

# SPEAK. RESIST. REPEAT: THE POWER AND COURAGE OF EXPRESSION

WRITE  
FOR  
RIGHTS  
AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



Freedom of  
Expression

Human Rights  
Education  
Activity



## WRITE FOR RIGHTS

# WRITING LETTERS CHANGES LIVES

**When just a handful of people unite behind someone, the results can be amazing.**

Nearly 25 years ago, a small group of activists in Poland ran a 24-hour letter-writing marathon to support individuals at risk of human rights violations. What started as a small event has since evolved into the world's largest human rights campaign: Write for Rights.

In 2001, 2,326 letters were written to people around the world. By 2024, that number had soared to more than 4.6 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions taken in more than 200 countries and territories. Across the globe, people have proven that geography is no barrier to solidarity, and that words have the power to inspire hope and spark change. In 2024 alone, almost 1 million people were engaged through human rights education activities like this one.

Together, our actions have helped transform the lives of more than 115 people over the years, by freeing activists from detention, securing justice for those whose rights have been abused and protecting people who advocate for change.

This year's campaign once again supports individuals at risk around the world. They are connected because their human rights have been violated simply for who they are or because they exercised their rights. Together, we can demand justice for them. Through Write for Rights, they will receive thousands of personalized messages of solidarity from across the globe, reminding them that they, and their struggles, are not forgotten. And, by writing directly to the authorities, we can pressure those in power to help build a more just and equal world.

Year after year, individuals featured in the campaign tell us how deeply these actions matter. Many describe the strength they draw from knowing that so many people care and support them. Often, your letters lead to real change: charges are dropped, people are released from detention, and authorities introduce new laws or policies to protect human rights.

***From the bottom of my heart, this campaign has kept me alive, it's what has stopped them from killing me because they know that you are there.***

Jani Silva, environmental defender, 2021

## BEFORE YOU START

This **human rights education activity** can take place in a variety of settings: online or offline, in classrooms, community groups, families or activist networks. As a facilitator, adapt the activity to your group's context. For example, you may want to consider what knowledge the group already has about the issues discussed, the size and age range of your group and how to best organize the activity to allow for active participation, the physical setting of your activity, delivering it in-person or online, and any limitations. When participants want to take action in support of an individual at risk, discuss how to do so safely.

The activities are based on **participatory learning methods** in which learners are not merely presented with information; they explore, discuss, analyse and question issues relating to the individuals' and groups' stories. This helps participants to:

**BUILD** key competencies and skills

**FORM** their own opinions, raise questions and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented

**TAKE OWNERSHIP** of their learning, and shape discussions around their interests, abilities and concerns

**ENGAGE** emotionally and develop values and personal commitment.



Petitions and postcards in support of Manahel Al-Otaibi during Write for Rights 2024.

© Amnesty International Thailand

Read about the people we're fighting for: [amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/](https://amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/)

Contact the Amnesty team in your country: [amnesty.org/en/countries/](https://amnesty.org/en/countries/)

Tweet your support to @Amnesty using the hashtag **#W4R25**

If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's **Facilitation Manual** before you start: [amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/](https://amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/)

Amnesty International offers free online human rights education courses: [academy.amnesty.org/learn](https://academy.amnesty.org/learn) and quizzes: <https://share.google/XbBVTSryhr9UNR4rq>

# YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL

## RESETLED IN SAFETY

In 2023, as a result of his human rights work, Rohingya activist Maung Sawyeddollah faced serious security risks at the refugee camp where he lived in Bangladesh. In August 2024, he was granted an exit visa from Bangladesh and a student visa to attend university in the USA, which is likely thanks to the huge publicity created by Write for Rights 2023.

**“ Through the campaign, I found myself receiving an outpouring of motivation, support, encouragement and solidarity from individuals and groups across the globe. The global community’s response was heartening, as people from diverse backgrounds united in the fight for justice and human rights ”**

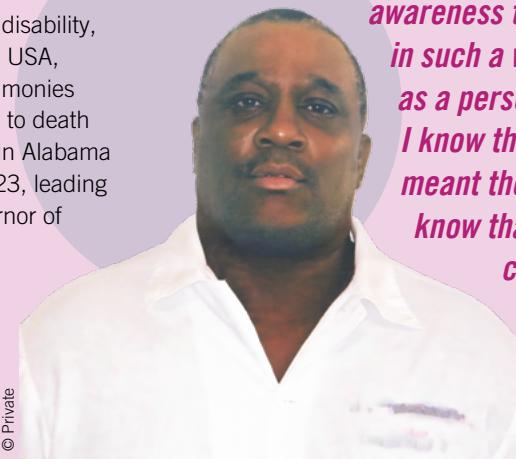
Maung Sawyeddollah



© Munir Uz Zaman/AFP via Getty Images

## SPARED FROM EXECUTION

Rocky Myers, a Black man with an intellectual disability, spent three decades on death row in Alabama, USA, for murder. Rocky was convicted following testimonies blighted by inconsistencies. He was sentenced to death against the jury’s wishes, a practice abolished in Alabama in 2017. Rocky featured in Write for Rights 2023, leading to a huge global campaign calling on the Governor of Alabama to grant him clemency and commute his death sentence. In February 2025, this was granted. Rocky’s fight for justice is not over as he remains under life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, but the threat of execution has ended.



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**“ Not only did this campaign bring awareness to his case, but it was done in such a way that honoured Rocky as a person, father and grandfather. I know the outpouring of support meant the world to Rocky, and to know that so many people felt called to action is truly inspiring ”**

Miriam Bankston, member of  
Rocky Myers’s legal team

## FREED FROM PRISON

In September 2020, Dorgelesse Nguessan was arrested and later sentenced to five years in prison for taking part in peaceful demonstrations in Cameroon. Her story featured in Write for Rights 2022 and, in January 2025, Dorgelesse was released and reunited with her family.

**“ You reached out to us at the point when we most needed it. My son was sick, my mother was sick. My being in prison had had such an impact on my mum, she was weakened by it. This campaign gave her strength. It encouraged all of us. I don’t know how to thank Amnesty enough ”**

Dorgelesse Nguessan



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# ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations.

Your rights are about being treated fairly, treating others fairly and having the ability to make choices about your own life. Human rights are universal – they belong to everyone, everywhere.

They are inalienable – they cannot be taken away from us. And they are indivisible and interdependent – each right is equally important and they are interconnected.

Since the atrocities committed during World War II, international human rights instruments, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have provided a powerful framework for national, regional and international legislation

designed to improve lives across the world. Human rights are laws for governments. Human rights are not optional privileges or luxuries to be granted only when convenient. They create binding obligations for governments and public officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of all people, both within their borders and beyond.



© UN Photo

## THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The UDHR was drawn up by the newly formed United Nations in the years immediately following World War II. Since its adoption on 10 December 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed to be bound by the general principles expressed within the 30 articles of this document.

As its name suggests, the UDHR is a declaration of intent by every government around the world that it will abide by certain standards in the treatment of individual

human beings. Human rights have become part of international law: since the adoption of the UDHR, numerous other binding laws and agreements have been drawn up on the basis of its principles. These laws and agreements provide the basis for organizations like Amnesty International to demand that governments end the abuses experienced by the individuals featured in our Write for Rights campaign.



Amnesty activists in Togo during Write for Rights 2024.

# UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

 <p>Civil rights and liberties Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.</p>	<p><b>Article 1</b> Freedom and equality in dignity and rights  <b>Article 2</b> Non-discrimination  <b>Article 3</b> Right to life, liberty and security of person  <b>Article 4</b> Freedom from slavery  <b>Article 5</b> Freedom from torture</p>
 <p>Legal rights Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.</p>	<p><b>Article 6</b> All are protected by the law  <b>Article 7</b> All are equal before the law  <b>Article 8</b> A remedy when rights have been violated  <b>Article 9</b> No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile  <b>Article 10</b> Right to a fair trial  <b>Article 11</b> Innocent until proven guilty  <b>Article 14</b> Right to go to another country and ask for protection</p>
 <p>Social rights Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.</p>	<p><b>Article 12</b> Privacy and the right to home and family life  <b>Article 13</b> Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders  <b>Article 16</b> Right to marry and start a family  <b>Article 24</b> Right to rest and leisure  <b>Article 26</b> Right to education, including free primary education</p>
 <p>Economic rights Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.</p>	<p><b>Article 15</b> Right to a nationality  <b>Article 17</b> Right to own property and possessions  <b>Article 22</b> Right to social security  <b>Article 23</b> Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union  <b>Article 25</b> Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being</p>
 <p>Political rights Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion.</p>	<p><b>Article 18</b> Freedom of belief (including religious belief)  <b>Article 19</b> Freedom of expression and the right to spread information  <b>Article 20</b> Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way  <b>Article 21</b> Right to take part in the government of your country</p>
 <p>Cultural rights, solidarity rights Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.</p>	<p><b>Article 27</b> Right to share in your community's cultural life  <b>Article 28</b> Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized  <b>Article 29</b> Responsibility to respect the rights of others  <b>Article 30</b> No taking away any of these rights!</p>

## ACTIVITY

# FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

### KEY CONCEPTS

- Freedom of expression
- Right to protest
- Shrinking civic space
- Human rights defenders
- Repression and arbitrary detention

### ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

This activity explores how the right to freedom of expression is under threat in different parts of the world, through the stories of three individuals persecuted for their journalism, advocacy and public commentary. Each has been criminalized, detained and ill-treated because of their commitment to their beliefs, highlighting a global pattern of shrinking civic space and increasingly authoritarian practices to repress freedom of expression.

AGE: 14+

### TIME NEEDED

60 minutes plus additional time for the Take Action section.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **understand** the concept of freedom of expression and its importance.
- **identify** ways in which freedom of expression is being threatened globally.
- **explain** the consequences that individuals face, such as harassment and imprisonment, for speaking out or exposing injustice.
- **demonstrate** empathy and solidarity with journalists and human rights defenders by reflecting on their stories and participating in meaningful action.

### MATERIALS

- **Handout:** story cards and take action cards (pages 15-18)
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) simplified version** (page 5)
- **Background information:** The right to freedom of expression (pages 13-14)
- Paper, pens and envelopes (if sending letters)
- Optional: videos from [amnesty.org/en/w4r-videos](https://amnesty.org/en/w4r-videos)
- Optional: Template letters from [amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/](https://amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/)

### PREPARATION

- Read the story cards and select which cases to work on.
- Print the handouts for each participant/group.
- Read the background information.
- Depending on the size, level of knowledge and learning needs of your group, you may wish to adjust how much time is given to each part of the activity, or adapt specific instructions. Plan your timing carefully.

## 1. WARM-UP: SILENT CORRECTION

 15 MINUTES

Have one or two items ready that you are going to present. These can be photos or physical items. Conduct yourself as an authority, and tell the participants:

*"I am an expert on many, many topics. Today, I came here to share some of my wisdom and experience with you. But to do so, I require your full attention and support. So, as I present, you must remain completely silent. No talking, no reacting. No matter what I say, you must not react to my statements, until I tell you when you can speak and move again."*

**Note to facilitators:** please adapt to ensure the inclusion of all learners.

When the group is ready, hold up each item or image, one at a time. For each, state obviously incorrect or distorted facts. Take enough time for participants to feel the tension, to want to speak up, and to connect emotionally with the situation. Don't rush: allow the discomfort to grow so the exercise has its intended impact. As you present, stay straight-faced throughout.

Here are a few examples from which you can choose or draw inspiration:

- **A book:** Books were invented in 1950. They were first used as doorstops or as bricks for building houses. People didn't realize they could put words on the pages until 1970. But now, with the internet, books have lost all of their value. They are outdated and none of the ideas in books are relevant anymore. We are better off using them as toilet paper, or tossing them on a fire to keep us warm.
- **A photo of police in riot gear:** These are gardeners. They wear helmets to protect them from falling leaves, which often cause severe head injuries. These things that look like shields are shovels, so they can dig faster. They go around town and spot which garden or plot of land needs tending, and they work on it voluntarily, out of the goodness of their hearts. Only men are good gardeners. Women are generally too weak to be outside for long, it hurts their lungs and they are allergic to the sun.
- **A photo of a cat:** This is a dog. All dogs hate water, because they cannot swim. If it rains and they are outside, they melt. Dogs are by far the unfriendliest creatures alive. They are angry animals that build little nests in trees where they live. Despite popular belief, dogs never meow. They whisper insults in ancient languages that humans cannot understand.
- **A bottle of water:** This is a portable rain museum. Each bottle contains the angry tears of clouds who remember what they had for dinner last night. Water is really unsafe for people to drink. People used to drink it, but never more than 5ml a day because it is very toxic. And that was before we discovered it is actually ghost sweat. The cap on this bottle here is to stop the ghosts from escaping and singing karaoke. It is much better for children to drink coffee, melted ice cream, or, better yet, deodorant.

*Sai Zaw Thaik, photographer for the independent Myanmar media outlet Myanmar Now, on assignment in Myanmar. (See page 17.)*  
© Myat Gyi



After you have finished your presentation, take a moment to observe participants' reactions. You may want to end by thanking them for listening and telling them they may applaud for you now.

Then, announce that this is the end of the exercise by inviting everyone to take a deep breath, move around briefly or shake it out. Ask participants gently how this exercise made them feel. After getting some initial reactions, debrief further by asking:

- **Did you hold back any reactions? Did you want to speak up?**
- **Why didn't you, even though you knew the statements were silly?**
- **How did your body respond to the mismatch between what you saw and what I said? What emotions came up? Confusion, frustration, humour, tension?**
- **Did your trust in me change, especially since I was speaking as an authority figure and an expert on the topic?**

If there is time, you may want to bring the discussion to a more general reflection about misinformation and oppression in society.

- **Why is it important to be able to speak out when something isn't right?**
- **What do you think happens when people are not allowed to question what they're told?**
- **How do people find ways to express themselves when they are silenced or blocked from speaking out?**

Wrap up by explaining:

*"In this exercise, for a few moments, you experienced what it feels like to be silenced, or not allowed to challenge something that was clearly not true. That was just role-play, a game. But in real life, many people face situations in which speaking out or exposing wrongdoing puts them in danger. People in positions of power may spread misinformation, block access to facts, or punish those who question or oppose them. It is not always safe to challenge governments, police, corporations or other powerful interests. To understand this better, let's explore some of the key rights that are supposed to keep people safe when they challenge those in power or speak up."*

Below left: *Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy, head of the channel Temirov Live, being detained by police in Kyrgyzstan in January 2024. (See page 15.)*

© Temirov LIVE

Below: *A view of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, where Tunisian lawyer and media personality Sonia Dahmani worked. (See page 17.)*

© Pexels





## 2. HUMAN RIGHTS, INTERCONNECTED

Explain that this activity has three rounds. In each round, you will read out a situation that describes a human rights violation and give two rights as options. Participants will need to decide which right they think fits best with the situation or is most at risk.

You can ask participants to show their choice in one of two ways: either by standing in the part of the room that you assign for answer A or B, or by staying in place and raising their hand when you call out their chosen option. Choose whichever method works best for your group depending on their learning needs, mobility and setting.

**Tip for facilitators:** This exercise isn't about getting a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. In fact, these situations involve more than one right, and they are interconnected.

Guide participants to reflect on why they chose a particular answer and help them to see how these rights overlap and depend on each other. Keep the tone open and exploratory, rather than quiz-like. You can use the background information on pages 13-14 to guide this exercise or explain certain concepts in more detail.

If this is the first time that participants are introduced to the UDHR, you should focus on building a shared understanding of what it is first, using the information starting on page 4.

### SITUATION 1:

A group of students posts videos online, criticizing the government for corruption. The next day, police stop their planned peaceful march before it begins and arrest several of them. Is this mostly about:

- A. freedom of expression, or**
- B. freedom of peaceful assembly?**

*Debrief:* Freedom of expression (A) protects the students' right to share opinions online, but freedom of peaceful assembly (B) protects their ability to gather peacefully in public. When people come together publicly to express their views, both rights work together. This combines freedom of expression with peaceful assembly and gives us the right to protest. These rights are connected. Violating one right often undermines the other.

### SITUATION 2:

A lawyer who speaks out against injustice is taken from her home at night and locked up for months. She isn't allowed to see a judge and isn't told what she is accused of. Is this mostly about:

- A. the right to a fair trial, or**
- B. protection from arbitrary detention?**

*Debrief:* Locking someone up without telling them why, or without being brought before a judge, is called arbitrary detention (B). It violates their right to liberty. Sometimes people are released without formal charges ever being filed, in which case no trial is necessary. But when charges are brought, the right to a fair trial (A) is essential. It makes

Above right: *Protest in Yangon, Myanmar, covered by Sai Zaw Thaik.*  
© AAMI

Right: *Aike Beiskeeva, Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy, Azamat Ishenbekov and Aktilek Kaparov – journalists from Temirov LIVE – during their court hearing.*  
© Private



sure people know what they are accused of, can defend themselves, and are judged fairly. Without fair trial rights, arbitrary detention becomes more likely. These rights are connected and both help to protect people from abuse.

### **SITUATION 3:**

A journalist is arrested after reporting on problems in the police force. In prison, he is kept in a small, dirty cell overrun by rats. He isn't given the medicine he needs and he is insulted every day by the prison guards. Is this mostly about:

- A. freedom from torture and other ill-treatment, or**
- B. the right to health?**

*Debrief:* Not giving someone medicine and leaving them in filthy, unsafe conditions is a violation of the right to health (B). Being insulted every day and left in these conditions could also amount to ill-treatment (A). When the authorities cause severe physical or mental pain or suffering to a person on purpose, for example to punish, intimidate, discriminate or to get information, this amounts to torture (A). These rights are connected, and governments must ensure that they keep people safe and treat them with dignity and respect.

As a final reflection, ask participants:

- **Was it hard to choose between the two rights? Why do you think that is?**
- **How might protecting one right help prevent violations of others?**

Guide participants to the idea of all human rights being interconnected: when one is violated, it can easily result in other abuses. This is why governments must protect all rights, together.

Point out that the three different scenarios all had to do with the right to freedom of expression. End by explaining this right in more detail, in preparation for the next part of the activity:

*"We each have the right to express our opinions, to criticize those in power, and to share information. This is called freedom of expression. It is protected by international law, like Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It means being able to speak out, challenge power, share stories and seek justice without fear of retaliation. Yet, in many parts of the world, these rights are not fully protected. And people – whether they are journalists, human rights defenders, artists, students or just everyday people posting online – are brave to speak up, even despite the risks."*

Below left: *Protest in Yangon, Myanmar, covered by Sai Zaw Tharke.*

© Myanmar Now

Below centre: *Makhabat Tazhibek kzyz.*

© Toktosun Shambetov (RFE/RL)

Below right: *Sonia Dahmani.*

© Private



### 3. STORIES OF COURAGE: EXPLORING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

⌚ 25 MINUTES

Read out loud:

*"We have just seen how hard it can be to separate one right from another, and how a violation of freedom of expression could result in other rights being violated. Today, we'll learn about three individuals who used their voices to defend others and expose harmful practices, and paid a heavy price for doing so. As we read their stories, take a moment to imagine: what would it feel like to be in their place?"*

Divide participants into small groups or pairs. Give each group a story card from pages 15-18, a copy of the simplified UDHR (page 5) and some pens and paper. Ask them to read the story together and to discuss the following questions:

- **What was this person trying to say or do?**
- **Why do you think the authorities punished them?**
- **Look at the UDHR. Can you find two or three rights that have been denied to this person?**

Then, tell each group:

*"Imagine you are Sonia/Makhabat/Sai Zaw. What would you want the world to know? What rights do you feel are being denied? What would you ask governments or ordinary people to do? Write a short, appealing message for social media or for another public platform, asking for support, from their perspective."*

After about 15 minutes, bring participants back together. Ask a volunteer from each group to briefly introduce the person, and to read out the message they created.

After learning about the individuals, use the following questions for a final reflection:

- **What happens to a society when voices like these are silenced?**
- **How does this connect to human rights around the world?**
- **What can we do as individuals or communities when we witness these injustices?**

End by saying that the stories show us how deeply harmful it is when people are silenced for speaking out. They also remind us why the ability to express ideas and opinions freely is so valuable; not just for individuals, but for whole societies. Governments have a responsibility to protect these rights, even when the views expressed are critical or uncomfortable. As we've seen, when they fail to do this, the cost for those who speak out can be very high.



*From top to bottom: Sai Zaw  
Thaike, Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy  
and Sonia Dahmani.*

© Kon Blai, © Temirov LIVE, © Private

## 4. TAKE ACTION

Tell participants about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign and explain that Amnesty is calling on people to write letters to the individuals in the stories, and also to the authorities responsible for protecting, respecting and fulfilling their human rights. Explain that the people on the story cards have all been included in this year's campaign. You can give examples from previous years' campaigns (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters and taking other actions can be, or watch this one-minute story from Moses Akatugba who was freed from death row thanks to Write for Rights:

[https://youtu.be/8cU6EPY5r\\_c](https://youtu.be/8cU6EPY5r_c)

If there isn't enough time for participants to take action within the time allowed, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.

### WRITE A LETTER

Ask participants to choose one of the people whose cases they have learned about, and give them a copy of the take action card from pages 16-18 for that person. Tell the participants that their letters will be sent to the authorities responsible for protecting that person's human rights.

Give everyone letter writing materials and allow time for them to write their letters. Explain that a personal message to the officials can have the most impact. Ask them to:

- **Write something about themselves.**
- **Tell the official what shocks them about the individual's story.**
- **Say why they think it is important that governments respect human rights.**

If people wish to share their finished letters with the group, or express their feelings at the end of the activity, provide an opportunity for them to do so.

### SHOW SOLIDARITY

If you have time, you can also do some of the solidarity actions on the take action cards. The solidarity letters are often a great source of support and strength for the people featured in these cases.

Send your messages of friendship and hope to encourage Sonia, Makhabat and Sai Zaw to keep up their fight for justice and show they are not alone. Be creative and tell them a little bit about yourself to make this a personal letter.

Learn more about other activities in the Write for Rights campaign at [amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/](https://amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/)

15 MINUTES

Optional: show participants the videos of Sonia, Makhabat and Sai Zaw, which can be found here: [amnesty.org/en/w4r-videos](https://amnesty.org/en/w4r-videos) (available in English).



Clockwise from top:  
Amnesty activists in  
Nepal, Canada, Bulgaria,  
Luxembourg, Zimbabwe,  
Poland and Taiwan  
take part in Write for  
Rights 2024.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

# THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The right to freedom of expression protects your ability to hold your own opinions and to express them freely, without government interference. This includes the right to express views through public protests or written materials, media broadcasts, the internet and works of art. We need a free flow of ideas in order to ensure that different opinions are taken into account and different ideas are aired. Limiting the right to freedom of expression undermines transparency and accountability and makes the fight for human rights even more difficult. Freedom of expression is important not just to society as a whole, but also to the individual. Our opinions and thoughts are a fundamental part of what makes us human. Silencing someone's voice is like erasing part of their identity.

## RESTRICTING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The right to freedom of expression is not an unlimited right. Sometimes, governments have a duty to protect other people's rights or certain public interests which requires some expression to be prohibited or restricted.

For example, freedom of expression does not protect speech that directly incites violence, such as urging people to attack a minority group. In that case, governments have a duty to step in and prevent harm.

But the circumstances in which the authorities can restrict the right to freedom of expression are very narrow and must be considered as exceptional rather than the norm. Outside of such cases, governments are not allowed to block or punish people just because their ideas are critical, unpopular or even offensive. The right to freedom of expression applies to ideas of all kinds and protects the ability of people to protest even if their message might be considered offensive, shocking or disturbing. Any restriction on human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, must be legal, proportionate and necessary.

*Posters produced by photography students supporting Amnesty International's campaign Protect the Protest in London, UK, 2025.*



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

# THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION UNDER ATTACK

In many countries today, freedom of expression is under severe attack. Many governments abuse their authority to stifle criticism and silence peaceful dissent by passing laws criminalizing freedom of expression or misusing criminal legislation to target critics. Critical speech, dissent and protest are routinely censored or obstructed, online as well as offline. This is often done in the name of counterterrorism, public order, national security or religion. Governments not only censor speech but actively target people such as journalists, activists, lawyers, artists, students and anyone else who decides to speak out, through unfair trials, arbitrary detention, and ill-treatment.

Governments exploit vague laws, like “spreading false news” or “inciting unrest” to justify long prison sentences, often imposed without proper legal process. These abuses are not isolated; they reflect a global trend of shrinking civic space, where criticism of those in power is treated not as a right protected under international law, but as a threat to be punished. This creates a chilling effect, silences public debate and erodes justice and accountability.

### GOVERNMENT OBLIGATIONS

Governments have a legal duty not only to avoid violating rights, but to protect and uphold them. As set out in the UDHR, governments must, among other things:

- respect the right to freedom of expression, even when it criticizes those in power (Article 19)
- uphold the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, so people can gather and express their views safely (Article 20)
- ensure fair trials for anyone accused of a crime, so no one is punished without due process or the right to defend themselves (Article 10)
- protect people from torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, including by providing humane prison conditions (Article 5)
- prevent arbitrary arrests and detentions, ensuring that no one is imprisoned without a clear legal basis (Article 9).



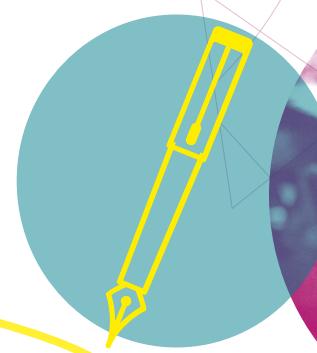
# READ OUR STORIES

The stories below are of people connected by their journalism and media work. These individuals from Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Tunisia have shown immense courage to document and speak up about human rights violations, often at great personal risk. Your support and solidarity matters.

WRITE FOR RIGHTS  
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## SUPPORT US – WRITE A LETTER!

You're here to learn about human rights and also because you want to make a real difference. Through these actions, you will learn how your voice can positively affect people's lives. Whether you do this with a group of friends, classmates, your family or by yourself, the words you write will change lives.



## WOMAN JOURNALIST JAILED FOR EXPOSING ALLEGED CORRUPTION

Born into a family of poets, judges and politicians, Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy grew up surrounded by creativity and human rights. Poetry is woven into Kyrgyzstan's culture, with poets using their words to voice people's struggles and criticize the authorities. For Makhabat, becoming a journalist was an obvious choice. She could amplify people's voices and share their stories.

By 2022, Makhabat was the head of one of the most prominent investigative media outlets in Kyrgyzstan, uncovering alleged corruption at the highest levels and reporting on deeply rooted social issues like inequality, giving a voice to people affected.

This crucial work was not without risks. As the authorities intensified their crackdown on independent

journalism, Makhabat became a target. In December 2023, she received threats of imprisonment, torture and deportation. Unintimidated, she vowed to continue her work.

Just weeks later, in January 2024, the authorities raided Makhabat's home and arrested her. The charges, "calls for violence against citizens" and "calls for active disobedience and mass riots", were baseless. There is no evidence for either. Yet in October 2024, Makhabat was sentenced to six years in prison.

Now her young son is growing up without his mother.

**Call on Kyrgyzstan to ensure the immediate release of Makhabat and to review her criminal case now.**

Makhabat  
Tazhibek kyzy  
Kyrgyzstan

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

STORY CARD





## WRITE TO THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL

Call on the prosecutor general to initiate a review of the case of Makhabat, ensure her immediate release and full acquittal, and guarantee that she can continue her professional activities in Kyrgyzstan without undue restrictions.

**ADDRESS:** General Prosecutor  
General Prosecutor's Office  
Toktonalieva Street, 139  
Bishkek, 720040  
Kyrgyzstan

**SALUTATION:** Dear Prosecutor General

**EMAIL:** statement@prokuror.kg

**FACEBOOK:** www.facebook.com/prokuratorakg

**INSTAGRAM:** genprokuratura\_kr

**HASHTAGS:** #MakhabatBoshtonduk, #FreeMakhabat, #W4R25

## SEND YOUR LETTERS AND CARDS OF HOPE TO MAKHABAT

Help keep Makhabat's spirits up and let her know she is not alone. Tell her about traditional music and folklore in your country – both are so important to her.

**ADDRESS:** Makhabat Tazhibek kyzzy,  
1991 year of birth  
Correctional Facility No. 2  
selo Stepnoye  
Alamudun District, 724328  
Kyrgyzstan

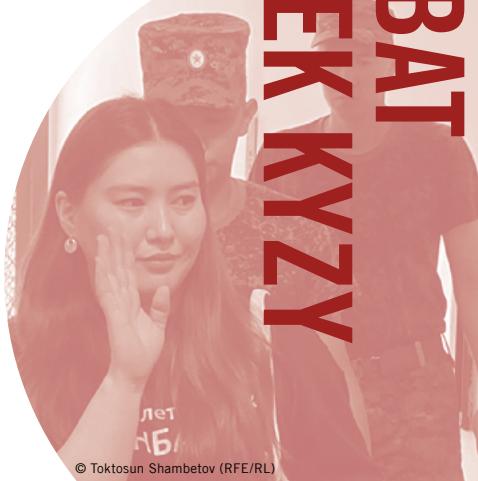
**FACEBOOK:** www.facebook.com/temirovlive

**INSTAGRAM:** temirovlive

**X:** @TemirovLive

**HASHTAGS:** #MakhabatBoshtonduk, #FreeMakhabat, #W4R25

MAKHABAT  
TAZHIBEK KYZZY



# LOCKED UP AND BEATEN FOR HIS JOURNALISM

Journalism is an extremely dangerous profession in Myanmar. More than 200 journalists have been imprisoned by the military since they took power in 2021. At least seven have been reportedly killed. Media outlets have been banned and forced into exile.

Despite this danger, when Cyclone Mocha slammed into Myanmar in May 2023, photojournalist Sai Zaw Thaik travelled undercover to Rakhine State, determined to report on the devastation.

He embedded himself with a relief team. But after a week there, Sai Zaw was arrested. He was interrogated, beaten and in September 2023, sentenced by a military tribunal to 20 years in prison with hard labour. His trial lasted just one day.

Sai Zaw should be able to report freely. He should also be at home, spending time with his family and doing the things he loves, like playing football, watching Manchester United and seeing friends. He should be caring for his cats who he adores.

Instead, he is locked up. He has endured beatings by prison staff and periods of solitary confinement.

**Demand that Myanmar's military immediately release Sai Zaw Thaik.**

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# LOCKED UP AND SILENCED FOR SPEAKING OUT

Sonia Dahmani loves the sea, long days at the beach with friends and quiet evenings spent watching movies. She has a deep appreciation for art in all its forms, from paintings and exhibitions to theatre and music. But what matters most to Sonia is her family, including her beloved dog, Carla.

Sonia is a lawyer and media commentator who has dedicated her life to defending human rights, standing up for the marginalized, and saying what others are afraid to, no matter the cost. She is a vocal critic of inhumane prison conditions and racism, regularly addressing these issues on television and radio shows.

On 11 May 2024, masked policemen violently raided the Tunisian Bar Association in Tunis

and arrested Sonia. They detained her in Manouba prison, where she has been held ever since. The Tunisian authorities have convicted and sentenced Sonia for "spreading false news", with more politically motivated investigations still pending. She faces many years in prison for speaking out against injustices. Her imprisonment is a clear attempt to silence her.

Sonia is being held in inhumane conditions. Her cell is rat-infested. She has endured degrading treatment by prison authorities. She is being denied medical care, including the medication she needs.

**Demand Sonia's release now.**

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Sonia Dahmani  
Tunisia

## WRITE TO THE MYANMAR MILITARY JUNTA

Demand that the military release Sai Zaw Thaik immediately. He has been sentenced to 20 years in jail solely for his work.

**ADDRESS:**

Myanmar military junta  
c/o Myanmar embassy or consulate in your country,  
or a country near you

**SALUTATION:** To the Myanmar military junta**EMAIL:**

sacministry1234@gmail.com  
[www.sacministry.gov.mm/en/contact-us](http://www.sacministry.gov.mm/en/contact-us)  
[www.seniorgeneralminaunghlaing.com.mm/en/contact/](http://www.seniorgeneralminaunghlaing.com.mm/en/contact/)

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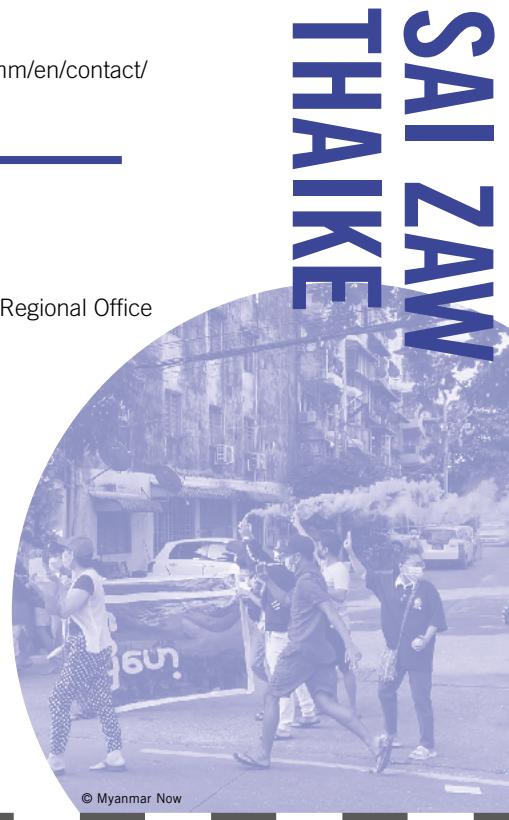
TAKE ACTION

## HELP KEEP SAI ZAW'S SPIRIT STRONG

Send him your messages of friendship and hope. You could include drawings of cats (Sai Zaw has several) to accompany your message.

**ADDRESS:**

Sai Zaw Thaik  
c/o Amnesty International  
East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Regional Office  
M. Thai Tower  
All Seasons Place  
87 Wireless Road  
Lumpini, Phatumwan  
Bangkok 10330  
Thailand

**FACEBOOK:** [www.facebook.com/myanmarnownews](http://www.facebook.com/myanmarnownews)**X:** @Myanmar\_Now\_Eng**INSTAGRAM:** myanmar\_now**HASHTAGS:** #FreeSaiZaw, #FreeSZT, #W4R25

## WRITE TO THE PRESIDENT

Call on the Tunisian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Sonia Dahmani, quash the sentences and drop all charges against her as she is detained solely for exercising her right to freedom of expression.

**ADDRESS:**

President of Tunisia  
Carthage Presidential Palace  
La Goulette Road  
Carthage Archaeological Site  
Tunis  
Tunisia

**SALUTATION:** Your Excellency**EMAIL:** [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)**FACEBOOK:** [www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn](http://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn)**X:** @TnPresidency**HASHTAGS:** #FreeSonia, #W4R25

WRITE  
FOR  
RIGHTS  
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TAKE ACTION

## SHOW SONIA THAT SHE IS NOT ALONE

Send Sonia messages of hope and solidarity. Let her know you support her in her fight for human rights in Tunisia. You could draw pictures of dogs (Sonia has a dog called Carla) to accompany your message.

**ADDRESS:**

Sonia Dahmani  
c/o Amnesty International Tunisia  
5 Rue Zouhair Ayadi  
El Menzah 4  
Ariana, Tunis 1082  
Tunisia

**INSTAGRAM:** [freesoniadahmani](http://freesoniadahmani)**HASHTAGS:** #FreeSonia, #W4R25

SONIA  
DAHMANI

# WHY DOES SOLIDARITY MATTER?

You might think that writing to somebody you don't know can't make a difference, or that they won't want to hear from you. But, when you're locked up or in fear for your life, or you're desperately seeking justice for a loved one, having somebody tell you that they believe in you matters a lot. They may feel anxious and alone, and your words can bring comfort and hope to them.

Through the solidarity she received in 2023, Ana Maria Santos Cruz felt the embrace of a global community. It helped her to keep hope alive after the death of her son, Pedro Henrique. Pedro was an activist and an advocate of racial justice and human rights. He was murdered in 2018.

Ana Maria has bravely sought the truth about her son's death, calling on the authorities in Brazil to conduct a thorough investigation and trial. When she received thousands of letters of support from around the world, she felt more able to cope with her grief and with the ongoing threats against her. She said:

***“I always say that Pedro taught me a lot, including how to be a tireless fighter for justice. It was also Pedro who connected me with Amnesty International, as he was a supporter of the movement. He used to say to me, joking, that Amnesty International would one day take him to countries of Africa, to Jamaica and other places to do human rights work. Who would imagine that he was right?***

***After his murder, through the Write for Rights campaign, Pedro Henrique and I were, in a way, taken to different countries through this story of the fight for justice. I'm very happy and feel strengthened by this wave of solidarity, which comforts my heart.”***

Above: Amnesty activists in Zimbabwe work on Pedro's case. Right: Ana Maria Santos Cruz, with a portrait of her son Pedro Henrique at the Passo Staircase, Salvador.

**Ana Maria Santos Cruz**  
Brazil



## ABOUT

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people that mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held accountable for their actions. We investigate and expose abuses wherever they occur. By amplifying the powerful stories of the people we work with, we mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and act in solidarity with activists on the frontlines. We also support people to claim their rights through education and training.

Our work protects and empowers people – from abolishing the death penalty and advancing climate justice and equality, to combating discrimination and defending the rights of refugees and migrants. We help to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws and free people who have been jailed solely for voicing their opinion. We speak out for anyone and everyone whose freedom or dignity is under threat.

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL IS A GLOBAL MOVEMENT  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS. WHEN INJUSTICE HAPPENS TO ONE PERSON,  
IT MATTERS TO US ALL.**

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Amnesty supporters and members take part in Write for Rights 2024 in the Netherlands.