CLOSING SPACE is when a political actor makes it increasingly difficult for basic democratic activities to occur.

The dynamics of closing space are multi-faceted and fast moving, and we need to be prepared to react to many problems at the same time.

So it’s best to start by understanding the problems and then by making a plan!

When political space is closing, it can seem overwhelming.

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BUT HOW CAN YOU TELL IF POLITICAL SPACE IS CLOSING?
AND IF ONE PARTY IS MAKING IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR PEOPLE AND CANDIDATES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS?

THERE ARE TELLTALE SIGNS...

UNDUE RESTRICTIONS ON VOTING.
I’LL ALSO NEED TO SEE A LIBRARY CARD.
WE DON’T HAVE A LIBRARY.

PUTTING PARTY LOYALISTS IN CHARGE OF VOTE COUNTING.
IT’S GOOD TO HAVE FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES!

...A STRONG POLICE PRESENCE AT RALLIES...
ARE WE GOING TO HAVE A PROBLEM HERE?
WHERE?!  

...BLOCKING ACCESS TO POLLING PLACES

...EVEN INTIMIDATION BY HIRED GANGS THAT SUPPORT THE INCUMBENT...
STAY INSIDE WHERE IT’S SAFE! IT LOOKS LIKE RAIN!
HAHAHAHAHA!

DO MORE LISTENING!
AND THOSE ARE THE MOST OVERT WAYS THAT AN INCUMBENT LEADER CAN CLOSE POLITICAL SPACE, AND RETAIN POWER.

SOME ARE MORE SUBTLE, LIKE THESE:

MY OPPONENT’S SUPPORTERS CAUSE ALL YOUR PROBLEMS!
FAKE NEWS! BELIEVE ONLY WHAT I SAY!
WHAT YOUR CANDIDATE IS DOING IN THESE PHOTOS WILL SHOCK YOU! CLICK THE LINK NOW!
WHY VOTE FOR A CANDIDATE WHO HATES OUR COUNTRY?
FOR A CANDIDATE WHO HATES OUR COUNTRY?

ALSO SPYING...
SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING...
CO-OPTING OPPOSITION PARTY MEMBERS...
& POLITICIZED PROSECUTIONS...

SINCE YOU’VE DONATED TO THE OPPOSITION PARTY, MAYBE IT’S TIME WE HAD A LOOK AT THE FINANCES OF YOUR FAMILY’S BUSINESS...
These actions create vicious cycles that increase polarization and erode public confidence in politicians, political parties, and their own government.

Incumbent leaders can seize on this spiraling momentum to close political space even faster, or force opposition parties to raise the stakes and close space for their own supporters.

Our supporters are in trouble—the opposition knows they’re unpopular so they’re trying to intimidate our good, patriotic citizens.

The last time their party was in office, they did much worse to us. These terrorists are enemies of the state! We’ll be sure the media knows what to call them.

I need ideas, my loyal advisors! How can we respond?!

Love it. What else?

My cousin did three years under their administration on a trumped-up charge!

Perhaps it’s time for an “anti-corruption drive.”

They recruited a friend to run as a third-party candidate and take votes away from us.

Very good, I remember that!

We can do that, too. Get me “a friend” on the phone.
Political parties, especially the ones out of power, can keep political space open. Maintaining and preserving democratic functions can help them survive.

Like mobilizing voters... The right to vote is a heavy burden.

Out of power, political parties can represent the interests of people who feel left out of the political process.

Lift with your legs.

...And the right of people to gather and organize.

Our time is now!

They turn citizens into voters...

I can hardly wait to cast my ballot!

Me too!

...Organize opposition to an unpopular government...

If elected, I can be your voice in the government!

Keep your promises!

...Engage in civic education.

This is how we turn something that you want into policy.
Observe electoral processes.

No irregularities here.
Everybody will have their chance to vote.

Mobilize get-out-the-vote actions.

We voted!

Build and maintain party infrastructure...

I'm interested in starting a local party branch.

...to build party resilience between elections.

Hi! I'm calling from the party. Would you be interested in subscribing to our newsletter?

Hi! I'm calling from the party. Have you heard about our new youth wing?

Political research, mapping, and learning can reveal strengths and weaknesses.

How have we done in the last two election cycles?

We won three seats but lost one.

How is the party performing around the country?

We're stable in urban areas, losing ground in the suburbs, and growing support in rural areas.
WHERE’S OUR PARTY AGENDA FROM THE CONVENTION?

JUST PRINTED, MA’AM.

LOOKS LIKE WE HAVE A LOT TO DO, BUT I DON’T AGREE WITH ALL OF THESE PRIORITIES FOR OUR DISTRICT...

I KNOW IT MIGHT NOT BE IMPORTANT FOR US, BUT IT’S THE PARTY’S PLATFORM. IT’S IMPORTANT FOR THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN THAT WE STAY ON BRAND.

WE HAVE YOU BOOKED ON THE COUNTRY’S BIGGEST PODCAST...

...OUR POLICIES WILL CREATE JOBS...

...AND WE CHALLENGE THE PRESIDENT TO DEFEND THEIR POLICIES IN A TELEVISED DEBATE WITH OUR CANDIDATE.

OUR POLICIES ARE DESIGNED TO HELP THE PEOPLE...

ONCE YOU REALIZE THAT YOU’RE LIVING IN CLOSING POLITICAL SPACE, YOU NEED TO FIGURE OUT YOUR OPTIONS.

LET’S HEAD OVER TO OUR DECISION TREE TO HELP DEVELOP PROGRAM IDEAS.
The DECISION TREE

PART ONE:

1.1 - Are normal campaign activities (like rallies, canvassing, or contacting supporters) legal and safe?

   IF YES √ ADVANCE TO 2.

   IF NO consider whether working with different types of stakeholders like civil society organizations, human rights activists, incipient parties, or protest movements. If party building is a long-term or strategic goal, consult the "maintaining relevance out of office," "using technology in closing space," and the "capitalizing on diaspora and international support" units.

1.2 - Do opposition parties have a reasonable chance to win national leadership seats?

   IF NO move to number 3.

1.3 - Can opposition parties win sub-national leadership seats?

   IF NO consider working with other types of stakeholders, e.g. civil society organizations, human rights activists, incipient parties, or protest movements.

   IF YES党programming may be appropriate.

   IF NO see "building party infrastructure in closing space" unit 1.

PART TWO:

Deciding which form of party programming is most appropriate for you

2.1 - Do candidates or parties currently hold regular meetings with members or supporters, or are their local branches capable of doing so?

2.2 - Have party partners determined which policy issues are most important to voters generally and to their specific constituency?

   IF NO see "building party infrastructure in closing space" unit 1.

2.3 - Have parties worked to expand their membership base or registered more voters?

   IF NO see "building party infrastructure in closing space," "technology tools for political parties in closing space," and "capitalizing on diaspora and international support in closing space" units 1, 3, 5 & 6.

2.4 - Has the party sought new fundraising options?

   IF NO see "forming opposition coalitions in closing space." and "maintaining relevance out of office in closing space" units 5 & 6.

2.5 - Is it possible to organize an opposition coalition, either pre-election or post-election?

   IF NO see "forming opposition coalitions in closing space," and "capitalizing on diaspora and international support in closing space" units 4 & 5.

   IF YES √ see "forming opposition coalitions in closing space," and "capitalizing on diaspora and international support in closing space" units 4 & 5.

   IF NO see "maintaining relevance out of office in closing space" unit 6.