

# Human Rights Council

Protecting the right to peaceful protest



<b>Forum</b>	Human Rights Council
<b>Issue:</b>	Protecting the right to peaceful protest
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## Introduction

Protests are the acts of expressing public disapproval or objection towards something. Peaceful protest refers to all forms of protests that are non-violent. The right to peaceful protest allows individuals to exercise their other human rights. Through protest for example people have the ability to practice freedom of speech and assembly, a fundamental element of an individual's freedom.

Protests are often seen as a challenge to a state, and they can be. However, in actuality the right to peaceful protests is crucial for not just an individual and their freedom, but also for states. The right to protest provides communities with an outlet for their frustrations. Often when frustrations are not appropriately expressed they develop. As occurrences that grow frustrations continue people tend to become increasingly frustrated and eventually end up expressing this through violence. Throughout history we have seen that when people are limited in their freedoms of assembly and speech by a state eventually the state can no longer uphold its power as it results in domestic instability. Not only this, but communities will start to turn to other forms of protest, which often include violence. Putting the society, the state, and the protesters themselves at risk.

Throughout history we have seen the immense impact that the voicing of change can have upon our society. The effectiveness of protest in evoking social change can be seen through different periods of history such as the women's suffrage movement through which western women gained the right to vote, the anti-apartheid movement in South-Africa, alleviating segregation, and the famed civil rights movement which achieved equal rights for afro-americans. More recent and ongoing movements include the schools strike for climate, Black Lives Matter and girl's rights to education



## Definition of Key Terms

### Ancient

The ancient period in history lies between the period of the beginning of writing and recorded Human history up until the period of decline of the Roman empire in 500 BCE..

### Assembly

A group of people who are gathered together in a set place for a single purpose or with a single objective in mind. An assembly can also be considered as an act of gathering together for a set purpose.

### Classism

Having unfair or unreasonable presumed opinions of members belonging to a particular social class, often other to the one of your own. Within western societies classism often creates a hierarchy within society.

### Decennia

A period of 10 years. A decennium is a decade

### Feudalism

Is a system in which rights were appointed to one depending on their social class, creating a hierarchy. Feudalism was popular amongst European societies from the 9th to 15th centuries but elements of feudalism prevailed beyond this time period. In most societies, peasants had extremely poor quality of life in the feudal system creating frustration.

### Millennia

A period of 1000 years also known as a millennium.

### Protest

A statement or action that expresses disapproval or an objection of something. Protests are carried out through various actions and forms of media such as performance art, verbal protest, conversation, visual art, etc.



## Revolt

A revolt is violent action taking out against an established government or ruler. A revolt is carried out by 'rebels'. A rebel is a person who uses force to oppose a government or a ruler.

## Revolution

A revolution is when a radical change in the established order occurs, often due to a revolt.

## General Overview

Protesting can be traced back to ancient times. Although the concept of protest, like most other concepts, has developed over time, protests have always been a way for societies to challenge the oppression they face.

### Ancient Protesting

Protests can be traced back to ancient time periods. The first ever recorded labor strike dates back to 1157 BC. This protest was the result of late-wages from the Egyptian government under Pharaoh Ramses the third and was recorded using papyrus, ancient Egyptian writing material. This protest can be characterized as a peaceful protest as protesters were assumed to not have used violence. During the strike, a sit-in was performed. A common form of protest where individuals will sit down to occupy an area for elongated periods of time.

Ancient Rome also saw many protests in which the Roman classist society was criticized by members of the plebeian class. The plebeian class consisted of all free Roman citizens that were not members of higher classes including the patrician, senatorial and equestrian classes. Between the 5th century up to the 3rd century BC the plebeians carried out many protests, amongst which were the 'Secessio Plebis'. The Secessio Plebis were a series of organized strikes that lasted from the 5th century BC all the way up to the 3rd century BC in which the Plebeians would leave Rome for elongated periods of time. Leaving the patricians without resources as the Plebeians did most labor work in Rome. Eventually the plebeians gained access to the government through their protests and the strain that it placed upon Patrician society. The Patricians were excluded from trade allowing the Plebeians to become wealthier members of society. Over time the Plebeians became wealthier, securing a better quality of life for the common societies of Ancient Rome. The Secessio Plebis



demonstrates how protest has evoked complete social change throughout history. Both the Ancient Egyptian labor strike and the Secessio Plebis show how protests have been an element of our human societies over the past millennia and how even in ancient society people relied on protest for the expression of need for social change and how sometimes, protests could eventually be successful.

### Revolts and Revolutions

In England in 1381 the peasants revolt took place in which English peasants marched from Essex and Kent towards London. The uprising was the result of the introduction of a poll tax in 1380 in the midst of massive economic instability within England. Peasants protested the poll tax amongst the lack of personal liberties and the classist system present in England at the time. The marches were extremely violent and many nobility, who were key political stakeholders at the time, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Courteney, were killed. Eventually the protesters assembled at Blackheath where a priest preached for equality amongst all of England's citizens. Eventually the protests didn't evoke change within England and hundreds of protesters including the leader of the march, Wat Tyler, were killed. The violence of the protest and the unwillingness of the crown to allow for these protests to occur can arguably be blamed for its unsuccessful and destructive outcomes.

Another notable peasant revolt is the German Peasants War. Similarly German peasants were exasperated with the oppression they faced from nobility and high members of society. They fought for peasants' rights from 1524-1525, stimulated by the earlier religious reformation led by Martin Luther. Peasants built small armies to try to challenge nobility which resulted in the deaths of 100,000 unskilled peasant fighters facing the developed armies of their noble enemies.

The American Revolution, or revolutionary war, was the revolution that resulted in the independence of the United States of America from Great Britain and its colonial rule. The revolution started in 1775 after tensions had grown too large between Britain's North American Colonies and the colonial government which represented the British crown, or royal house. The conflict started with skirmishes between rebels and the organized British troops and eventually developed into a full blown war with major armed conflict. The first large-scale protest towards British colonial power was the Boston Tea Party, in which rebels chanting the phrase 'no taxation without representation' pushed 342 chests of tea imported by the British East India Company and were thrust into the water in the Boston Harbour. This challenged Great Britain's taxation of their colonies, which the colonies felt was inappropriate as they did not directly benefit from this taxation themselves.



The French Revolution from 1778 to 1799 best known for its slogan ‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité’ is arguably the most well regarded and respected revolution across western democratic society. The French revolution fought for liberty, equality and fraternity, three concepts that are now regarded as essential parts of our democratic societies. The French Revolution was seen by many members of European Societies as an example and was used by many other societies as an example to break free from the remnants of feudalism. The French Revolution however saw incredible violence and can be characterized by the deaths of many revolutionists and eventually also incredible numbers who opposed the revolution. The by far most famous death of the French Revolution was French Queen Marie Antoinette’s execution in 1793.

### **Peaceful Protest**

What most of these revolutions, strikes and revolts from history have in common is that they have somehow resulted in violence or destruction. Where there are often two parties involved in a protest, one in support of the protest and one opposing it, it is obvious that neither parties benefit when violence takes control. Therefore the United Nations has found the right to ‘peaceful’ protest to be an essential element of maintaining peace across our world. There have been several peaceful protests which have proven to be far more successful than those that are violent.

### ***Women’s Suffrage Movement***

Throughout the Women’s Suffrage movement starting in the mid 19th century with the Seneca Falls Convention, there were many peaceful protests held by women that eventually led them to gaining the right to vote. Protests were hosted by domestic organizations such as the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in America and Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in the UK. These protests included parades, hunger strikes in which women would refuse to eat, and other peaceful protests. By 1928, 30 western countries had granted women, often only white noble women, the right to vote.



### *The Velvet Revolution (1989)*

During the Czechoslovakian Velvet Revolution there was a domestic protest movement that ended the Soviet communist rule over Czechoslovakia. During this movement the sitting communist government, in many ways controlled by soviet leader Gorbachev, formed a coalition government with other non-communist parties due to the public outcry over the non-democratic regime. The Velvet Revolution and its peaceful organized protests successfully got the government to reform in a way favorable to their needs.

### *Black Lives Matter (2013-now)*

The Black Lives Matter movement has peacefully protested for the recognition of the need for justice in the face of tragedy caused by police brutality and other institutional oppression for black people primarily across the United States of America but also other nations. Protests are often held in the honor of deaths of Afro-Americans such as George Floyd and Micheal Brown to highlight the oppression caused by police brutality.

Although many movements such as women's suffrage, climate strikes, and Black Lives Matter, to name a few are often considered to be peaceful movements, it is still evident that that is not the case. On occasion peaceful protestors still face violence from institutions that they protest against. This leads to violent protests breaking out endangering states, civilians and protestors all at once. Although seemingly simple the issue is perplexing and hard to combat. In situations where there is a conflict of interest there is every possibility that conflict may break out.

It is the United Nations Human Rights Council and many non-profit organizations that dedicate themselves to the cause of the protection of the right to protest, whilst also keeping in mind the safety of the lives of the protesters. It is therefore crucial that the United Nations and its member states develop new solutions for the protection of everyone's freedoms, whilst considering their safety.



## Major Parties Involved

### Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The OHCHR have their own specific mandate which they use with the aim of protecting every individual's right of peaceful assembly.

### Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a non-profit organization which amongst other focusses draws attention to ongoing protests and highlights injustices conducted towards protestors by states.

### Greenpeace

The main organization advocating for climate action from large companies and government institutions. Greenpeace activists often organize public protests such as marches and campaigns.

### The United States of America (USA)

Criticism towards the US has been continuously growing over the past decades due to rising issues of police brutality and harmful strategies which they use to control protestors.

### Human Rights Watch

The Human Rights Watch works to investigate and report of violence happening towards individuals internationally. It also publicises about states that are limiting human rights, such as the right to protest, towards their citizens.

### China

China has faced scrutiny from the Human Rights Watch about their lack of respect for their civilians' right to protest. Over the period of COVID-19 it became increasingly evident to international organizations and the international community that Chinese citizens were being limited in their rights of assembly and protest.





## Timeline of Key Events

### Date Description of event

1157 BC, Egyptian labor strike

495 BC, first Secessio Plebis ending in 287 BC

1381, English Peasant Revolt

1517, Martin Luther Church Reform ending in 1648

1524, the German Peasant War ending in 1525

1777, the American Revolution ending in 1783

1778, the French Revolution ending in 1799

1848, Seneca Falls Convention

1848, start of the Women's suffrage movement ending in the late 1920s

1915, start of the Indian Independence Movement ending in 1947

1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1948, start of the Anti-Apartheid movement ending in 1991

1954, popularization of the American Civil Rights movement ending the late 1960s

1961, Amnesty International founded

1969, Stonewall riots

1971, Greenpeace founded

1987, the Singing Revolution ending in 1991

1989, the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia

2004, the Orange Revolution of Ukraine ending in 2005

2011, High Seas Alliance founded

2013, start of the Black Lives Matter movement

2018, School Strikes for Climate



## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The UN has many times addressed the right to peaceful assembly and protest. Some relevant resolutions and events include;

- Importance of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in advancing sustainable peace and democratic transitions, 27 July 2023 (A/78/246)
- The promotion and protection of human rights in the context of peaceful protests, 9 April 2019 (A/22/10)
- The promotion and protection of human rights in the context of peaceful protests, 11 April 2014 (A/25/38)
- International covenant human rights, 1999 (A/54/157)

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The UN has actively drawn attention over the past decades. Calling out injustices that occur due to police brutality and the lack of recognition for the right to peaceful protest. As the UN tries to begin more open discussions over the right to peaceful protests more member states have become involved in the issue, dedicating themselves to the cause of fighting for the right to peaceful protest.

Non-profit organizations such as Amnesty draw attention to injustices through publicizing them on their sites. Through this protests are being recognised, protestors themselves are gaining support and states are being held accountable for their actions that endanger protestors and their access to their right to freedom of assembly.



## Possible Solutions

Often a lack of trust in leadership is what instigates violence. Out of fear of being harmed, protestors will bring devices which they are willing to use. When authorities are involved this quickly escalates if both parties involved are armed. Establishing a bond of trust and communication between authorities and protestors may help prevent this violence from occurring. Governments may be encouraged to allocate specific places at which protests can be held. They also may be encouraged to establish a line of communication through which protestors can notify governments of where protests will occur. This way the state may better understand the intent of the protestors, and the protestors may feel more protected and heard.

Establishing a programme tasked with developing crowd management strategies may also be a crucial element in protecting the right to protest. Often authorities are not equipped to prevent violence from breaking out, or even from calming it down once it has happened. This results in government forces, such as law enforcement workers like police, reacting in an ineffective and panicked manner. The appropriate development of new strategies and training programmes that may be shared with governments could positively encourage institutions to develop more effective strategies facing violent protests.

Governments could choose to establish expressive spaces encouraging citizens to express ideals towards them. Establishing a set organization tasked to hearing frustrations and feedback from people may prevent the need for large scale action amongst communities. In this way governments have a chance to try and make a difference and people can voice their opinions directly towards a state without having to take extreme measures to have themselves be heard. These organizations could employ trained experts tasked with collecting these ideals and seeing where popular public demand lies.



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