

Cambridge Symposium on Protest and Peaceful Assembly

13 May 2026

Alison Richard Building, University of Cambridge

Hosted by Amnesty International, the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (University of Cambridge), and the European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law

Co-convened by Professor Sharath Srinivasan, Professor Tabatha Abu El-Haj,
Dr Michael Hamilton, Dr Thomas Probert, and Francesca Fanucci

On 13 May 2026, the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR) at the University of Cambridge, together with Amnesty International and the European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), convened an invitation international symposium on protest and the right of peaceful assembly. The event brought together leading scholars, practitioners, and rights advocates drawn from law, criminology, sociology, political science, and international human rights to provide multiples entry points on the state of protests and assembly in the world today. Nearly half of the contributors to the *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Assembly* – published by Oxford University Press in 2026 and edited by Tabatha Abu El-Haj, Michael Hamilton, Thomas Probert, and Sharath Srinivasan – were present, giving the symposium a dual function as scholarly convening and intellectual backdrop to the public book launch that followed in the evening. Across three panel sessions and a set of opening and closing remarks, the symposium examined the social and political significance of assembly; the legal architecture of the right to peaceful assembly and its gaps; and the state practices – including policing, surveillance, and legislation – that increasingly shape and restrict its exercise in practice.

Opening Remarks

Speakers: Dr Michael Hamilton (Amnesty International); Francesca Fanucci (ECNL); Professor Hélène Tigroudja (UN Human Rights Committee). Chair: Professor Sharath Srinivasan (University of Cambridge).

Prof. Sharath Srinivasan opened by tracing the origins of both the gathering and the *Handbook* to a meeting in Glion, Switzerland in early 2020, where the UN Human Rights Committee was completing General Comment 37 on the right of peaceful assembly. All three speakers on this first panel were present that day in Glion. First to speak, Dr Michael Hamilton set the global stakes, describing the ‘bravery and tenacity of protesters in countries across the world’ who take to the streets ‘often at great human cost,’ and sharing a harrowing account from Amnesty’s Iran team. However, he also insisted on the importance of seeing assembly as ‘not only protests’ but also more mundane, expansive ways of coming together: a ‘substrate of social and political life itself’ as Prof. Srinivasan put it. Francesca Fanucci identified several converging threats: the criminalisation of peaceful disruption or surveillance accelerated by AI and new technologies,

but more generally, ‘a creeping normalisation of the idea that assemblies and protests in general are a problem that needs to be managed, rather than a right that needs to be not only protected, but also positively facilitated.’ A member of the United Nation’s Human Rights Committee, Prof. Hélène Tigroudja reflected on civil society’s decisive contributions to General Comment 37 – including the addition of online protest, ‘totally forgotten in the first version’ – and issued a call for input into the emerging General Comment 38 on Article 22 (freedom of association), of which she is rapporteur, with a submission deadline set at end of June.

Panel 1: The Power and Politics of Assembly

Panellists: Gina Romero (UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association); Professor Greg Magarian (Washington University School of Law); Dr Illan Wall (University of Galway). Chair: Professor Sharith Srinivasan (University of Cambridge).

The opening panel situated the significance of assembly in the present moment – politically, historically, and theoretically, with an invitation by Prof. Srinivasan to think assembly with and, importantly, beyond the rights framework. Not a lawyer, but an activist herself, Gina Romero described the global landscape as a ‘perfect storm’: democratic decline, rising authoritarianism, armed conflicts, and the deterioration of multilateralism simultaneously inspire more protest while providing justification for its suppression. She documented the shift from *de jure* notification to *de facto* authorisation regimes worldwide. Romero concluded with insistence: ‘people will never stop gathering’ because assembly ‘will always be part of our DNA.’

Prof. Greg Magarian traced a detailed historical parallel between the waxing and waning of public protest in the United States and the development of First Amendment law from the 1940s to the present moment in which, for the first time, the two have diverged: public protest is robust while legal protections are going in the other direction. Dr Illan Wall highlighted the Handbook’s key intellectual move: taking assembly seriously ‘in and of itself’ rather than as a subset of expression rights. This, he argued, pointed to assembly as a ‘series of action’, of ‘processes of organisation’ and eventually habits that constitute the ‘essence of democracy.’

Discussion then turned to the current climate and the rise of far-right protests. Romero noted how conservatives in Colombia beginning to use the right to protest gave it ‘the complete sense of it as a right for everybody.’ Wall introduced the idea of ‘repertoires of policing’ – the cumulative, never-forgotten arsenal states build across generations – and warned that consistent repression might lead to increased rebellion, advising the audience to pick up a copy of Andreas Malm’s *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*.

Panel 2: Claiming the *Right* of Peaceful Assembly

Panellists: Dr Orsolya Salát (ELTE University Budapest); Professor David Mead (University of East Anglia); Dr Kirsty Hughes (University of Cambridge). Chair: Professor Tabatha Abu El-Haj (Drexel University Kline School of Law).

This panel examined how the right to peaceful assembly is claimed, contested, and constrained through law. Dr Orsolya Salát opened by identifying a sleight of hand: unlike in other areas of rights law, being judged ‘unpeaceful’ does not result in due-process sanctioning after the fact but in prevention or dispersal in the moment – making the peacefulness criterion a mechanism for ‘preventing or stopping the exercise of a right altogether.’ Prof. David Mead offered a typology of ECHR case law on peacefulness and drew attention to the UK legislature’s effective criminalisation of disruption despite its protection in principle – noting that English law now defines ‘serious disruption’ as anything causing ‘more than minor disruption’ and inviting the

audience to ‘reclaim disruption.’ Dr Kirsty Hughes provided an analysis of the Palestine Action case, in which the High Court found the Home Secretary’s prescription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation unlawful while simultaneously rejecting the argument that Palestine Action constitutes a civil disobedience organisation. Hughes identified two difficulties for Palestine Action on appeal: the High Court’s own factual assessment implies the interference may ultimately be proportionate, and recent UK Supreme Court dicta point strongly toward deference to the executive on security matters. The case, she argued, illustrates the difficulty of attaching ‘single labels – peaceful, non-peaceful, violent, non-violent, protest, terrorist – to what is an organic and unwieldy social movement’ and interrogates the concept of civil disobedience in the UK.

The subsequent discussion focused in great part on the case of Palestine Action, in which several of the symposium’s participants have been involved. However, Prof. Tabatha Abu El-Haj pressed the point that both the expressive value and the instrumental political value of assembly fall quickly under scrutiny – there are less disruptive ways to make a point, and most assemblies are not instrumentally effective – and that the deeper value of solidarity, presence, and community consistently escapes the legal frame.

Panel 3: Between Protection and Control: State Interventions and Assembly

Panellists: Dr Charmian Werren (University of East Anglia); Professor Pete Fussey (University of Southampton); Dr Stuart Casey-Maslen (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights); Dr Michael Hamilton (Amnesty International). Chair: Dr Thomas Probert (Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria).

The final panel examined how states regulate assemblies in practice, ranging from UK policing guidance to crimes against humanity to the coming challenge of autonomous force. Dr Charmian Werren traced the trajectory of ‘facilitation’ in UK policing from its enthusiastic adoption in the 2009 Adapting to Protest report – which used the word 47 times – to its near-disappearance in the 2021 Getting the Balance Right, where it appears twice, the first time critically. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, she described police officers telling road-blocking protesters they were being ‘facilitated onto the pavement,’ and documented how facilitation-in-practice has collapsed into pre-event dialogue that allows police to shape assemblies before they happen.

Prof. Pete Fussey argued that the standard approach of cataloguing discrete surveillance technologies misses the key dynamic of contemporary surveillance: technologies now ‘act in concert together,’ making the landscape additive but the impact multiplicative. He told of a major joint report with Gina Romero’s mandate across 86 territories that found multi-generational chilling effects in countries including Zimbabwe and Uganda. Dr Stuart Casey-Maslen surveyed three areas: criminal accountability for protest killings amounting to crimes against humanity (pointing to ongoing cases in Syria, Venezuela, Bangladesh, and Iran); normative erosion of IHL protections in conflict zones; and the coming challenge of autonomous use of force.’

Finally, Dr Michael Hamilton asked whether human rights law has changed protest policing and whether it can. His answer was cautious: the language of facilitation is co-opted, the ‘comfortable relationship’ between protesters and police that human rights frameworks implicitly seek may be ‘deeply problematic,’ and a cascade of legislation tasks police with enforcing an ever-wider set of restrictions.

Closing Remarks

Speaker: Agnès Callamard, Secretary General, Amnesty International.

Prof. Sharath Srinivasan and Prof. Tabatha Abu El-Haj started these closing remarks with final thoughts on the day's proceedings. After highlighting the richness of the discussions, Prof. Tabatha Abu El-Haj offered a series of provocative questions: 'are there times when actually assembly should be violent? Or should we take the Rawlsian civil rights framework as the only way of thinking about when lawbreaking is worthy of legal protection?' Or should we fight, as a participant suggested, for an abolitionist agenda?

Finally, Agnès Callamard capped off the day's discussions with a call to arms. She diagnosed the rise of what she calls 'a predatory world order' – one in which 'the killings of civilians are normalised, are made core tools of statecraft, and justified through dehumanisation and racist ideology,' and argued that attacks on freedom of assembly – now sharply accelerating – are 'part and parcel' of this order. She named the victims of assembly repression with specificity: refugees and migrants, climate activists, pro-Palestinian protesters, LGBTQI+ communities, Gen Z, and economic protesters. She closed with Amnesty's three-pillar resistance framework: defending essential gains of the last eighty years; selecting priorities for disruption against bad laws and practices; and a 'responsibility to transform' – building a transformative human rights vision for 2048 rather than merely defending a 20th-century framework against collapse. Most importantly, as she concluded: 'We need to keep imagining, we need to keep transforming, and we need to keep building.'