encourage and empower them not to stop here.



Conflicts – especially violent conflicts – do not only call for prevention and resolution, but also for transformation. Transformation can be achieved through designing activities that build tolerance and acceptance. It helped me to more fully realise who I am, what I am here for, and how I can leave my mark in the efforts to build a peace that will be passed from this generation to the next.

*This is a chronicle. The writer is responsible for the opinions expressed in the text.*

The peacebuilder **Aya Albadarneh**, works for Generations for Peace (GFP) in Jordan. She has focused her professional career on using sports for development and she has 7+ years' experience in managing sport-based youth engagement projects in MENA, Europe, and the USA in different conflict contexts.

**Age:** 31

**Current location:** Amman, Jordan

**Current occupation:** Programs consultant

**Previous studies:** Bachelor's degree in industrial engineering and master's degree in conflict resolution, University of Jordan

**A field she is passionate about:** Sport for development, peacebuilding, youth engagement and community empowerment.

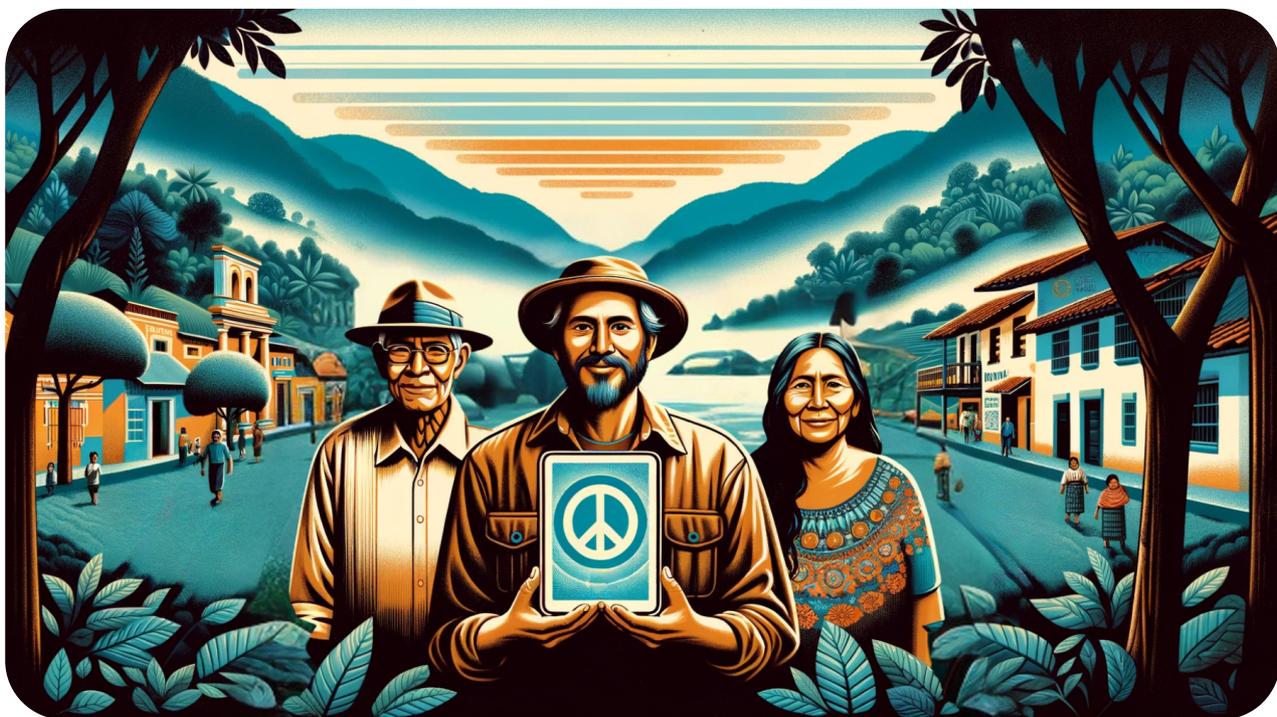


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## Chapter 5: Nathaly Mejia, Guatemala/Sweden



### **Unravelling Democracy: Guatemala's Struggle to Maintain Human Rights**

#### *An interview*

Guatemala grapples with a multitude of human rights challenges. The period leading up to the recent 2023-elections was marred by democracy issues. Widespread corruption, weak rule of law, limited accountability of those violating human rights, and increasing persecutions and threats against various societal groups and have been creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear amongst activists. Particularly vulnerable are human rights defenders, notably those from rural and indigenous communities, who have long struggled due to the absence of robust national protection mechanisms and an effective legal system.

Despite the fear of persecutions, massive national protests were held across Guatemala during several weeks following the presidential election in August 2023. People took to the

streets to show their discontent for the [attempts of public prosecutors](#) to undermine the electoral results and, in extension, the country's democratic status in general. Many of the protesters have been demanding the removal of Attorney General Consuelo Porras, based on accusations that she has been using her power to undermine president-elect Bernardo Arévalo of the social democratic party Movimiento Semilla, to prevent him from taking office in January 2024, according to [Reuters](#).

During these national protests, the demonstrators succeeded in mobilizing at a national level. Although these protests were particularly successful in mobilizing different groups from the population, standing up for your rights and going out on the streets to demonstrate is not a new phenomenon – it is a tradition in the country. This is something that Nathaly Mejia, previously country representative for The Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (SweFOR) in Guatemala, has observed from up close during her seven years of working with human rights in the country.

"This is what has inspired me to continue working in Guatemala. I feel like I am where it is happening, close to human rights defenders. It is scary and impressive at the same time to take part in the reality they are living. I get so inspired by them – by all the people I have met", says Nathaly Mejia.

The protests swept through rural and urban areas nationwide, and indigenous leaders were especially successful in mobilising people at local levels. Historically, blockades have proven to be an effective non-violent form of protest in Guatemala, predominantly applied in rural and indigenous communities. This time, however, this method expanded into urban areas, transforming the streets in these areas into hubs of activism. In this striking development, protesters became empowered in the streets, where even dance became a form of expression amidst blockades, Nathaly Mejia explains.

### **Indigenous Communities Face Threats Fighting for Their Land Rights**

The issue of land rights is one of the most common sources of conflict in Guatemala. It was one of the main issues addressed in the Peace Agreement of 1996 after the civil war had ended, and it remains the largest driver for activism in the country. One issue connected to land rights that Nathaly Mejia witnessed during her years in Guatemala, is the exploitation of land by large mining cooperations. The local population is consulted during excavation processes, which often occur in areas with indigenous communities.



Around 43 percent of the population in Guatemala is indigenous, according to the [population census in 2018](#) by the Guatemalan National Institute of Statistics. The indigenous population in Guatemala scores lower than the general population in areas such as health, education, employment, and income. The underlying cause of this disparity is rooted in structural racism, which spurs inequality and social exclusion, leading to repeated violations of basic rights of indigenous people, according to the human rights organisation [The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs](#) (IWGIA). Guatemala has ratified the International Labour Organisation's Convention 169, obliging countries to recognise the rights of indigenous people, but there are still many indigenous people and communities that have had to endure threats, violence and extensive, expensive, and exhausting legal processes for defending their land rights against extractive companies. According to Nathaly Mejia, persecuting people for crimes they have not committed and delaying trial processes so that people are in custody longer are some ways that the legal systems are used to silence people. These processes are psychologically draining, time-consuming and they frequently affect women and children if it is men who are imprisoned, as the man is often the family's financial provider.

"I would say that there are always actors who want to silence people and in Guatemala, they have found legal ways to silence human rights defenders", Nathaly Mejia comments.

Since human rights defenders, particularly those from rural and indigenous communities, frequently face suppression by either state authorities or powerful corporate entities, it is not uncommon that non-violent methods such as blockades or demonstrations are used to draw attention to issues with land rights. Human rights organisations in the country try their best to support the civil society, for example by creating spaces for dialogue, helping designing risk analyses, and providing legal support. However, the legal system, for various reasons, has seldom been a neutral force during such proceedings. Nathaly Mejia underscores that, beyond battling racism and classism, the absence of a robust rule of law significantly hampers the pursuit of these groups to claim their rights.

### **The Impact of Anti-Corruption Efforts and Human Rights Advocacy Amidst a Weak Rule of Law**

Guatemala has experienced a shrinking democratic space during the years before the elections of August 2023, according to Nathaly Mejia. This has for example been visible in an increased number of persecutions amongst people involved in anti-corruption efforts. Many of those who have been persecuted during these years have been part of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), whose mandate expired in 2019, or in other ways an active actor against impunity, she explains. CICIG was established in 2006 with

the aim to combat illegal armed criminal networks threatening democratic institutions by supporting the development of an independent justice system, investigating corruption, and proposing policy reforms, according to the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#). During the four presidential terms in Guatemala when the CICIG and the Attorney General's Office led anti-corruption initiatives, they encountered resistance from various sectors within and outside the government, according to the human rights organisation [Washington Office on Latin America](#). Despite facing numerous challenges, the CICIG managed to overcome many attempts to impede its progress until President Jimmy Morales, who was himself under investigation for corruption, sought to undermine its functioning and [declined to extend its mandate](#).

The dissolution of the CICIG contributed to a decline in rule of law. Nathaly Mejia points out that persecutions and threats against several societal groups became even more common ever since, and from 2021 it has been a repeated pattern. As an effect of the coronavirus pandemic, an increasing number of smear campaigns also went on to be spread digitally. During Nathaly Mejia's years in Guatemala, she has observed a concerning trend that

repressive methods, previously mainly used to silence advocates for land rights among indigenous and rural communities, now extends even more broadly. Repressive methods are no longer limited to these groups, but is increasingly used to target journalists, lawyers, and prosecutors who stand up for corruption.

"Something that has come to characterize Guatemala in the last two years is an increased decline in rule of law, which makes it difficult for anyone to stand up for human rights", Nathaly Mejia says.

With an increase in persecutions and the lack of rule of law, human rights defenders no longer know where to turn for protection nor how to access legal mechanisms – services that should be provided by the state. What Nathaly Mejia

#### **The 2023 Guatemalan Presidential Elections**

In August 2023, presidential elections were held in Guatemala. Bernardo Arévalo of the social democratic party Movimiento Semilla came out as a winner, beating former first lady and right-wing politician Sandra Torres of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza party in a race marred by fears of democratic backsliding. Arévalo won 58 percent of the vote compared to Torres' 37 percent, according to official data from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Arévalo, a centre-left figure, resonated with a widespread discontented public, pledging to combat crime, corruption, malnutrition, and to address high levels of inequality. Arévalo has been faced with several legal challenges since his rise as a frontrunner in the general elections in June. Following the general elections, the Public Ministry launched inquiries into allegations of forged signatures by Movimiento Semilla during its political party authorization process. These claims triggered nationwide protests, during which concerns were voiced about electoral integrity and perceived threats to democratic principles.

has witnessed in her work is that when there are no national mechanisms for protection, people do not use the legal system and they do not believe in it. Individuals and organisations do not dare raise concerns in the same way as before, of fear of being persecuted.

Civil society organisations do not have the same opportunities to secure dialogue with government institutions or hold them accountable for their actions. Simultaneously, the responsible government, who recently lost the elections, have shown little self-criticism on this regard. In speeches to the UN assembly and in communication with other countries' diplomats, the narrative has been that they stand up for human rights.

"How do you deal with these issues when there is no self-awareness? It will be difficult for human rights defenders and the rest of the civil society to act in a country that does not have the mechanisms for a rule of law for all", Nathaly Mejia says.



The peacebuilder **Nathaly Mejia**

**Age:** 31

**Current location:** Gothenburg, Sweden

**Current occupation:** Regional Representative at Bris – Children's Rights in Society, Sweden.

**Previous studies:** Bachelor's programme in political science and master's programme in global studies

**A field She is passionate about:** Human rights and peacebuilding



The writer **Ellinor Berglund** has a master's degree in development studies and a bachelor's degree in international crisis and conflict management. She is involved in FUF's editorial team for the second semester in a row.



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## Chapter 6: Oluwafisayo Olorunfemi, Nigeria/ United Kingdom



### #EndSARS: Was it worth it?

#### *A commentary*

The youths could no longer take it, so they took to the streets demanding justice against the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit of the Nigerian police force. This story covers the unprecedented #EndSARS protests and x-rays its implication on the future of the nation.

In October 2020, Nigerian youths took to the streets to demand justice following a video that went viral, showing SARS officers dragging two men from a hotel and shooting one of them, [reports Amnesty International](#). The protest soon gained momentum across the country as several youths took to X (formerly Twitter) to share their experience with the notorious unit using the hashtag #EndSARS. Their stories included allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, and unlawful detention.

## The Beginning

The SARS unit was created in 1992 to tackle armed robbery in Lagos, the most populous urban area in Nigeria. In 2002, SARS units were formed in other states with a mandate to arrest, investigate and prosecute suspected violent criminals, while operating undercover. Initially, the units did not carry arms in public. Subsequently however, they were allowed to carry arms, after which reports of extortion by the unit allegedly became prominent.

The reports of abuse increased, and between 2006 and 2008 a presidential committee proposed a reform of the police force. In 2013, 35 bodies of missing persons were found in a river in Anambra state in south-eastern Nigeria, allegedly killed by the SARS. In 2015, the government again made a promise to reform the SARS following years of reports of human rights violations – a promise they again failed to fulfil.

## Failed Promises

By 2017, the hashtag #EndSARS was launched, used by hundreds of Nigerians to document abuses by SARS officers and demand an end to their impunity. As a response, an anti-torture law was adopted and at the end of that year, broad reforms of SARS were proposed to tackle the issue of excessive use of force. In 2018, a presidential committee was again launched to investigate the allegations, but according to Amnesty International, when the committee released the report, its views did not represent the views of the public. By 2019, the Inspector General of Police ordered the disbandment of the unit and other special squads acknowledging years of protests of human rights violations by Nigeria's population. However, like previous attempts, this failed too.

The agitation increased and by October 2020, the video that surfaced on the internet tipped the scale leading to protests. After days of nationwide protests demanding the end of SARS, Nigerian authorities announced the disbandment of SARS and its replacement by SWAT units, making it the 5th time since 2015 that the Nigerian authorities pledged to reform the police and disband SARS. Youths termed this “empty promises” according to Daily Trust, and protests continued with several demands, including justice for all deceased victims, appropriate compensation for their families, setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct, and psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed. Less than two weeks later, the Nigerian army violently repressed the protest at Lekki toll gate in Lagos State, by shooting at protesters. At least 12 people were killed at the toll gate on that

day and at least 38 people were allegedly killed across the country, [according to Amnesty International](#).

### **Three Years Later: Was the #EndSARS Movement Worth it?**

"Any changes that followed the #EndSARS protests are fast disappearing, as police brutality is again becoming a daily part of life for people across Nigeria", [says Isa Sanusi, Director of Amnesty International](#).

His sentiment is shared by some youths from different states of Nigeria who took part in an anonymous focus group poll to get public opinion on the implication of the protests. More than 60 percent of the 20 respondents agreed that police brutality is fast increasing. Respondents also agreed that the protests temporarily unified youths across the country.

The protests did temporarily blur religious lines, according to TVC News, as Muslims and Christians were seen supporting each other, demystifying the perception of a permanent religious divide.

With regards to its impact on politics, most Nigerians saw the protest as a rude awakening for the political class as it showcased the strength of the people's voice. From the poll, it was alluded that the protests impacted the 2023 general election as there was an obvious shift from politics as usual when youths supported a less prominent political party and candidate. The massive voters' registration for the election and voter turnout was another indication of this, according to [Aljazeera](#). Although the "youths' choice" did not win the election due to alleged electoral malpractices, some consider it a sign that the long-awaited change is on the horizon.



The peacebuilder **Oluwafisayo Olorunfemi**, is a Nigerian, currently based in the United Kingdom. She has dedicated her time to developing initiatives that enhance peace and empower youths.

**Age:** 27

**Current location:** Ipswich, Suffolk, United Kingdom

**Current occupation:** Certified project manager. Currently works as a programme development advisor with charities focused on youth and peace.

**Previous studies:** Academic background in history and international studies alongside various professional certifications in peacebuilding.

**A field she is passionate about:** Policy and governance as she believes these are the bedrock of any sustainable development a society can experience.

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A focus group poll made by the writer of this text, Oluwafisayo Olorunfemi, on her social media pages. The poll had 20 participants from different states across Nigeria.





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