

Short report about the Protest Under Pressure conference

The coordinator of the Legal Mobilization Platform has written a short report on the Protest Under Pressure conference. This report details the organizing process of the conference, the outline of the conference on the day itself, initial reactions from participants after the conference and the coordinator's own reflections on the conference and its format.

On 25 January 2024, the Legal Mobilization Platform, together with its partner the Tilburg University Law School, organized a conference titled 'Protest Under Pressure'. The conference centred around understanding the different forms and objectives of protest and around the increasing infringements on the right to protest in the Netherlands and internationally.

We initially came up with this idea in the Spring of 2023. However, we wanted to consult widely with members of the Platform and in line with our organizing principles; we did not want to organize a typical academic conference. In particular, we were conscious of the fact that at demonstrations, activists are in the forefront of public attention and thus it was crucial to involve them in the planning and conversation. In May 2023, we organized a smaller consultative workshop on the right to protest and the challenges around it with invited academics, legal practitioners and activists. We asked all participants in the workshop what they thought a conference on this topic should look like. Participants emphasized that we should not organize an academic conference with a call for papers and academic presentations. Instead, we should facilitate conversations across different fields and disciplines. And this is exactly what we did.

In the morning of the conference, we organized four parallel sessions, each of which focused on a different, contemporary social justice theme, namely: gender and queer justice, climate justice, justice for Palestine and racial justice. During the four parallel sessions, which were organized according to the different challenges faced when it comes to the right to protest, it became clear how many intersections exist between the justice movements. Based on existing research and the outcome of our consultations at the workshop in May, we realised that any social justice theme one protests for, are confronted with securitization, lawfare and other forms of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) and digital surveillance. The last session concentrated on the establishment of transnational activist networks, which became a topic of discussion during the roundtable at the end of the conference. The importance of building a global coalition was underscored multiple times.

Many conference participants remarked that the event was truly inspirational. The participants came from several different countries, including the Netherlands, India, Russia, South Africa, the United States, Germany, France and the Philippines, and from many different backgrounds, from climate justice activists to public interest lawyers to philosophers. This brought a great variety of experiences to the discussions. I personally encountered perspectives I had never heard before and gained new insights that can be useful for my own scholarship and activism.

Although the conference format might have been unconventional, I think it was all the more effective for the majority of the participants. It served as a great way to break the bubbles many of us find ourselves in. I hope this format will become a common practice at conferences in the future.

~ Marthe Heringa, coordinator of the Legal Mobilization Platform