

Arresting and Killing Greenies: Targeting Climate Change Protests

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

Climate change, like any crisis afflicting earth and humanity, is bound to bring out the best and the worst of a species that soils its nest, salts the earth, and poisons its nourishing rivers. For those benefiting from plunder and bounty, change is a hard thing to accept. Kleptocrats and the extractive industries, renters of land, and those wishing to make off with the earth's booty take poorly to dissidents keen to point out this fact.

For that reason, climate change protestors have come to be seen as part of a verminous brood that global alliances of plundering fossil-fuel lobbies and corrupt, weak officials, elected or otherwise, wish to be rid of. Protesting against this old order of acquisitiveness and accumulation is seen, even now, as aberration and monstrosity, if you believe that profits of market enterprise come before the Cassandras of scientific concern. Best, goes the view, to think of ways of getting rid of these nuisances before they eat into company budgets and government treasuries.

The nature of that ridding comes in various forms: silencing and intimidation, the extensive application of oppressive laws limiting protest, the use of the dumb arm of those laws (police, prosecutors, courts) and, should that all fail, plain old disappearance and murder. It's remarkable to think that individuals whose only weapons are words and whose actions are limited, whose only means of suasion are vocal arguments and non-violent physical disruption, are given such forbidding properties. So forbidding, in fact, that they are worthy of criminalisation.

This is despite the presence of legal provisions that protect, as **Michel Forst**, UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention [puts it](#), those "taking action to defend their human right, and the human right of future generations, to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, as recognized by the United Nations General Assembly." Given the urgency posed by the threat of climate change, and the "inadequate response from governments", the peaceful protest has found expression in various ways, including various actions that may "cause disruption in the public space".

This makes the [2024 study](#) by researchers based at the University of Bristol, with the self-evident title *Criminalisation and Repression of Climate and Environmental Protest*, all the more pertinent. It addresses the patterns of criminalisation and repression of climate and environmental protest around the world and the various laws and powers that have been introduced and used. For reasons of focus, 14 countries are examined in greater depth.

The report, using data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) and Global Witness, elucidates a tendency that has become all too common. In the first instance, this

punitive policy shifts the focus away from taking action against climate change and instead punishing those who oppose inertia and inactivity in the face of it. In the second instance, these policies are authoritarian in nature, inconsistent “with the ideals of vibrant civil societies in liberal democracies.”

The most severe manifestation of this attack on environmental defenders is evidenced by the chilling policy of murder and disappearance. The non-government organisation Global Witness reports that 2,106 killings of such protestors took place between 2012 and 2023. The Global South, notably Latin America, is particularly notable in this regard. The dishonourable list includes Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Honduras.

In wealthier states, the climate change protester may be safer, but hardly immune from state violence. Countries that either openly or ostensibly accept freedom of assembly protections and the right to protest – in this case the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia – have been enthusiastically enacting laws that increase sentences for non-violent protest and negligible acts of sabotage. (The report points to the damage inflicted on a statue as an example.) Arrests of such protestors in both Australia and the UK are above the international average: 20% and 17% respectively.

The authors also write about the “secondary” criminalisation of climate and environmental protests, which involves that nasty trend of applying, sometimes inventively, laws that are already on the books. A popular choice in this regard is the evoking of anti-terrorism powers and the declaration of states of emergency to enable the extraction industries to continue their work unimpeded.

On the issue of oppressive laws, Australia has become something of a leader. Novel pieces of legislation that chip away and smother civil liberties is something of a specialty down under, encouraged by the glaring absence of a federal bill of rights. Since 2019, the states of Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia have all passed legislation in this criminalisation frenzy.

Australia’s Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), in collaboration with the Human Rights Law Centre and Greenpeace, affirms the tendency in its 2021 [report](#), further noting the prioritisation of deterrence and denunciation in sentencing practices in courts “particularly when climate defenders do not express remorse or contrition for their activism.”

Broadly speaking, the emergence of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) has become a weapon of choice in government and corporate litigation. Environmental groups have also been the subject of extensive surveillance and infiltration by government agencies and corporations friendly to the extraction agenda.

In arguments about the role played by environmental defenders, their slandering by the publicity machines of governments in league with private interests conforms to a familiar pattern. They are pictured as privileged, pampered rabble rousers, ungrateful for what the earth’s plunder has done for them and, even more galling, the saintly role of mining magnates. Gina Rinehart, Australia’s wealthiest extractor, is the [paragon of such views](#). “My question to the short-sighted is this: Do you really think we could survive without mining?”

The United Nations **Secretary-General António Guterres** sees it differently.

“Climate activists are sometimes depicted as dangerous radicals,” he [stated](#) in a video message in April 2022. “But the truly dangerous radicals are the countries that are increasing the production of fossil fuels.”

And how radical they continue to be in hiding the true cost of the extraction market.

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