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**INTERVIEWER:** All across the world, from Turkey to India, from Venezuela to Russia, not to mention the United States, governments are drifting away from democratic principles that threaten their control and resorting to policies that undermine human rights and starve civil society. In response, can those who uphold progressive ideals take a page from the dictator's playbook?

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Cesar Rodriguez Garvey Vito is a Colombian legal scholar and human rights advocate and the executive director of De Justicia, a Colombia-based social justice and human rights organization. He talked with us recently about how to face the crackdown on civil society.

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Cesar, you're here at the Watson Institute for a conference titled Civil Society in Peril. And it does seem to be in peril, both in the global north and in the global south. So how do you explain this increase in government repression of nongovernmental groups through violence or restrictions on foreign funding or other means? And do you think it'll get worse before it gets better?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ GARAVITO:** Well, I think that we need to see this regression, this crackdown on civil society organization partly as the result of the success that those organizations and the human rights movement and the social justice advocacy field have had over the last three or four decades.

**INTERVIEWER:** How so?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ GARAVITO:** Because-- well, human rights, just to use human rights as a proxy for progressive politics and the protection of values based on equality and solidarity and dignity. Human rights have become the lingua franca, sort of the international language of progressive politics, to the point that the targets of human rights activism, be it governments or corporations that might violate human rights or extremist religious organizations, they all have wised up to the discourses and the tactics and strategies of human rights actors.

So they have, especially states, developed counter-strategies. And many of the developments,

the restrictive laws, the naming and shaming of civil society organizations are, in a way, responses to the naming and shaming that human rights organization have used very successfully over the last few decades.

So to answer your question, specifically, yes, it is a worrying trend. I think that, of course, things can always get worse. But they're pretty bad as they are, especially because some of these laws, say for example laws that brand human rights organizations and civil society organizations as foreign agents just because they receive foreign funding from philanthropies, say, those laws have been copied around the world, have been disseminated around the world in a sort of a copycat phenomenon that's worrying.

**INTERVIEWER:** In the north and the south?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ** In the north and the south. So you can see that across regions, across a countries in different parts of the world from Russia to Venezuela to Ecuador, governments on the right and the left.

**GARAVITO:** And this is important, because--

**INTERVIEWER:** On the left as well?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ GARAVITO:** On the left as well. So just to talk about the country right next door to where I'm based-- I'm based in Bogota, Colombia. One of the most worrying cases of civil society crackdown is taking place in Venezuela under a government that is allegedly leftist.

Just a few years ago, De Justicia, my organization, put out a report on how the Correa government in Ecuador that also was a left wing government in many other ways, crackdown on environmental organizations and indigenous peoples' organizations, because they opposed oil drilling in the Amazon region.

So the phenomenon really cuts across regions, political inclinations. And that's why we need to develop responses that in turn learn from the attacks and wise up to the strategies are being used against civil society organizations.

**INTERVIEWER:** And that's what you were doing in part in this conference today. How many countries are represented by the participants about?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ GARAVITO:** About a dozen from all regions of the world, virtually. And what they have in common, or at least what the memos and their submissions and the contributions to this conference have in common is that we were focusing on responses.

Just as there is there's been a process of dissemination of attacks-- I wrote an op ed. I write a weekly op ed for our national newspaper in Colombia. And I entitled one of those op eds "The Dictator's Playbook." I thought by now, there's a well-known set of rules that if you want to crack down against your opponents or people or organizations that express dissent, then you put in place a few laws and a few executive measures that, for instance, brand them as foreign agents or that restrict heavily their operational capacity by making it, for example, difficult to maintain their legal personality and then make it easy for you as a semi-authoritarian politician or a president or a minister to shut them down or to make their life very difficult.

Just as there is an authoritarian playbook, we want to develop a counter-authoritarian and democratic playbook to respond to those attacks.

**INTERVIEWER:** You are a co-founder of De Justicia, the Center for Law, Justice, and Society in Columbia. And your team's work on a range of issues from transnational justice to environmental justice to drug policy in Colombia, where you're based, but also across the global south. And I'm wondering how you combine the work of academics, you at De Justicia.

It seems to me your teams are made up of scholars, academics, and activists. And why are both important? Why is research important to activism and vice versa?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ GARAVITO:** I think that there are ways to reunite those two selves. I wrote a paper called "Amphibious Research" in which I argued that those of us who do academic research and advocacy tend to lead double lives.

I was a visiting professor here at brown. A few years ago. And I spent a lot of time in academia. I did my PhD here in the US at Wisconsin. So of course, it takes a lot of work and a lot of effort to develop an academic career. But if you remain constrained by the incentives and by what's encouraged in academia, well, that's your whole life, and that's, of course, a lot of work and a lot of energy that's invested in building up a strong academic career.

If, in addition to that, you want to do advocacy and human rights activism or civil society work, that's a completely different line of work, because that's also done according to other types of professional incentives. So you need, for example, to spend a lot of time talking to the media. You go to a lot of meetings with grassroots communities.

And it gets to a point in which it is very difficult to sustain those two parallel tracks, the academic and activist. So what I've proposed and what De Justicia has tried to do over the last

12 years is to argue that there are ways to reunite those two lives and to do what I call action research, meaning it's amphibious. It's sort of a metaphor that tries to convey the fact that you can move from academia to activism and back to academia, just as an amphibious frog is able to shift from water to land and back to water without succumbing in the effort.

**INTERVIEWER:** And one informs the other?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ GARAVITO:** One informs the other. That's key. So the way that we propose to do this is by working with formats and with ways and methodologies and outputs that take elements from both worlds.

So I'll give you a specific example. We worked with a human rights activist from across the global south in annual action research workshops in which we mentored them to write about their own advocacy. So many of them have litigated fantastic cases of environmental justice or traditional justice in Africa and Latin America and Asia.

But they don't have the time to sit down and write about it. So the result is that activists tend not to be as reflexive as they would want and as we would need them to be in order to strengthen their own practice.

So what we do is to unplug them for 10 days per year for us to spend time working on their projects and then mentor them for a year after the workshop. And the outcome is a combination of a blog site that's called Amphibious Research in which they continue to write, they continue to work as a community of scholars-slash-activists who write in the first person about their own practice.

So with academic standards of quality research or of narrative writings, we can insert a little bit of creativity also and in terms of the format. And the hope and the outcome that's out there-- anyone who wants to visit it can go and check out the blog. It's called [AmphibiousResearch.org](http://AmphibiousResearch.org).

By not being constrained by the format of, say, peer-reviewed academic journals but by experimenting with other writing styles, the hope is that you can have the best of both worlds.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's so interesting. And you're executive director of De Justicia. But have you done that workshop?

**CESAR** Yes. Yes, I've done it for five years now.

**RODRIGUEZ**

**GARAVITO:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, you have?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ** Yes, I created it with colleagues at De Justicia. And I run it for five years now with them. And we have trained about 60 activist-researchers who are practicing this line of hybrid work.

**GARAVITO:**

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**INTERVIEWER:** So the Civil Society in Peril conference is about north-south and south-south dialogue. Why are these dialogues important? What can Colombia learn from India? And what can the United States learn from Colombia and so forth and so on?

**CESAR RODRIGUEZ** As in any professional field, there are inequalities, asymmetries. And in the field of production of knowledge and academia, there is this strong pull effect towards the north for obvious reasons. The US, for instance, has a strong university field with more resources than in many other regions of the world.

And the respective regions of the global south tend to gravitate towards to their former metropolis, say Africa towards Europe, Latin America, because of the hemispheric relationship with the US, towards the US, academic and activist field.

So the idea behind the De Justicia's global south approach is to resist, to a point, that gravitational pull and to create types of collaboration and mutual learning with organizations not just within Latin America and the Americas but also with Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

With the action research workshop that I mentioned is just one example. But we also do collaborative research. We have collaborative activism.

So what we found is that by definition, we share not just economic and socioeconomic traits, like being middle income countries with high levels of poverty and inequality, but also common challenges.

So I'll give you a specific example. So the Colombian Constitutional Court has been incredibly progressive and innovative in protecting what we in the human rights world call socioeconomic rights, meaning rights that have to do with the material well-being of the people, so right to

health, right to education, right to housing.

We in Colombia, luckily, are ending the oldest civil war in the hemisphere and actually in the world. And as a result of that war, approximately 5 million people were forcefully displaced from their homes. So 5 million people are IDPs, internally displaced people.

When colleagues from Kenya or from India come to Colombia, either for workshops or for exchanges of judges that we organize periodically, we'll, they're struck to see the relevance of the jurisprudence of the Colombian Constitutional Court on IDPs, because they're also facing, at different scales, similar issues.

But I could make a long list of cases that look very similar in different parts of the global south, socioenvironmental, conflicts having to do with extractive industries in indigenous territories, cases or situations having to do with informal workers, street vendors, for instance, challenges related to access to quality health care at basic levels. All of those are the background conditions that make for basic conditions of mutual understanding between activists in different parts of the global south.

Now, finally, the south-north component that we bring into the equation through this collaboration with the Watson Institute. What the Watson Institute and Professor Patrick Keller and Peter Evans have encouraged the students to do and have been able to do with us at De Justicia is to propose at least to have a kind of horizontal dialogue with counterparts in the global south, so that at least there is the possibility of mutual learning.

And many institutional innovations have happened in the south that have not traveled the world to the global north, just because of the asymmetry of the flows of knowledge and ideas and institutions. So the hope is that, by opening ourselves up to these types of dialogues, there will be more and better flow, a more dynamic flow of ideas of solutions to problems like the crackdown on civil society organizations, regardless of whether those ideas are formulated in the north or the south.

**INTERVIEWER:** Terrific. Well, Cesar, I can hear the conference outside the door. I will let you get back to it. But thank you so much. And I hope you'll keep coming back to the Watson Institute.

**CESAR** Thank you, Sara. It's always a pleasure to come back.

**RODRIGUEZ**

**GARAVITO:**

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**INTERVIEWER:** This has been *Trending Globally, Politics and Policy*. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Stitcher or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us. And help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to [Watson.Brown.edu](http://Watson.Brown.edu).

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