



# DEFENDING CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

## THE CHALLENGES

In many countries across the globe, democracy is under attack and authoritarianism is on the rise. Corrupt and abusive leaders violate the fundamental rights of citizens through political repression, cracking down on those who dare to speak up for their rights and for the rights of others—through threats, imprisonment, torture or even murder. Marginalized populations—particularly women, youth, Indigenous groups, and religious, ethnic or sexual minorities—are frequently excluded from civic and political life.

Although many countries have ratified United Nations treaties and covenants that safeguard basic human rights such as the rights to political participation, free speech and peaceful assembly, some stray from their pledges and others haven't signed on at all. Left unchecked, corrupt and power-hungry leaders get away with shocking abuses—consolidating their power, dismantling democratic institutions and persecuting minority populations, pushing them further to the margins of society.

## HOW WE MAKE CHANGE

To counter these challenges, AJWS supports courageous social change organizations building movements fighting for democracy and human rights. These activists are empowering people to learn about their rights; speak out



Aliou Sane, leader of AJWS grantee Y'en a Marre, hits the streets to mobilize voters in the weeks leading up to Senegal's presidential election. *Photo courtesy of Y'en a Marre.*

### WE'RE BUILDING A WORLD WHERE ALL CITIZENS CAN:

- Participate in the political process to shape decisions that affect their everyday lives
- Express views freely and obtain and share information without censorship or fear of retribution
- Assemble, organize and mobilize social change efforts peacefully
- Live free from violence, discrimination and oppression based on who they are or what they believe

against corruption, violence and abuse; use the ballot box as a vehicle for change; and organize to advance human rights at the local, national and global levels. Our grantees are often at the center of transformational moments—elections, peace negotiations or large-scale protests—when the rights of minority communities are most at risk or when there are strategic opportunities to foster lasting impact.

- In regions rife with corruption or led by dictators, our grantees seek to make governments more just, transparent and accountable and ensure free and fair elections through which all citizens can make their voices heard.
- In countries emerging from conflict, they support peace negotiations and ensure that the root causes of the conflict are addressed, taking into account the needs of women, minorities and other citizens caught in the crossfire.
- In societies where discrimination, violence and other abuses go unpunished, they conduct advocacy, provide legal aid and pursue legislative reform to ensure that authorities implement and enforce equitable laws and that the survivors of crimes and atrocities can pursue justice in courts.
- When those in power silence, exclude or impoverish the vulnerable, AJWS grantees organize and mobilize communities to demand equality and shape their own solutions to the problems they face.

## OUR IMPACT AROUND THE WORLD

Our grantees are fighting on the front lines to defend the rights of the most vulnerable in their midst:

- In April, democracy triumphed in Senegal when the young, progressive, working-class leader Bassirou Diomaye Faye was sworn in as president after months of turmoil—during which the incumbent Macky Sall postponed the election and jailed opposition activists, and allegations emerged of rampant government corruption. Through this turbulent period, AJWS supported grassroots organizations that played a key role in mobilizing, educating and inspiring the movement—largely led by youth—that finally ousted Sall. Among them, **Y'en a Marre** spearheaded a powerful voter mobilization and registration campaign that brought out thousands of voters and trained youth activists to ensure a fair election.
- In Mexico, AJWS partner María Herrera Magdaleno received due recognition when she was named one of TIME magazine's "100 Most Influential People of 2023." A mother and an activist, María transformed grief into action for thousands of families. Four of her children have been missing for more than a decade, casualties of violence in Mexico that has led to the "disappearance" of over 110,000 people. The government's failure to find them led María to her own search. She founded the collective **Familiares en Búsqueda ("Families in Search")** and today runs a network with nearly 200 collectives of bereaved relatives. AJWS is proud to have been María's first funder and continues to support her ongoing quest for justice.



María's shirt bears the images of her four sons—Jesús Salvador, Raúl, Luis Armando and Gustavo—whose disappearance prompted her to ignite a movement. *Photo by Christine Han*

- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), AJWS funds **Lutte pour le Changement (LUCHA)**, a movement of young activists strengthening their country's fragile democracy. In the lead-up to DRC's high-stakes presidential election in late 2023, LUCHA is mobilizing a massive voter campaign. Its 10,000 members will work to ensure that the vote will be credible, free and safe by registering voters in rural areas, educating people about their local candidates and monitoring voting sites for any signs of violence, fraud or voter intimidation. Because so few people in the DRC have internet access, LUCHA's campaign must be conducted in person — activists will be dispatched to rural areas across the country to engage people in markets and village squares.

In 2024, AJWS invested in **162 social change organizations** around the world that work to defend civil and political rights.

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**American Jewish World Service**  
45 West 36<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10018

📞 212.792.2900  
800.889.7146  
✉️ [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org)

🌐 [ajws.org](http://ajws.org)  
📘 [/americanjewishworldservice](https://www.facebook.com/americanjewishworldservice)  
✉️ [/ajws](https://twitter.com/ajws)  
📷 [/americanjewishworldservice](https://www.instagram.com/americanjewishworldservice)

