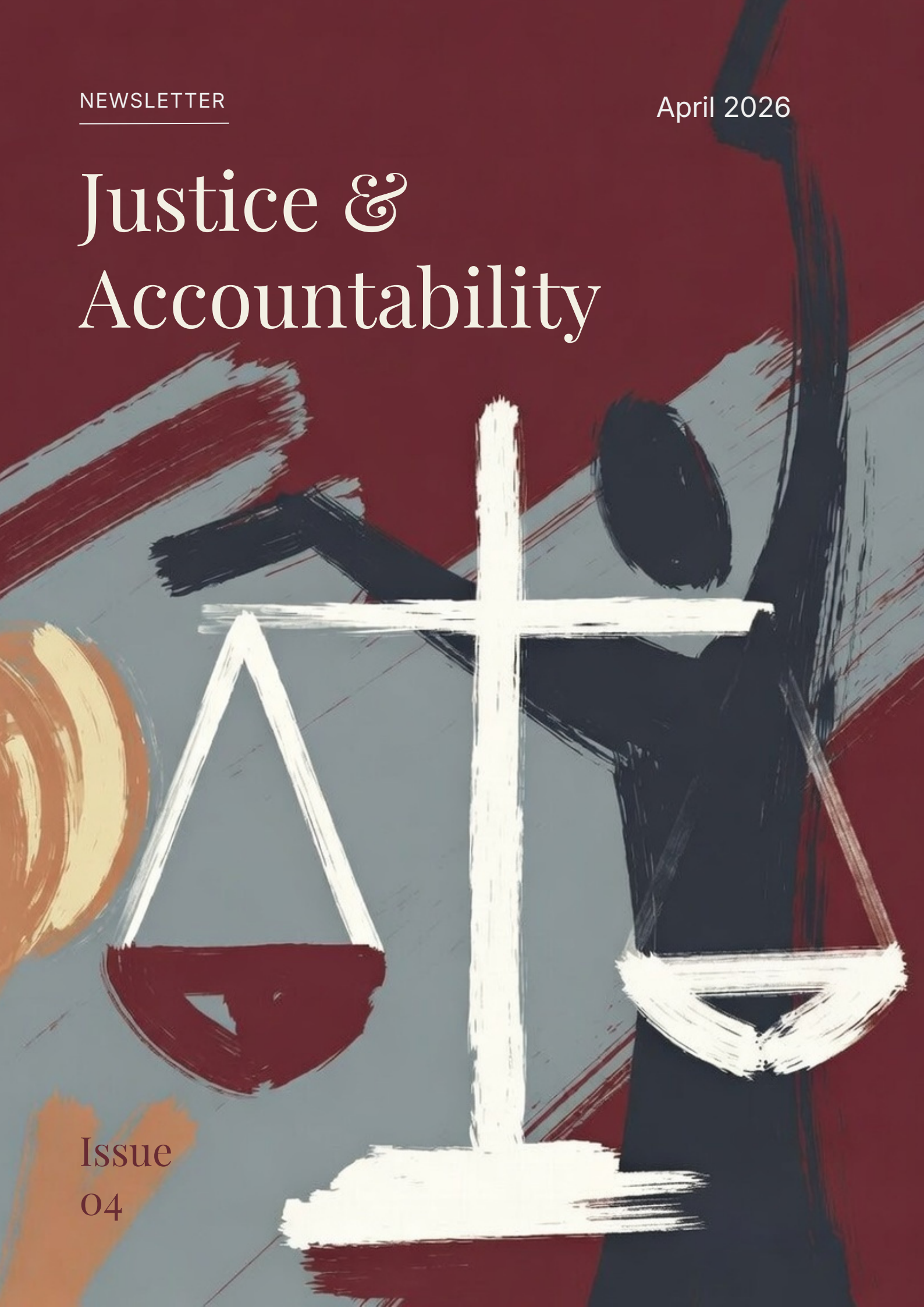


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April 2026 revealed a global pattern of adaptive authoritarianism: governments weaponized national security, "extremism," and counter-terrorism frameworks to criminalize human rights work while offering limited, selective prisoner releases that largely bypassed political cases.

Armed conflicts continued to generate high civilian casualties with insufficient accountability. Justice processes show incremental activity but suffer from chronic delays, low participation, and structural weaknesses.

The net trend points to shrinking civic space, eroded trust in institutions, and a widening gap between rhetoric and rights protection. Numbers underscore the scale: hundreds of new detentions for expression, over 245 verified child casualties in Sudan in just 90 days, and persistent impunity despite high-profile judicial steps.

In this issue:

- **Adaptive repression:** Challenges to civic space and documentation
 - **Armed conflict:** The human cost
 - **Prisoner releases:** Selective freedom, systemic detention
 - **Pursuing accountability:** Incremental activity, persistent stagnation
 - **Overarching trends:** Patterns and lessons learned
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Adaptive repression: Challenges to civic space and documentation

A clear cross-regional pattern emerged where states targeted not only individual critics but the very infrastructure of human rights documentation and advocacy.

Across the Middle East, UN High Commissioner Volker Türk highlighted a deepening clampdown on freedom of expression. For instance, Iran recorded some 2,345 arrests on security-related charges, executions, and extended internet restrictions. UN independent experts have additionally drawn attention to a worrying global rise in attacks on National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). These bodies, when operating independently, serve as vital watchdogs. However, recent findings from a report by the Global Alliance of NHRIs highlight an increase in reported attacks, including smear campaigns (often with gendered dimensions), judicial harassment, physical violence, and rising digital threats.

In Russia, the Supreme Court designated Memorial, the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize co-laureate, as an “extremist” organization and banned its activities. The ruling effectively criminalizes the dissemination of Memorial’s materials, including extensive archives on Stalinist repression, the Chechen wars, and lists of current political prisoners.

Similar dynamics surfaced in other countries:

- Chinese authorities continued targeting prominent cultural and legal voices. Contemporary artist Gao Zhen has remained in detention since 2024 on charges of “*slandering heroes and martyrs*” linked to satirical artwork. Meanwhile, human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng was released after serving a three-year sentence for “*inciting subversion of state power*” for his advocacy work. Rights groups stress that this release must be unconditional, with no surveillance, movement restrictions, or harassment directed at him or his family.
- In Burkina Faso, the ruling military junta intensified pressure on civic space. Authorities announced the dissolution of 118 civil society organisations and associations, including entities involved in monitoring of the human rights situation, governance, and humanitarian work. Justified under a 2025 law on the freedom of association, this decision forms part of a broad strategy aiming to shield the junta from scrutiny through administrative hurdles, funding restrictions, and punitive measures against local and international groups.

“*The military government’s action, if based on alleged noncompliance with the 2025 law, appears legally questionable since the required time frame has not yet ended ... The scale of the shutdown is one of the most significant blows to civil society groups since the military took power and sends a chilling message to everyone else.*

– Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch

In Tunisia

By April 2026, at least twenty civil society organisations and associations had been subjected to court-ordered suspensions linked to funding declarations and administrative compliance requirements. Since late 2025, courts had issued orders targeting a wide range of entities, including the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), Aswat Nissa, the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights (FTDES), the Tunisian branch of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), and investigative media outlets such as Nawaat and Inkyfada.

In mid-April 2026, this culminated in the one-month suspension of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), one of Africa's oldest human rights organisations and a member of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize-winning National Dialogue Quartet, alongside travel bans affecting FTDES staff.

Journalist Zied El Heni was placed in pretrial detention after appearing before the Fifth Central Unit for Combating Information and Communication Technology Crime. He faces charges under Article 86 of the 2001 telecommunications law for "insulting others via public communication networks," triggered by a social media post highlighting the persecution of a fellow journalist, who spent more than three years in prison before being exonerated.

The provision, originally enacted in 2001 during the Ben Ali era to address telephone harassment, has since been widely applied to online speech and social media posts. It states: *"Any person who intentionally offends others or disturbs their comfort through public telecommunications networks shall be punished with imprisonment for a period ranging from one to two years and a fine of one hundred to one thousand dinars."*

Armed conflict: The human cost

Ongoing and post-ceasefire violence demonstrated the devastating, disproportionate impact of modern warfare on the most vulnerable:

- In Sudan, UNICEF documented at least 245 child casualties in the first 90 days of 2026 alone: 160 killed, 85 maimed, marking a roughly 50% increase compared to 2025. Drones accounted for over 70% of these incidents. The broader crisis is staggering: more than 5 million children displaced, over 8 million out of school, and 4.2 million facing acute malnutrition.
- In Lebanon and Syria, UN experts voiced serious concern over Israeli military operations, warning that they risk undermining regional stability and civilian protection:
 - They strongly condemned Israel's large-scale airstrikes in Lebanon, conducted just hours after a ceasefire announcement, and described the attacks as indiscriminate, disproportionate, and a clear violation of the UN Charter.
 - The experts also expressed alarm over Israeli operations in southern Syria, pointing to reports of arbitrary detentions, including of children, along with movement restrictions and civilian intimidation. They additionally drew attention to the recent discovery of three mass graves in northeast Syria and called for prompt, thorough, and independent investigations to establish facts and ensure accountability.

The sharp rise in child casualties from drone strikes and weakening respect for humanitarian law risk turning immediate violations into long-term generational crises marked by displacement, lost education, and lasting trauma.

Prisoner releases: Selective freedom, systemic detention

Several countries announced amnesties or prisoner releases, yet these remained tactical rather than reflecting a genuine, rights-based effort to end politically motivated or arbitrary detention.

Myanmar released **over 4,335 prisoners**, including 179 foreigners, as part of a New Year amnesty. However, the vast majority of the estimated 30,000+ political detainees arrested since the 2021 military coup remain behind bars.

Cuba pardoned 2,010 prisoners in what state media called a **"humanitarian and sovereign gesture."** However, rights groups noted that few, if any, were political prisoners and none were prisoners of conscience.

Egypt freed at least **62 political detainees** in a one-week period in late March/early April. Human rights monitors welcomed the step but described it as insufficient, given the thousands still held on similar charges.

Tunisia **provisionally released human rights defender Saloua Ghrissa** after more than 15 months of pretrial detention following her arrest in December 2024. All charges against her and seven colleagues remain pending.

These measures often serve diplomatic or public relations purposes while leaving the underlying machinery of repression intact. Absent transparent criteria, independent oversight, and genuine inclusion of political cases, they act as temporary pressure valves rather than meaningful reforms, which in turn erode public trust and sustain cycles of arbitrary detention.

Pursuing accountability: Incremental activity, persistent stagnation

Judicial accountability showed some movement but exposed deep implementation gaps and institutional fatigue.



- The International Criminal Court Pre-Trial Chamber I unanimously **confirmed all charges** against former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and committed the case to trial. The charges center on crimes against humanity in connection with the country's deadly war on drugs campaign. This decision marks a significant step toward international accountability for thousands of alleged extrajudicial killings, though the trial itself remains ahead.
- The European Court of Human Rights maintained a high level of activity throughout the month, issuing **three batches of judgments and decisions** on the 09th, 21st, and 28–30th of April. The rulings spanned a wide range of Convention rights, with key themes including police operations and use of force, procedural rights and fair trial standards, property rights and effective remedies, and data protection safeguards. The April docket illustrates the Court's dual function: addressing individual grievances while identifying systemic deficiencies (e.g., in migration detention, juvenile justice, or property restitution) that require broader policy responses.

At the national level:

- In Syria, the [trial of Atef Najib](#) (linked to 2011 Daraa events) opened with public sessions. Proceedings included some victim participation and family presence, alongside parallel accountability efforts against former regime figures and ongoing discoveries of mass graves. While these steps represent an initial domestic push for accountability, observers have noted reliance on ordinary criminal law rather than specialized transitional frameworks, the use of in absentia trials for high-level figures, and risks of selective or politically influenced prosecutions.
- In Tunisia, the Tunis Specialized Criminal Chamber conducted **four sessions in April** (on the 6th, 13th, 20th, and 27th) as part of the country's transitional justice process. However, victim and family attendance was notably low, perpetrators were often absent, and all cases were postponed to late June or September 2026. This pattern reflects deeper stagnation in the country's accountability process, years after the mechanisms were established, and points to challenges including limited resources and eroding trust.

International and regional judicial mechanisms often produce a high volume of decisions and findings, yet their impact ultimately depends on how they are translated at the national level. In contrast, domestic justice processes tend to face chronic delays and uneven engagement, with limited participation in some contexts reflecting distrust or fear of reprisals. Where accountability is selective or delayed, it risks reinforcing rather than resolving underlying grievances, leaving reconciliation efforts fragile. Sustainable progress in justice and accountability is therefore contingent on judicial independence, victim-centred approaches, transparency, adequate resources, and comprehensive coverage across perpetrators and time periods.

Overarching trends: Patterns and lessons learned

- *Repression is growing more legalized and digitized, raising the bar for effective challenge and documentation.*
- *Child harm in conflict is escalating through indiscriminate tools and access barriers.*
- *Releases and trials generate headlines but deliver limited systemic change when disconnected from deeper reforms.*
- *Independent documentation and memorialization efforts remain among the strongest long-term defenses, which is precisely why they face increasing attack.*
- *International and regional courts remain productive, yet implementation and political will gaps may limit their deterrent effect.*

The coming months will test whether delayed processes advance and whether international and regional bodies can apply sustained pressure amid evident political and funding fatigue. Consistent support for local human rights defenders and independent monitoring are essential.



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