

For 'Rapid Decline' in Civic Freedoms, India Added to CIVICUS Monitor's 'Watchlist'

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New Delhi: India has been added to a watchlist of countries that have seen a “rapid decline” in civic freedoms by an independent monitor, highlighting the drastic measures taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to silence critics of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

India and Russia were added to **CIVICUS Monitor's Watchlist**. CIVICUS Monitor is an online platform that tracks the latest developments to civic freedoms, including the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, across 197 countries and territories.

India has remained a “repressed” nation in the ‘People Power Under Attack 2021’ report by the CIVICUS Monitor, along with **48 other countries** including Afghanistan, Russia and Hong Kong. Its rating was first downgraded in 2019, “due to a crackdown on human rights activists, attacks on journalists and civil society groups, and the assault on civic freedoms in Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir”.

This rating is typically **given to countries** where civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights.

Meanwhile, other countries on the watchlist are El Salvador, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tunisia, and the UAE.

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In January, the Central Bureau of Investigation **conducted raids on Madurai-based human rights watchdog, People's Watch**. The raid came against the backdrop of 6,000 other civil society organisations, including **Oxfam**, losing their foreign funding licenses under the controversial Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act.

[Greenpeace](#) and [Amnesty International](#) are among the civil society groups that have had to close their offices in India.

Meanwhile, scores of human rights defenders and activists remain in detention under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and other laws. They include the [15 human rights defenders](#) linked to the 2018 Bhima Koregaon incident who have been accused of having links with Maoist organisations, based on [evidence believed to be “fabricated”](#).

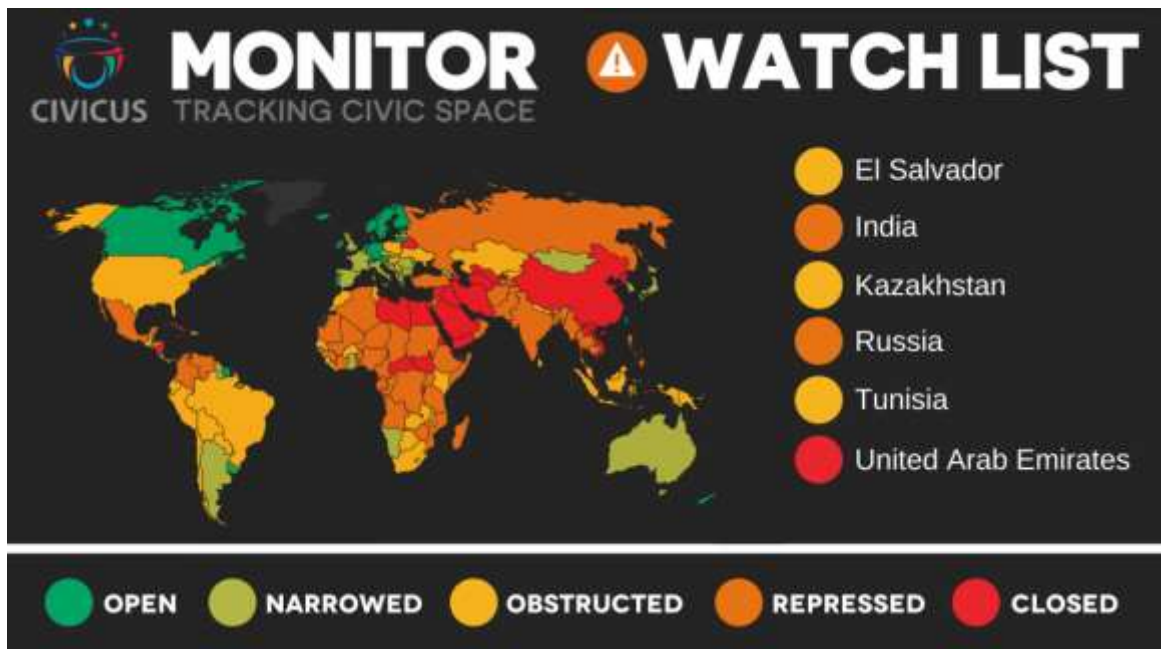
Waiting for bail, 84-year-old tribal rights activist [Stan Swamy](#), who remained in custody since October 2020 in the Elgar Parishad case under UAPA, died in July last year.

Further, at least 13 activists who were arrested under the UAPA for their work against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019 remain in detention. The slow investigative processes and extremely stringent bail provisions ensure that those detained under the law are held in pre-trial detention for long periods.

“The office raids and foreign funding bans are part of the government’s strategy to harass and silence their critics,” said Josef Benedict, Civic Space Researcher for the CIVICUS Monitor. “The use of broadly worded anti-terrorism laws against activists, journalists, academics, and students, reflect a multi-year decline in the state of civic and democratic freedoms in the country.”

Journalists have continued to be targeted in India for their work in recent months and there have also been concerns about the widespread surveillance of activists, journalists and others critical of the Modi government [following the Pegasus spyware](#) expose.

“The government must release all human rights defenders detained and come clean about its surveillance of activists and journalists as well as establish an independent and effective oversight mechanism to monitor all stages of interceptions of communications,” said Henri Tiphagne, national working secretary of HRDA – India.



In Jammu and Kashmir, after the government read down Article 370 in August 2019, which granted the erstwhile state “special status” under the Constitution of India, hundreds were detained and restrictions were placed on internet access. Over 600 cases of human rights violations have since been locked up in the state’s Human Rights Commission, *The Wire* had reported this year.

The Wire had also reported that more than 25 people from the Kashmir Valley were selected as potential targets of intrusive surveillance between 2017 and mid-2019 by an unidentified government agency, believed to be a client of the Israeli company NSO Group.

In recent months, the government arrested human rights defender **Khurram Parvez** as well as journalists and taken control of the **Kashmir Press Club** – the largest independent media body in Kashmir

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