

Artists and cultural institutions in conflict-affected countries came under attack.

BY BAMUTURAKI MUSINGUZI

From war zones to democracies under strain, artists in 2025 faced censorship, arrest, violence, displacement, and mounting pressure to self-censor, a new report shows.

Freemuse's State of Artistic Freedom 2026 report details how war, authoritarianism, religious extremism, far-right politics, and deepening polarisation are placing artistic freedom under growing pressure across the globe.

The report identifies two overlapping crises shaping artistic freedom in 2025: armed conflict, which destroys cultural life and puts artists directly in harm's way; and democratic decline, which gives governments new legal and political tools to suppress dissent.

Artists and cultural institutions came under attack in conflict-affected countries. At the same time, governments

across multiple regions used foreign agent laws, counter-terrorism measures, blasphemy laws, morality codes, and funding restrictions to silence critical artistic voices.

The report, titled *Courage is Contagious: Art Under Fire*, maps eight interconnected trends driving this crisis: war and its devastating impact on artists, cultural institutions, and heritage; the use of nationalism, religion, and security rhetoric to justify censorship; the spread of foreign agent laws targeting artists and cultural organisations; the criminalisation of artistic expression through terrorism, blasphemy, obscenity, and morality laws; increasing censorship and

'Sovereignty-type of laws are shrinking civic space'

Issue.
Repression of the freedom to create remains acute around the world. Yet, as our report shows, artists continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, finding ways to resist oppression despite immense hardship and risk.
- Sara Whyatt, the research director at Freemuse.

self-censorship around Gaza and Palestine; heightened repression of women artists, LGBTI+ artists, and marginalised communities; the targeting of music, film, satire, and online artistic expression; and growing pressure from non-state actors, including online campaigns, religious groups, and organised crime.

"Wars, authoritarian regimes, far-right groups, and religious fundamentalism are increasing in scope in all parts of the world, attacking and undermining human rights and the international rules-based world order. Increased polarisation and extremist groups also pose greater challenges to free expression and democratic values. The work to defend artistic freedom has never been more important," says Sverre Pedersen, the executive director of Freemuse.

"Repression of the freedom to create remains acute around the world. Yet, as our report shows, artists continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, finding ways to resist oppression

despite immense hardship and risk. Titled *Courage is Contagious*, the report reflects the very spirit that anchors Freemuse's work: standing in solidarity with artists and joining them in the ongoing struggle for artistic freedom," adds Sara Whyatt, the research director at Freemuse.

War, artistic freedom

The report highlights acts of creative resistance across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, where artists are using music, film, visual art, satire, legal action, and underground networks to challenge repression and defend free expression.

Cuts to civil society funding have, however, weakened the ability of organisations to monitor and respond to abuses.

Wars continue to rage across the globe. The targets and victims of war are not only military, with the report detailing how arts and culture are impacted. In Sudan, for one, over 50 artists have been reported killed since war broke out in April 2023. Museums, theatres and public libraries have been damaged or destroyed.

"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," Whyatt says.

Policing bodies

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."

50

In Sudan, for one, over 50 artists have been reported killed since war broke out in April 2023.

In Nigeria and Ethiopia, morality enforcement disproportionately targets women's dress, conduct and online expression.

The policing of bodies, clothing and moral conduct affects artists—male and female—across multiple regions. In Nigeria, a TikTok star 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 TikTok stars 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."

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 to her arrest.

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.

Across the world, artists who take to the streets do so at personal risk. In Morocco, rappers were 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.