

Forced disappearances are on the rise as human rights violators cover their tracks

February 20 2018, by Rodwan Abouharb

It seems the global campaign to protect human rights has had an unexpected side-effect: governments are changing their preferred methods of getting rid of political opponents.

Fear of scrutiny has prompted governments to switch from brazenly killing their opponents to forcing them to "disappear" – leaving their fate unclear, and helping leaders avoid accountability for their actions. The majority of disappearance cases go unsolved – in the absence of a body, forensic evidence or even eyewitness accounts, the people and groups responsible go unpunished.

Assessing the frequency of forced disappearances is difficult, but the practise seems to be becoming more widespread. Evidence from the [Cingranelli and Richards Human Rights Database](#) indicates the number of countries with 50 or more cases of forced disappearance almost doubled from 12 states in 2012 to 19 states in 2015 – the most recent year for which we have comparable data.

As of September 2017, the United Nations [Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#) – which began collecting data in 1980 – had been notified of 45,120 active disappearance cases involving 91 states. And with many cases from before 1980 still unsolved, this figure very probably under-represents the total.

But perhaps even more disturbing than the large numbers of disappearances world-wide is the evidence I present with Caroline Payne

in an [article](#) in The Journal of Human Rights. We've found that governments who are party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees people's rights to liberty and security and is monitored by the United Nations, are in fact *more* likely than non-signatories to switch from conventional extrajudicial killings to forced disappearances.

Under the radar

Forced disappearance is a well-worn tool for human rights violators. In its modern iteration, it began with the Nazis, who frequently spirited people away during World War II under the "Nacht und Nebel" ([Night and Fog](#)) decree. Disappearances were notoriously used across in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, where a clutch of military dictatorships showed no compunction about simply vanishing inconvenient citizens from the face of the Earth.

The UN-sponsored truth commission for Guatemala [estimated](#) that up to 45,000 people were disappeared during the country's 36-year civil war, while in Argentina, campaigns to establish the fate of thousands of disappeared people [continue to this day](#).

Disappearances were also commonplace in the conflicts that broke out in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It has been [estimated](#) that 40,000 people were disappeared in the conflicts in Croatia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The UN Committee on Missing Persons has made progress in gathering evidence and has [accounted for 26,000](#) missing persons so far.

In other places, nowhere near the same progress has been made. In the absence of concrete evidence, holding those who ordered these crimes to account remains very difficult.

Spirited away

The appeal of forced disappearances to human rights violators is not hard to understand. These governments are under increasing scrutiny on all fronts. Brave activists are using social media to document attacks on rights that would previously have gone under the radar – and other governments and non-governmental organisations are still making formal submissions to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances.

Because signing up to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights necessarily invites more direct human rights scrutiny, many governments who join it accept that obvious extrajudicial killings are suddenly a liability. Forced disappearances, by contrast, allow them to deny involvement even as they trumpet their improved record on [human rights violations](#) for which there is ample evidence.

Sure enough, plenty of recent reports of forced disappearances implicate various countries which have ratified the covenant. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) "scores" of forced disappearances in Bangladesh alone. Amnesty International has said that [at least 1,700 people](#) have disappeared in Egypt since 2015, and noted the disappearance of five young men at the hands of the police in [Chilpancingo, Mexico](#) over Christmas 2017.

Finally, [The Nation](#) and [Amnesty International](#) have both detailed the widening use of forced disappearance by the Pakistani security services. These practices were once restricted to parts of the country embroiled in conflict, but now seem to be broadening to a nationwide practice, used against bloggers and activists who dare to criticise the [government](#).

While our evidence makes for grim reading, it alerts governments which care about protecting human rights and human rights organisations to pay special attention to changes in other governments' behaviour. In

particular, improvements on some rights measures – in particular extrajudicial killing – may simply signal a change in strategy by governments who have no intention of truly cleaning up their act. Human rights organisations and governments need to wake up to this and start signalling to [human rights](#) violating states that their change of tactics is not going unnoticed.

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