

Why Grassroots Climate Justice Movements are Critical for Defending Democracy

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This brief was inspired by the wisdom shared in the funder learning series "[Climate & Authoritarianism: How Movements Are Defending Democracy](#)."

Across the globe, authoritarianism is on the rise. Governments and corporate elites are using the climate crisis to consolidate power by tightening surveillance, criminalizing dissent, and rolling back protections for land and labor. This dangerous convergence is accelerating ecological breakdown while weakening the very democratic institutions needed to confront it.

Yet in every region—from the Philippines to Brazil, Kenya to the U.S.—grassroots climate justice movements are defending civil space, advancing climate solutions, and protecting democratic life. These movements are insisting on governance that is participatory, accountable, and grounded in care.

The climate crisis and authoritarianism are mutually reinforcing

The climate crisis is not just an environmental issue—it is reshaping global governance. As ecological instability grows, it is being used to justify emergency powers, militarized policing, and the repression of communities defending their land and water. It is being used to instill fear and consolidate corporate power that undergirds autocratic regimes. Moreover, people are more likely to support authoritarianism when there are environmental pressures.

Likewise, governments are using the climate emergency to expand state control—framing ecological collapse as a matter of national security and in the name of “climate action,” forests are militarized, Indigenous territories are seized for carbon offsets, and entire communities are displaced to make way for so-called green infrastructure. In the U.S., over 20 states have passed laws restricting the right to protest fossil fuel infrastructure. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes are accelerating climate breakdown—fast-tracking fossil fuel expansion, stripping environmental protections, and granting unchecked control to extractive corporations. In Indonesia, legal protections for rainforests have been reversed and in Egypt oil and gas development is expanded.

Around the world, authoritarian regimes are learning from and reinforcing one another—sharing technologies, tactics, and political narratives. The targeting of activists, journalists, Indigenous leaders, and land defenders is not incidental—it is strategic. Protecting civic space is essential to sustaining environmental protections and democratic accountability. Philanthropy has a critical role in resourcing safety, security, and long-term organizing capacity, especially for those already facing surveillance, censorship, and repression.

Over 70% of the human population now lives under autocratic regimes. Meanwhile over 70% of global philanthropic funding comes from the US, which is sliding into authoritarianism. How funders support movements in Kenya, Colombia, Thailand, and elsewhere has global consequences. Funding feminist, Indigenous, and anti-authoritarian organizing in Kenya, Colombia, or Thailand is a global investment in democracy's immune system.

Movements are democracy in action

Too often, "democracy" is reduced to elections and institutions. When elections are undermined and courts no longer protect rights, grassroots movements often remain the most resilient democratic infrastructure.

Grassroots movements remind us that democracy is about relationships, healthy community organization, and political power.

1. Relationship

Movements cultivate belonging and collective power in the face of fear, isolation, and division—key tools of authoritarian regimes. In Liberia, during the civil war, thousands of women—across religious and ethnic lines—launched a grassroots peace campaign using nonviolent tactics like sit-ins, public rituals, and mass singing to pressure warlords into peace negotiations. Their collective action helped end the war, exiled dictator Charles Taylor, and laid the foundation for democratic transition—leading to Africa's first elected female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This kind of relational organizing—rooted in care, dignity, and moral clarity—is foundational to democratic culture.

2. Community infrastructure

Movements build the systems that states fail to provide—food sovereignty networks, water governance, disaster response, and more. In Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) organizes over 450,000 families (1.5M people) to reclaim land, grow food, and build rural schools and health clinics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MST distributed more than 6,000 tons of food to urban and rural communities in need. They also mobilized deliveries in countries like Zambia, demonstrating their capacity to provide transnational aid as state isolationism grows. And this is not just mutual aid, it is an alternative model of democratic governance grounded in collective self-determination.



MST volunteers distribute food packets in February 2021. Photo by Jaine Amorin, MST.



Ecuadorian organizers behind the successful referendum. Photo by Carlos Granja Medranda, El Universo

3. Political and legal reform

Movements drive legislative victories and defend the courts as a site of people power. In Ecuador, Indigenous movements led mass mobilizations and legal actions to block oil drilling in the Amazon. In 2023, a national referendum—won through grassroots organizing—permanently protected Yasuní National Park from extraction.

In the Philippines, movement groups sued the World Bank's private finance arm for fueling coal expansion, leading to international pressure campaigns and divestment wins. These victories directly undermined the concentration of power in the country.

4. Global solidarity

Movements amplify democratic narratives and collaborate transnationally to confront increasingly interwoven autocratic regimes. In 1989, grassroots movements in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania organized two million people to form a 420-mile human chain known as the Baltic Way—an act of nonviolent solidarity that helped catalyze the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, global movements like La Via Campesina—representing over 300 million peasants and small farmers—are advancing food sovereignty and grassroots democracy in 80 countries, linking climate resilience with food sovereignty and grassroots democracy. By linking struggles across borders, they model a vision of democracy that is collective, plural, and planetary.

Conclusion

History shows us that moments of democratic backsliding require early, visible, and courageous alignment with those upholding justice and accountability. Grassroots movements are the first, and often the strongest line of defense against authoritarianism. From the victories of decolonization, anti-apartheid, and pro-democracy movements in places like Brazil, Fiji, and Sri Lanka, we know the rise of authoritarianism is not inevitable.

Recent research shows that 19 countries are in the process of democratizing—ten of which have reversed authoritarian trends because of the strength and persistence of grassroots movements. And movements don't just resist authoritarianism—they build what comes after it. And yet, over 70% of the world's population now lives under autocratic rule and grassroots movements are dramatically under-resourced. If funders wait for conditions to stabilize before funding, they will be too late. To fund grassroots climate justice movements is to invest in a global immune system for democracy.