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The global criminalisation and repression of climate and environmental protest – a repertoire of repression

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out a repertoire of repression operating to criminalise and repress recent climate and environmental protest globally. Deploying a novel mixed methods approach, involving a comparative quantitative and qualitative analysis of a sample of 14 countries, we identify that repression and criminalisation are global phenomena – spanning the Global South and North. The repertoire of repression includes: i) enactments of new anti-protest laws; ii) creative and strategic use of existing legislation and legal processes; iii) police action, such as arrests, surveillance, harassment and other forms of police violence; iv) disappearances and killings; and v) vilification. We argue that this repression is a complex eco-system involving state and non-state actors, laws and legal processes, social and media discourses which operate to deplete, deter and delegitimise protest, and distract attention from violent or harmful political structures.

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a surge of climate and environmental protests across diverse political systems (Fisher *et al.* 2023). This mobilisation reflects both a growing perception of the existential character of the climate crisis (Soler-I-Martí *et al.* 2024) and widespread recognition that existing political systems are ill-equipped to respond at the required pace and scale (Smith 2021). Climate and environmental protests have been met by an intensification of criminalisation and repression by state and non-state actors (Menton *et al.* 2021, Vekh Weis 2021, Berglund *et al.*

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2024), from far-reaching anti-protest legislation in the United Kingdom (UK) (Martin 2025), Australia (Gulliver *et al.* 2023) and the United States (US) (Page and Greer 2024) to the use of police violence, disappearances and killings (Le Billon and Lujala 2020). While research on protest criminalisation and repression is well-established (Della Porta 1996, Earl 2003, Vegh Weis 2021), scholarly work specifically on climate and environmental protest remains nascent (Di Ronco and Selmini 2025; Gulliver *et al.* 2023; Rodriguez & Bazan Seminario, 2024; Vegh Weis 2024). A recent review highlighted the lack of a global, comparative lens (Ayanian *et al.* 2025) and the limited work on the international dimensions of climate protests specifically has taken the form of investigative journalism rather than systematic analysis (Westervelt and Dembicki 2023)

We address this gap by theorising and mapping a *repertoire of repression*, operating globally, that links criminalisation and associated coercive tactics as parts of a multi-layered continuum. Specifically, we ask *how* these protests are repressed around the world, and what *differences* and *similarities* can be observed across countries with varying degrees of civic space and different experiences of climate and environmental protest. By linking legal change, policing practices and lethal/non-lethal violence, we argue that criminalisation and repression are not aberrations of climate governance but a core governing strategy. The criminalisation and repression of protest expose activists to considerable harm and risk and threaten to weaken or deter civil society pressure on climate change and other environmental issues. This undermines the political opportunity structure for green coalitions as it serves to focus state policy on punishing dissent *instead of* taking adequate action to address climate and environmental issues (Amnesty International 2024, Forst 2024). The work helps to identify varieties of environmental authoritarianism and provides a basis for scholarship on authoritarian legalism and state-corporate entanglement in environmental governance. Bringing this data together will help other scholars to link how sudden or strategic acts of repression – ‘repression shocks’ – seek to enable harmful environmental outcomes, much like economic or political shocks have been used to advance neoliberal capitalism (Klein 2007). Moreover, we provide a conceptual framework for mapping deteriorating civic space.

Spanning the Global South and North, we specify how an intersecting matrix of state and non-state actors seek to suppress climate and environmental protest through: (i) enactment of anti-protest laws; (ii) creative and strategic legal interventions; (iii) policing practices including arrests, surveillance, harassment and other forms of police violence; (iv) disappearances and killings; and (v) public vilification. Whilst exploring how techniques of repression vary between countries

and political systems, we interpret this repertoire as functioning to deplete, deter and delegitimise movements while distracting attention from underlying environmental harms.

This article makes three major contributions: conceptual, empirical, and policy-analytical. Conceptually, we provide a portable notion of the repertoire of repression situated within a Gramscian account of contemporary climate politics (Mann and Wainwright 2018, Nyberg *et al.* 2022). Here, we view the current state of global politics as an arena of contestation in which powerful actors – principally states (Stallard & Poynting 2025) and corporations (Kerber, 2025) – actively recalibrate and downgrade climate commitments to preserve forms of economic and political governance constituted though and reliant on extractivist and ecocidal practices (Svampa 2019). The repertoire we identify operates as a strategic instrument through which these actors consolidate hegemony in the face of challenges from below (Mann and Wainwright 2018). This repression is both symptomatic of, and serves to reproduce, the present state of global climate politics.

Empirically, we deploy a mixed-methods design across 14 countries, integrating geocoded event data from ACLED (2024) to quantify forms of repression against climate and environmental protest; data from Global Witness (2024a) on killings and disappearances; qualitative evidence on civic-space infringements from CIVICUS (2024a); and an original compilation of anti-protest legislation. This represents the first systematic, cross-national triangulation of legal, civic-space and event-level data focused on climate and environmental protest.

In policy-analytical terms, our portable framework can be used by scholars, monitors and policy actors to track trends, evaluate reforms and anticipate risk diffusion across political systems and over time. It can help clarify where legislative rollback, policing practices, and lethal/non-lethal violence occur at the same time. We thus provide a structured framework that could be deployed to assess compliance with human-rights commitments relevant to protest and environmental defenders. These triangulated indicators offer a practical early-warning tool for civil society and the media, and international donors or civil society organizations.

Our paper proceeds in four sections. We begin with conceptualising protest and the repertoire of repression, considering literature from relevant fields and the broader political context in which it takes place. We then set out our methodology, followed by our presentation of the repertoire of repression, demonstrating its enactment in our sample of 14 countries. This is followed by a discussion about the political significance of the repression of climate and environmental protest.

Conceptualising protest and the repertoire of repression

Environmental protest and climate protest are often associated with distinct goals and approaches (Berglund *et al.* 2024). Environmental protests are aimed at stopping specific environmentally destructive projects. These are most commonly against fossil fuel exploration and extraction, deforestation, dam building or mining. Menton *et al.* (2021, 1) define environmental defenders as ‘a broad range of people defending their lands and environments and those seeking to protect defenders or support their cause’, including ‘indigenous and local people opposing large-scale resource projects’ alongside ‘lawyers, journalists, and staff from environmental or human rights organisations’.

Environmental protests are inherent to industrialisation and capitalism, insofar as these systems of production depend on resource extraction and inevitably come into conflict with people whose basic means of survival (clean water, arable land, clean air) are threatened by expanded extraction (Glassman 2006, Svampa 2019, Chagnon *et al.* 2022). Environmental protest is therefore nothing new and a common occurrence across the Global North and South. It has often been carried out through direct action methods to physically stop extraction projects by putting bodies in the way, in what Klein (2015) popularised as Blockadia. Whilst it is recognised that environmental protest takes place everywhere, the literature on environmental defenders is heavily weighted towards the Global South (see Le Billon and Lujala 2020, Scheidel *et al.* 2020, Menton *et al.* 2021).

Climate protests tend to be more urban than environmental protest, often separated from particular geographies of extraction, and are characterised by broader policy demands – such as ending oil exploration; more overarching political demands – such as enacting a Green New Deal; or more diffuse demands – such as calling for more action on climate change (Berglund and Schmidt 2020). Climate protests started in earnest at the sixth annual United Nations climate change conference in the Hague in 2000 (de Moor *et al.* 2021) and subsided somewhat before entering a new wave in 2018 until the start of pandemic restrictions (Fisher and Nasrin 2021). From 2021, they have reemerged to different extents and in different forms, largely (but by no means exclusively) in the Global North, where non-violent but disruptive protest is a key element of these mobilisations (Fisher *et al.* 2023).

To make this conceptual differentiation between climate and environmental protest is not to suggest that these are mutually exclusive categories. Environmental protesters often position themselves in broader opposition to climate change (Verweijen *et al.* 2021), while climate activists are frequently involved in opposing environmentally destructive climate change-accelerating projects, such as fossil fuel extraction (Berglund 2024a). Instead of trying to separate overlapping forms of environmental protest,

our focus here is on understanding the different but interconnected ways eco-politics are expressed and repressed internationally.

We conceptualise the repression of climate and environmental protest as a complex eco-system involving state and non-state actors, laws and legal processes, and social and media discourses, which operate to deplete, deter and delegitimise protest, and distract attention from violent or harmful political structures. In addressing Earl and Braithworth's (Earl and Braithwaite 2022) observation that there have been few attempts to integrate perspectives on repression from different disciplines, our approach incorporates the concept of criminalisation but goes wider. The criminalisation of protest has been conceptualised to include both the categorising of some forms of protest as criminal through legislation, and the actions of police, courts and other actors that shape 'which of the countless behaviors corresponding to the criminal law [...] will be effectively criminalized' (Vegh Weis 2021, p. 2), i.e. treated as criminal. Our understanding of repression incorporates criminalisation, but recognises a broader spectrum of tactics being used to prevent, constrain and punish collective action (Earl 2011) which do not fall squarely within the terrain of criminalisation – most notably killings and disappearances, alongside certain forms of vilification and strategic litigation. We thus view criminalisation as a central pillar within a wider repressive framework through which states and other actors attempt to reshape the costs and benefits of collective action (Tarrow 1996).

We build on previous efforts in the social movements literature to categorise the criminalisation and repression of protest. However, the most prominent typologies in this literature have primarily focused on liberal democratic states in the Global North (Marx 1979, Della Porta 1996, Earl 2003, Boykoff 2007). They have also tended to focus largely on the actions of the police (Della Porta 1996, Martin 2024), and recognise only a restricted role for non-state agents (Boykoff 2007). Nevertheless, they have been instrumental in identifying how criminalisation and repression involve multiple actors and operate along a spectrum from subtle to overt forms of social control.

We take a Gramscian approach to understanding why the repression of climate and environmental activism is happening now. Most significantly, the legitimacy of fossil fuel-driven capitalist hegemony has been shaken in recent years (Nyberg *et al.* 2022). The 2018–2020 wave of climate change activism played a major role in shifting *common sense*¹ around climate change and fossil fuels globally. Public and political concern about climate change increased, outright climate change denialism decreased, and the need to transition away from fossil fuels towards renewables became more widely accepted (Mann 2021, Nyberg *et al.* 2022). Politically, many states, even many with right-wing governments, committed to reaching Net Zero, and coal phasedown and partial phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies were for the first

time agreed upon in international climate talks at COP26 in 2021 (UNFCCC 2022). We argue that it is in response to this that the increased repression of climate activism takes place.

The current stage of climate change politics – of which repression forms a part – is marked not just by capitalist hegemony and the role of fossil fuels, but by their presentation as inevitable. This sense of inevitability was central to Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony, where hegemony is maintained by extinguishing imaginations 'that things could be other than as they are' (Crehan 2016, p. 55). Many political and corporate actors have backtracked on climate targets, not because they deny climate change or their contribution to it, but because it has become politically viable to accept its inevitability. Using the concepts of another Gramsci-inspired analysis (Mann and Wainwright 2018), the current context can be understood as a strengthening of authoritarian capitalist *Climate Behemoth* forces that oppose planetary governance of climate change, alongside a weakening of the *Climate Leviathan*, that is, the liberal capitalist forces striving for global climate governance. However, both political blocs pursue the repression of the anti-capitalist *Climate X*, mainly constituted by social movements (ibid.). What we are seeing is thus competing efforts to reinforce capitalist hegemony and emphasise its inevitability and its legitimacy by repressing those actors that present us with different imaginaries and/or directly threaten capital accumulation.

Methodology

To explore global patterns of criminalisation and repression of climate and environmental protest we undertook a comparative analysis of a sample of 14 countries, supported by quantitative and qualitative analysis from 2012 to 2023. To source quantitative data, we utilised Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED 2024) and Global Witness (2025). We used the CIVICUS (2024a) database (2018–2025) for examples of repression from our 14 countries, and a range of databases to identify recent legislation used to repress climate and environmental protests (Amnesty International 2024, Freedom House 2024, Right of Assembly 2024, University of Pretoria 2024, ICNL 2025).

The ACLED dataset has existed since 1997 as an open-source tool to facilitate international, comparative, and sub-national research on conflict and political violence (Wigmore-Shepherd 2014). It captures a range of events including fatalities, injuries, arrests, troop movements and demonstrations. The dataset includes several other variables such as the actors (state and non-state) reportedly involved in each event, and the city where the event happened. Whilst ACLED reporting conventions may overestimate the number of events (i.e. an incident lasting over 7 days will be counted as seven

events), its reliance on media sources serves to underestimate events where the media has not reported (Eck 2012). State sponsored media or media in support of the state are likely to downplay the extent of arrests and police brutality. Notwithstanding these caveats, ACLED is a key data source with information on climate and environmental protests and how these are responded to in different countries. This is particularly so since the dataset includes an increasingly large number of countries across the Global South and North.

This is the first study using ACLED data to explore the repression of climate and environmental protest globally; we examined various aspects of policing, including arrests and other physically violent repression, by undertaking a series of procedures to select events which focused on ‘protest’ and ‘repressive’ acts between 2012 and 2023. This was done by identifying and applying keywords in the short description of the event and then checking manually to ensure a rigorous process for classifying events that spoke to the aims of this study (for an extended account of the methodology see Berglund *et al.* 2024).

We also analysed Global Witness data, collected since 2012, on the killing of land and environmental defenders, and the type of perpetrators involved (e.g. armed forces, police, hitmen). The organisation follows a rigorous methodology with set criteria for a death to be counted as a killing, but many killings in rural areas or in some countries go unreported which means that this form of repression in our typology is underestimated. In many cases, the perpetrator is unknown even when a killing has been recorded (Global Witness 2025).

Our analysis of these datasets focuses on 14 countries (see Table 1). They represent all six populated continents and have been purposefully selected to represent varying degrees of civic space, using the CIVICUS annual monitor, in order to capture the potential commonalities and variations across liberal democracies and authoritarian states. CIVICUS scores and rates countries according to those scores into one of the five categories: open; narrowed; obstructed; repressed; and closed. It uses a methodology ‘combining data sources on freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly and the state’s duty to protect these fundamental freedoms’ (CIVICUS 2024b, p. 5). The result is a much more nuanced assessment of civil and political rights than simply talking about democracies or autocracies. Based on this, we demonstrate that our sample is global in geographic and political terms. More significantly, our sample also represents varying levels of climate and environmental protest in recent years (see Table 1). This application of ‘Most Different Systems Design’ (Anckar 2008) is suitable for identifying global patterns, as well as variations in those patterns.

Table 1. Study countries, characteristics and protest type.

	GDP per capita \$ (2025)	CIVICUS category (2024)	CIVICUS Rating (2024)	Climate Protest (as % of all protest, 2012–2023)	Environment Protest (as % of all protest, 2012–2013)
Australia	64,712	Narrowed	76/100	12.9%	3.8%
Brazil	38,373	Obstructed	52/100	0.9%	1.7%
France	44,461	Narrowed	67/100	3.8%	0.4%
Germany	52,746	Narrowed	67/100	13.0%	0.7%
India	2,485	Repressed	33/100	0.4%	0.6%
Norway	87,962	Open	97/100	15.1%	0.8%
Peru	7,790	Repressed	40/100	1.2%	4.2%
Philippines	3,726	Obstructed	50/100	4.8%	2.9%
Russia	14,055	Closed	14/100	1.8%	2.4%
South Africa	6,253	Obstructed	60/100	0.7%	0.9%
Turkey	12,986	Repressed	24/100	2.2%	1.0%
Uganda	956	Repressed	30/100	1.2%	0.5%
United Kingdom	48,867	Obstructed	60/100	16.8%	0.9%
United States	81,695	Narrowed	62/100	2.7%	0.2%

Sources: GDP per capita from WorldData (2025); Data on climate and environmental protests via ACLED (2024) with authors' own calculations; CIVICUS (2024a).

Within our sample 13–17% of the protest activity reported by ACLED in the UK, Norway, Germany, and Australia can be categorised as climate protests, while less than 3% of protests in countries like Brazil, India, Peru, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, Uganda, and the US have the same framing. Environmental protests featured less prominently overall, with the highest proportions appearing in Peru (4.2%), the Philippines (2.9%), Russia (2.4%), and Brazil (1.7%). France, Germany, India, Norway, South Africa, Turkey, Uganda, the UK, and the US each had 1% or fewer protests categorised as environmental. Australia appears to be an exception among all 14 countries in having comparatively high rates of both climate (12.9%) and environmental protests (3.8%). These variations in types of protest in our sample are important for understanding the deployment of the repertoire of repression across the globe.

Mapping the repertoire of repression

The repression of climate and environmental protest can be sorted into five broad categories, which to different degrees can be observed across our 14 cases. The mutually constitutive categories form an emergent system of repression operating to suppress climate and environmental protest globally. [Figure 1](#) presents these categories and indicates their interactions with one another. New legislation criminalising dissent, creative and strategic legal interventions, and police action are mutually constitutive. Killings and forced disappearances to some extent operate separately though they are carried out by both state and non-state actors, and operate in a permissive

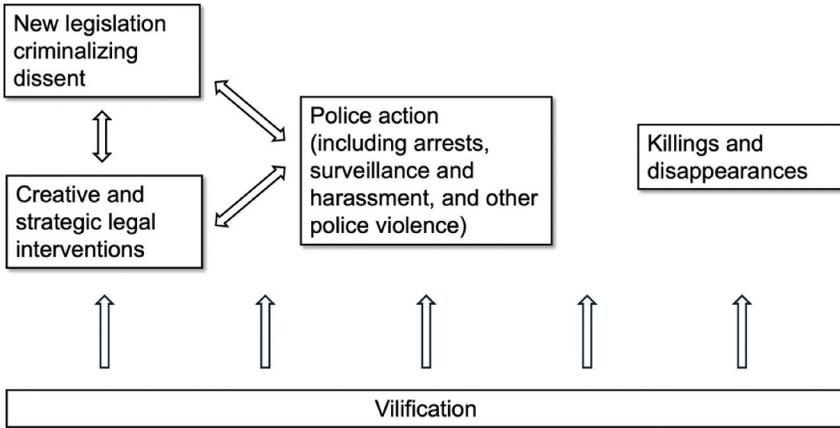


Figure 1. The repertoire of repression: a response to climate and environmental protest globally.

legal environment. Vilification, as well as being impactful, creates the permissive and generative context in which those other forms of repression operate.

This section sets out these categories as a typology of climate repression and criminalisation, drawing on previous academic attempts at categorisation and our quantitative and qualitative analysis of the datasets.

Table 2 summarises the main elements of the repertoire of repression including the focus and use and deployment of different tactics – such as legislation, arrests, surveillance, killings/disappearances, and the involvement of key actors, such as state officials, the military, and those employed by corporations.

In the discussion that follows, we further develop the repertoire of repression that is serving to contain and suppress the wave of activism challenging the climate crisis and destruction of the environment.

New legislation criminalising dissent

Many countries have introduced new legislation designed in part to criminalise both environmental and climate protest (Forst 2024). In terms of our sample, countries from the Global North and South have introduced new laws in roughly equal measure (Table 3). Moreover, countries with federal political systems have seen a rapid proliferation of new laws across state territories. The numerous new US state laws have targeted protests near gas and oil pipes, such as the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, with research exposing the influence of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and corporate political activities (Jang and Kagan 2025).

Table 2. Characteristics of the repertoire of repression.

Form of repression	Focus/tactics	Key actors
New legislation criminalising dissent	Laws that criminalise climate/environmental action groups, that criminalise tactics used by movements, or that introduce new police powers	Executive and legislatures
Creative and Strategic Legal Interventions	Use of laws focused on terrorism and/or organised crime to criminalise climate/environmental action Expansive use of strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP)	Police forces, prosecution services, courts Private corporations, legal firms, courts
Police action	Use of arrests, surveillance and harassment, and other forms of violence to enforce laws and pacify climate and environmental movements	Police officers, sometimes private security and military
Killings and disappearances	Extrajudicial violence, primarily targeted at land and environmental defenders	Police forces, private security, hitmen, landowners, militaries
Vilification	Criminalising, depoliticising and dehumanising discourses that encourage or legitimise repression, and obscure/invalidate the concerns of climate and environmental protesters	Politicians, corporations, media, think tanks

Across the study sample of 14 counties, we discern three distinct but inter-related trends with respect to the new laws. First, they seek to curb the activities of groups organising climate or environmental action (O'Brien *et al.* 2023) by limiting access to international funding (Robinson 2024), or allowing expansive civil liability for protest organisations and individuals, in addition to any fines given by courts for criminal offences committed (Kusnetz 2019). Examples here include the 2020 Indian Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, which limits international funding to NGOs, and the highly controversial 2020 South Dakota House Bill 1117, which significantly expands the terms through which third parties may be prosecuted for supporting or encouraging protest (Krup 2021).

Second, new laws may seek to limit protests and other forms of dissent by criminalising actions deployed by activists such as obstruction of roads and transport (Gulliver *et al.* 2023), and by increasing sentence length and other punishments for already-criminalised actions (Hemmings and Dastyari 2021, Webber 2023). This includes the UK's 2023 Public Order Act, which introduced new offenses for tactics frequently used by climate activists, such as locking-on, obstruction of major transport works and key national infrastructure, and causing serious disruption by tunnelling (Martin 2025) and New South Wales' 2022 Roads and Crimes Legislation Amendment Act, which made causing 'damage or disruption to major roads or major public facilities' a criminal (and imprisonable) offence.

Third, they extend or introduce new police powers, providing greater scope to impose restrictions on individual protesters and demonstrations,

Table 3. Recent legislation targeting climate and environmental protest.

Country	State/Province	Year	Name of law
Australia	New South Wales	2016	Inclosed Lands, Crimes and Law Enforcement Legislation Amendment (Interference) Act
Australia	New South Wales	2017	Sydney Public Reserves (Public Safety) Act
Australia	Victoria	2017	Crimes Legislation Amendment (Public Order) Act
Australia	New South Wales	2017	Biosecurity Regulation 2017
Australia	New South Wales	2018	Crown Lands Management Regulation 2018
Australia	Queensland	2019	Summary Offences and Other Legislation Amendment Act
Australia	New South Wales	2019	Right to Farm Act 2019
Australia	Queensland	2019	Summary Offences and Other Legislation Amendment Act
Australia	Commonwealth	2019	Criminal Code Amendment (Agricultural Protection) Act
Australia	New South Wales	2022	Roads and Crimes Legislation Amendment Act
Australia	Tasmania	2022	Police Offences Amendment (Workplace Protection) Act
Australia	Victoria	2022	Sustainable Forests Timber Amendment (Timber Harvesting Safety Zones) Act
Australia	South Australia	2023	Summary Offences (Obstruction of Public Places) Amendment Act
Brazil	National	2021	Lei dos Crimes contra o Estado Democrático de Direito
France	National	2019	Loi Anti-Casseurs
France	National	2021	Loi Contre le Séparatisme
Germany	North Rhine-Westphalia	2021	Assembly Law of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
Germany	Hesse	2022	Assembly Law of the State of Hesse
India	National	2020	Indian Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill 2020 (FCRA 2020)
Peru	National	2020	Ley de Protección Policial
Philippines	National	2020	The Anti-Terrorism Act
Uganda	National	2016	NGO Act
UK	National	2022	Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act
UK	National	2023	Public Order Act
US	National	2025	S.1017 - Safe and Secure Transportation of American Energy Act
US	Alabama	2020	Senate Bill 17/House Bill 21
US	Arkansas	2017	House Bill 1578
US	Arkansas	2021	House Bill 1321
US	Florida	2021	House Bill 1/Senate Bill 484
US	Florida	2024	House Bill 275/Senate Bill 340
US	Indiana	2019	Senate Bill 471
US	Iowa	2021	Senate File 342
US	Kansas	2021	Senate Bill 172
US	Kentucky	2020	House Bill 44
US	Louisiana	2018	House Bill 727
US	Missouri	2019	House Bill 355
US	Mississippi	2020	House Bill 1243
US	Montana	2021	House Bill 481
US	North Carolina	2023	Senate Bill 58
US	Ohio	2021	Senate Bill 33
US	Oklahoma	2017	House Bill 2128
US	Oklahoma	2017	House Bill 1123
US	Oklahoma	2021	House Bill 1674
US	South Dakota	2017	Senate Bill 176
US	South Dakota	2020	Senate Bill 151
US	South Dakota	2020	House Bill 1117
US	South Dakota	2020	Senate Bill 189
US	Tennessee	2017	Senate Bill 0902
US	Tennessee	2019	Senate Bill 264
US	Tennessee	2020	House Bill 8005/Senate Bill 8005
US	Tennessee	2024	Senate Bill 2570/House Bill 2031

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Country	State/Province	Year	Name of law
US	Tennessee	2025	Senate Bill 30/House Bill 55
US	Texas	2021	House Bill 3557
US	West Virginia	2024	House Bill 5091
US	Utah	2023	House Bill 370
US	West Virginia	2018	House Bill 4618
US	Wisconsin	2019	Assembly Bill 426

Authors' own list compiled using: Amnesty International (2024), Freedom House (2024), International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL) (2025), Right of Assembly (2024), University of Pretoria (2024) and Gulliver *et al.* (2023) for new laws passed in Australia.

expanded powers of arrest and surveillance, and increasing police impunity either through qualified immunity or by reducing police accountability (see McNamara and Quilter 2019). Examples here include the UK's 2022 Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Act, which gives police substantial new powers to place additional conditions on protests, including imposing starting and finishing times and, notoriously, noise limits (HM Government 2022); Peru's 2020 Ley de Proteccion Policial, which eliminates the requirement that police use of force should be proportionate and grants police special protections against criminal prosecution (HRW 2020); and Iowa's 2021 Senate File 342 'Back the Blue' law, which expands qualified immunity for officers (Vander Hart 2021).

Creative and strategic legal interventions

There is also evidence that state organisations and actors are expanding existing laws and using legal processes creatively to target climate and environmental protest. Police, prosecutors and courts exploit ambiguities in existing laws targeting particular constituencies and around which there is a measure of consent. Of particular significance has been the use of legislation ostensibly designed to target terrorism and organised crime being used against environmental and climate activists. Employing these legal tactics expands police and courts' power to target and even disband groups, increase punishment and sentence lengths, and in certain cases allow for the suspension of due process. More broadly, criminalising climate protest or environmental defence as terrorism or organised crime has a wider depoliticising effect; it positions them as both/either a severe security risk and/or a self-serving racket.

Notable recent examples of anti-terrorism laws being used in this manner include cases in the Philippines, where the state engages in 'red-tagging', labelling environmental defenders as either communists, terrorists or both, regardless of their actual political affiliations, thus exposing activists, mostly Indigenous people, to violence from government security forces (CIVICUS

2025); and France, where in 2023 counter-terror agents took several members of the movement *Soulèvements de la Terre* into custody, after the group took part in a demonstration against the construction of new giant water reservoirs. Immediately after this, the government issued a decree dissolving the movement, citing a controversial 2021 ‘anti-separatism’ bill which was ostensibly targeted at ‘Islamic extremism’ (CIVICUS 2023b).

States are also using laws originally designed to target ‘organised crime’ to criminalise climate protest and environmental defence. In May 2024, five members of *Letzte Generation* (Last Generation) in Germany were charged under section 129 of the German criminal code with ‘forming a criminal organisation’. This is the first time this law, more often used against mafia organisations, has been applied to a non-violent protest group (CIVICUS 2023a).

There are examples of these two processes working in conjunction, as in the criminalisation of activists in Georgia, United States, opposing the project to cut down the South River/Weelaunee Forest to build ‘Cop City’, a police training campus. In 2017, Georgia state law saw an expansion of the definition of domestic terrorism to include property crimes committed with the intent to influence government policy, and exposing activists to up to 35 years in prison. In March 2023, police arrested 32 activists for ‘domestic terrorism’, using this expansion. Then, in September 2023, 61 Cop City activists were indicted for violating the state’s 1970 Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, packaging the protests as a criminal conspiracy and effectively classifying acts of protest and civil disobedience as felonies (ACLU 2023).

Corporations also take advantage of a permissive environment to pursue legal action against climate and environmental protesters, a phenomenon known as strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs. These involve cases brought against individuals or groups, often activists, community leaders, and journalists, which may serve to intimidate or silence opposition, deter participation, tie-up scarce time and resources in years of legal wrangling, or seek to prevent protest through injunctions (Ramasastry 2022). In a report on the global scope of SLAPPs, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre identified 335 SLAPPs cases between 2015 and 2021, a number they note is likely to be the tip of the iceberg given the difficulty of identifying cases (Zuluaga and Dobson 2021). They found that SLAPPs are used in every region of the world, with Latin America at 39%, Asia and the Pacific at 25% and Europe and Central Asia 18%. Of our case study countries, Peru led the field with 38 cases, followed by the US with 28. While SLAPPs are used to silence protest across multiple sectors, environmental action is by far the most prominent – over 65% of the cases identified in the report concerned mining, agriculture and livestock, logging, and palm oil. SLAPPs cases can be criminal or civil, usually focusing on libel and defamation, but

also taking advantage of charges specific to a particular jurisdiction, such as anti-racketeering laws in the US. A notable recent example of this has been concerted action by Energy Transfer, the operators of the Dakota Access Pipeline, to prosecute movements involved in opposing the pipeline, including Greenpeace, accusing them of fraudulent speech intended to harm the company. While the company's attempts to file a federal RICO Act lawsuit in 2017 were dismissed, a subsequent lawsuit in the North Dakota state court found Greenpeace liable for over \$660 m in damages (Leingang and Lakhani 2025).

Police action

Police action is a central component of the criminalisation of climate protest and environmental defence. Indeed, many previous attempts at categorising repression have focused almost exclusively on different police tactics (Della Porta 1996, Earl 2003). Police forces are mandated to enforce laws such as those introduced above, but more broadly to uphold the existing social order (Ericson 1982). They play a crucial role in maintaining unequal, racialised and classed social relations, in consolidating the power of capital, and in pacifying the disorderly forces which threaten that order (Neocleous 2000, Duff 2021, Rossdale 2025). It is precisely as they challenge an economic and social order that is intertwined with the perpetuation of ecocidal and extractivist policies that climate activists and environmental defenders come into conflict with the police.

Police criminalise climate protest and environmental defence in several ways. One of the most significant is through the arrest, sometimes mass arrest, of protesters. This has been a major feature of policing in countries which see a high level of climate protest: 17.2% of climate or environmental protests in the UK and 20.1% in Australia resulted in arrest (Table 4). This is often linked to the presence of movements for whom exposing criminalisation and state repression is an integral feature of their tactical or strategic repertoire; in the past decade, Extinction Rebellion has explicitly sought mass arrest of activists, as part of a civil disobedience strategy designed to put pressure on governments (Berglund and Schmidt 2020). As such, mass arrests can function simultaneously as a repressive tool and a civil disobedience strategy.

Police forces also employ other forms of physical violence against climate protest and environmental defence, including beatings and baton strikes, use of firearms, tear gas, taser, water cannon and dogs.² This violence is present in all contexts, but higher in some countries, such as Peru (6.5%), Uganda (4.4%) and France (3.2%). Our analysis of ACLED data shows an inverse relationship between arrests and these other forms of police violence – fewer arrests are

Table 4. Police responses to climate and environmental protests between 2012 and 2023.

Country	Police arrests (reported in % of protests)	Other police violence (reported in % of protests)
Australia	20.1	0.5
Brazil	0.6	1.6
France	3.2	3.2
Germany	4.1	0.7
India	3.6	2.6
Norway	14.5	0.5
Peru	2.0	6.5
Philippines	4.8	0.6
Russia	7.6	0.9
South Africa	4.7	3.5
Turkey	8.0	1.9
Uganda	2.2	4.4
United Kingdom	17.2	0.2
United States	10.0	0.8

Authors' own calculations using ACLED (2024).

correlated with higher rates of other violent tactics (Table 4). These other forms of police violence may accompany arrests but should be recognised as a distinct form of state repression. Police force is often used to characterise a protest or movement as itself violent, which then justifies further criminalising moves, as seen in the case of *Soulèvements de la Terre* in French Sainte-Soline (CIVICUS 2023b).

As already discussed, police use new and existing laws to set restrictions on demonstrations, but they also use surveillance, threats and harassment to undermine the cohesiveness of organising groups. Extending the police's ability to legally do so has been an important component of recent legislation. However, policing is often practised in a legal grey area, including the use of extrajudicial force, intimidation and harassment. Moreover, police forces often work closely with private security forces in suppressing environmental and climate protest. For example, extensive use of private security characterised Standing Rock protests in the US (Dakwar 2017) and in Peru, mining companies purchase security services from the police force (Rodríguez and Bazán Seminario 2024). Brock's (2020) study of how the UK anti-fracking movement was policed provides a detailed exploration of how private security and police can interact to repress activists.

Killings and disappearances

Killings and forced disappearances constitute a distinct strategy for repressing land and environmental defenders. These are carried out by militaries, police forces, landowners, private actors and hitmen. In some cases, the state

is directly involved; in others, states create a permissive environment and culture of impunity for private actors. More than 2100 land and environmental defenders were killed globally between 2012 and 2023 (Global Witness 2025), with 85% of all killings in 2023 taking place in Latin America. While these primarily occur in Global South contexts, particularly where there is a high level of resource extraction (Le Billon and Lujala 2020), they should be recognised as global in the sense that they are frequently carried out to protect the interests of large multi-national corporations located in the Global North (Gordon and Webber 2016, Selwyn 2022). Among our study sample, 401 killings of climate and environmental defenders between 2012 and 2023 took place in Brazil, followed by the Philippines with 298 killings (Table 5). As shown, killings are not, however, restricted to the Global South; a notable recent example from the US is the case of Tortuguita, a forest protector resisting the construction of Cop City, who was shot 57 times by Georgia state troopers while holding their hands in the air (Pratt 2024).

Killings and disappearances form the sharp end of a broader system of violence that includes harassment, beatings, and death threats; Global Witness report that 'lethal attacks often occur alongside wider retaliations against defenders who are being targeted by government, business and other non-state actors with violence, intimidation, smear campaigns and criminalisation' (Global Witness 2024, p. 14). Of those murdered in 2023, 43% were indigenous people (p. 14). Community leaders and lawyers are frequent targets, which undermines the organising capacities of movements and communities. As such, the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders stresses that 'there is no more direct attack on civil society space than the killing of human rights defenders' (Lawlor 2020, p. 3).

Table 5. Killings of climate and environmental defenders between 2012 and 2023.

Country	Number of killings
Brazil	401
Philippines	298
India	86
Peru	58
South Africa	6
Uganda	5
Russia	4
United States	2
Turkey	2
Australia	1
France	1
Total	864

Authors' own calculations using Global Witness (2025); Note: there were no reported killings in Germany, Norway, and the UK.

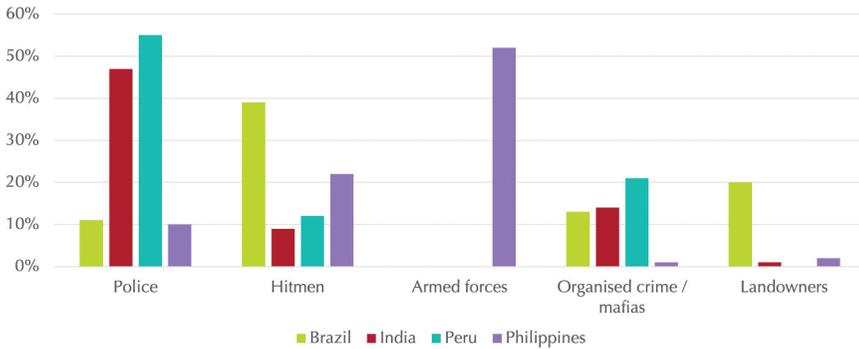


Figure 2. Perpetrator involvement in killings of environmental defenders 2012–2023 as percentage in each country. Authors' own calculations using Global Witness (2025).

The line between killings and disappearances and police action is often blurry. As [Figure 2](#) shows, there are a range of perpetrators. In Brazil, 39% of killings were carried out by hitmen, in the Philippines 52% by armed forces, while in India and Peru, 47% and 55%, respectively, were carried out by police.

To some extent, killings and disappearances are an extension of the extra-legal policing of movements, a means of undermining the cohesion of environmental defenders and a form of collective punishment, and an attempt to dissuade and deter future protest. Each disappearance or killing sows fear, with disappearances leaving communities in a suffocating limbo.

Vilification

Vilification captures efforts to discredit, delegitimise and smear the reputations of climate and environmental protesters. It operates both through the circulation of ideas, and more broadly, through the production of a social and political context that presents the criminalisation and repression of climate or environmental protest as necessary and justified. Key actors include politicians, corporate actors, media, and think tanks, who direct focus onto the averred harms and crimes of protest rather than onto climate chaos, extraction, or state and corporate violence while building a permissive or even generative environment for repressive responses.

Vilification takes several forms. Frequently, it involves presenting climate and environmental protesters as an urgent threat to social and economic life. A prominent feature here has been the labelling of protesters as (eco-) terrorists and/or extremists, present to greater and lesser degrees across the countries of our study (Smith 2008, Hasler *et al.* 2020, Gulliver *et al.* 2023). Alternatively (and often concurrently), protesters are represented as 'merely' criminal – that is, as

vandals (Lederer *et al.* 2024, p. 6), truants (von Zabern and Tulloch 2021), 'ideological warriors who impede trade' (Hasler *et al.* 2020, p. 517); framed as enemies of modernity, progress and development; and stigmatised through gendered stereotypes that devalue movements with female leaders and broadly pacific values (Lacerda and Rolemberg 2022, p. 186).

The CIVICUS database, under the 'public vilification' filter, includes examples from all 14 countries in this study. For example, in Brazil over 100 NGOs and civil society groups signed a public statement reporting misinformation on the part of former president Bolsonaro's government in 2019 following the president's false statements accusing NGOs of causing fires in the Amazon (CIVICUS 2019). Similarly, in Australia, there have been denunciations against the Prime Minister for labelling environmental protesters as 'anarchists' in a speech that framed green activists as a threat to civil liberties (CIVICUS 2020). Civic space in India continues to decline with reports of defamation and 'demonisation' of the farmers movement (CIVICUS 2021). Framing, defamation and demonisation are often followed up with arrests (for instance, under charges using the colonial law of 'sedition'). A case in point is the arrest of 21-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi from her home by Delhi police for allegedly editing a protest toolkit in solidarity with protesting farmers (*ibid.*). In Peru, there have been several cases of repression and vilification of indigenous and environmental defenders, via right-wing movements on social media, occurring before environmental and peasant community leaders have been charged with bogus criminal offences for protesting, 'disappeared', and murdered (CIVICUS 2024c).

Vilification operates in a dynamic relationship with the other categories in our repertoire. For example, the same thinktanks that have promoted and even drafted anti-protest legislation are also engaged in vilifying activists in traditional and social media (Westervelt and Dembicki 2023). The expansive use of anti-terror and organised crime legislation, and aggressive policing responses to protest up to and including targeted killings and disappearances, are legitimated and even provoked through discourses that demonise protesters (Hasler *et al.* 2020, Lacerda and Rolemberg 2022). And the media, in routinely reproducing police statements as fact, and in downplaying police violence, not only legitimise police repression but play an active role in constructing climate protesters as criminal, effectively acting as 'an extension of police power' (Duff 2024, p. 288).

The strategic framing of protest as terrorism, extremism, or criminal activity is not only a tool for delegitimising dissent but also serves to further entrench systemic power structures by diverting attention away from the larger issues of environmental destruction and social injustice. The interplay between media, political, and corporate actors thus creates a reinforcing cycle for the repertoire of repression, where climate and environmental activists are criminalised, displaced and silenced, while the underlying crises remain unaddressed.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have detailed the international criminalisation and repression of climate and environmental protest, and identified a repertoire of repression operative across 14 case study countries. We have shown how activists and social movements are targeted through a combination of new legislation, novel uses of existing legislation and legal processes, police action, killings, and vilification. Recent political developments – most notably President Trump’s second period in the US with roll-back on climate policies and authoritarian interventions in various states (but also advancement of similar social forces in many other countries) – are likely to expand and intensify this repertoire of repression. The governing coalition now in Washington aligns more closely with a *Climate Behemoth* configuration – sovereigntist, extractivist, and sceptical of liberal-internationalist climate governance – than with a liberal-capitalist *Climate Leviathan*. To the extent that this formation weakens already-fraying protections for dissent in liberal contexts, we anticipate greater criminalisation of protest, wider policing powers, and increased rhetorical delegitimation of climate and environmental protest (see Mann and Wainwright 2018).

The harmful effects of this repertoire are threefold. First, it *depletes and deters* climate and environmental action. Participation increasingly carries risk of legal sanction, carceral punishment, violence and vilification, while movements must divert scant resources and energy into managing these consequences. Second, criminalisation and repression contribute to *delegitimising* climate movements. As environmental movements gain momentum alongside growing public awareness of the existential threat of climate change, states and corporate actors use legal processes, police measures and public discourse to portray protest as counterproductive, criminal and dangerous. Such tactics threaten to fracture coalitions, isolate activists from the wider public, and recast their political concerns as ‘mere’ problems of order and legality. Third, criminalisation and repression *distract* from ecological crises themselves. Through the theatre of new legislation, discourses which position climate and environmental activists as fundamentally opposed to the public interest, and the framing of climate activists as ‘extremists’ and ‘eco-terrorists’, oppositional actors divert attention from the drivers of environmental harm.

These effects are not predetermined or uniform. Repression plays out differently across contexts, and in many cases can lead to sympathy, solidarity or radicalisation, and drive innovation amongst protest groups (Earl 2003). These dynamics of depletion, deterrence, delegitimation and distraction should therefore be understood as possible outcomes, or as the challenging environment in which activists must operate – even if they are

sometimes able to do so to their advantage. Further research is needed to understand how these processes and their effects vary across different contexts.

Our findings demonstrate the urgent importance of a global account of the criminalisation and repression of climate and environmental movements. We have highlighted significant variations across our case studies. Each context is different, and our findings recognise differential patterns – the typology we have laid out is a useful framework for drawing comparisons. However, we have also revealed the potential shortcomings of only looking within a particular state or context. Our data show a global pattern, a worldwide process of targeting climate and environmental protest. We argue that this reflects a wider ideological and political project to maintain the hegemonic interests of powerful states and corporations, whose activities often contribute to climate breakdown and whose interests lie in the maintenance of current political and economic arrangements.

Criminalisation and repression should be read as features of a carbon-intensive political and economic settlement rather than episodic excess. In a context of faltering international mitigation efforts and escalating ecological harms, actors with concentrated material stakes in prevailing forms of economic governance and organisation have strong incentives to contain struggles for environmental and climate justice. Repression thus operates as part of the governance repertoire of contemporary climate politics: it reallocates coercive capacity toward the management of dissent, sustains carbon lock-in, and displaces attention from environmental harm and the need for transformation. From a Gramscian perspective, the observed repertoire of repression is integral to the reproduction of hegemony within carbon-dependent capitalism. Whether under Behemoth (sovereignist-extractivist) or Leviathan (liberal-capitalist) configurations, repression helps secure consent and organise coercion by delegitimising challengers and normalising the redirection of state capacity from mitigation to order maintenance. Our findings therefore contribute to debates on the state – corporate nexus and the ideological work of repression in stabilising the existing accumulation regime.

Future research is required to capture the specifically transnational processes driving this phenomenon, in particular attending to how repressive and criminalising laws, policy frameworks, police tactics and vilifying discourses circulate internationally, and to the powerful actors driving that circulation. Further analysis is also needed to understand how movements can best respond to repressive political strategies and tactics, as well as for challenging the impact of repertoire of repression on global climate governance. By expanding our knowledge of these dynamics, we can better exploit the fissures in the structures and discourses that legitimise and enable the criminalisation and repression of climate protests and take steps to advance climate justice on a global scale.

Notes

1. Understood in the Gramscian sense of ‘the accumulation of taken-for-granted “knowledge” to be found in every human community’.
2. We categorise these as *other* forms of police violence to avoid the implication that arrest is not itself a violent process. Even where overt force is not used, arrests are always administered under the threat of potentially considerable violence against those deemed uncompliant (Seigel 2018).

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Data availability statement

ACLED and Global Witness data is available as referenced, as is our own methodology.

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