

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023

Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy



Highlights from Freedom House’s annual report on political rights and civil liberties

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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2023 edition of *Freedom in the World*. The complete analysis including narrative reports on all countries and territories can be found on our website at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

### ON THE COVER

Iranian people in Izmir protest the death of Jina Mahsa Amini while in custody of the morality police in Iran. (Idil Toffolo / Alamy)

## Key findings

### **Global freedom declined for the 17th consecutive year.**

Moscow's war of aggression led to devastating human rights atrocities in Ukraine. New coups and other attempts to undermine representative government destabilized Burkina Faso, Tunisia, Peru, and Brazil. Previous years' coups and ongoing repression continued to diminish basic liberties in Guinea and constrain those in Turkey, Myanmar, and Thailand, among others. Two countries suffered downgrades in their overall freedom status: Peru moved from Free to Partly Free, and Burkina Faso moved from Partly Free to Not Free.

### **The struggle for democracy may be approaching a turning point.**

The gap between the number of countries that registered overall improvements in political rights and civil liberties and those that registered overall declines for 2022 was the narrowest it has ever been through 17 years of global deterioration. Thirty-four countries made improvements, and the tally of countries with declines, at 35, was the smallest recorded since the negative pattern began. The gains were driven by more competitive elections as well as a rollback of pandemic-related restrictions that had disproportionately affected freedom of assembly and freedom of movement. Two countries, Colombia and Lesotho, earned upgrades in their overall freedom status, moving from Partly Free to Free.

### **While authoritarians remain extremely dangerous, they are not unbeatable.**

The year's events showed that autocrats are far from infallible, and their errors provide openings for democratic forces. The effects of corruption and a focus on political

control at the expense of competence exposed the limits of the authoritarian models offered by Beijing, Moscow, Caracas, or Tehran. Meanwhile, democratic alliances demonstrated solidarity and vigor.

### **Infringement on freedom of expression has long been a key driver of global democratic decline.**

Over the last 17 years, the number of countries and territories that receive a score of 0 out of 4 on the report's media freedom indicator has ballooned from 14 to 33, as journalists face persistent attacks from autocrats and their supporters while receiving inadequate protection from intimidation and violence even in some democracies. The past year brought more of the same, with media freedom coming under pressure in at least 157 countries and territories during 2022. Scores for a related indicator pertaining to freedom of personal expression have also declined over the years amid greater invasions of privacy, harassment and intimidation, and incentives to self-censor both online and offline.

### **The fight for freedom persists across decades.**

When Freedom House issued the first edition of its global survey in 1973, 44 of 148 countries were rated Free. Today, 84 of 195 countries are Free. Over the past 50 years, consolidated democracies have not only emerged from deeply repressive environments but also proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of new challenges. Although democratization has slowed and encountered setbacks, ordinary people around the world, including in Iran, China, and Cuba, continue to defend their rights against authoritarian encroachment.

# Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy

By Yana Gorokhovskaia, Adrian Shahbaz, and Amy Slipowitz

## Executive Summary

The global struggle for democracy approached a possible turning point in 2022. The gap between the number of countries that registered overall improvements in political rights and civil liberties and those that registered overall declines was the narrowest it has ever been through 17 consecutive years of deterioration.

The most serious setbacks for freedom and democracy were the result of war, coups, and attacks on democratic institutions by illiberal incumbents. The authoritarian regime in Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in a bid to scuttle that country's hard-won democratic progress. New coups and other attempts to undermine representative government destabilized Burkina Faso, Tunisia, Peru, and Brazil. Previous years' coups and ongoing repression continued to diminish basic liberties in Guinea and constrain those in settings such as Turkey, Myanmar, and Thailand. Afghanistan's Taliban regime barred girls from receiving an education in the midst of an ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis. Governments and occupying powers used violence and other means to destroy cultures and change the ethnic composition of populations in 21 countries and territories, including Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Myanmar.

A total of 34 countries showed improvements in political rights and civil liberties, compared with 35 that lost ground, signaling a possible slowdown in the global decline. Democratic gains were achieved through more transparent and competitive elections in Lesotho, Colombia, and Kenya. A lifting of pandemic-related restrictions that disproportionately affected freedom of assembly and freedom of movement also produced positive change, as did a renewed commitment to judicial independence in some countries.

In addition to these outright improvements, the year brought fresh evidence of the limits of authoritarian power. Authoritarian influence at the United Nations and other international organizations faltered as democracies reaffirmed the value of multilateral engagement. Ukrainians,

with material support from many democracies, beat back a vast Russian army that was hampered by decades of corruption. In China, the ruling Communist Party's onerous and politicized COVID-19 policies were abruptly dismantled in the face of public protests.

The 2023 edition of *Freedom in the World* is the 50th in this series of annual comparative reports. As such, it provides an opportunity to reflect on the challenges to and achievements of democracy over the past five decades. Among the more significant challenges has been a widespread assault on the civil liberties that can be used to hold governments to account—most notably, freedom of expression.

Over the last 17 years, the number of countries and territories that receive a score of 0 out of 4 on the report's media freedom indicator has ballooned from 14 to 33. The year 2022 brought more of the same, with media freedom coming under pressure in at least 157 countries and territories. Scores for a related indicator pertaining to freedom of personal expression have also suffered over the years amid greater invasions of privacy, harassment and intimidation, and incentives to self-censor both online and offline.

It has become more difficult to consolidate nascent democratic institutions in recent decades. More and more countries have remained Partly Free instead of moving toward full democratization. Still, the world is significantly freer today than it was 50 years ago. In 1973, 44 of 148 countries were rated Free. Today, 84 of 195 countries have earned that status. Many strong democracies that emerged during periods of progress have since withstood serious political, social, and economic pressures.

Ongoing protests against repression in Iran, Cuba, China, and other authoritarian countries suggest that people's desire for freedom is enduring, and that no setback should be regarded as permanent. Democratic societies' international solidarity, commitment to shared values, and continued support for human rights defenders are crucial to ensuring that the next 50 years bring the world closer to a state of freedom for all.

# Direct attacks on democracy and the human cost of authoritarian rule

**D**ramatic declines in political rights and civil liberties during 2022 were driven by direct assaults on democratic institutions, whether by foreign military forces or incumbent officials in positions of trust. War, coups d'état, and power grabs repeatedly posed an existential threat to elected governments around the world.

In February, Ukrainians were violently thrust into the heart of the global struggle to defend democracy against authoritarianism. President Vladimir Putin of Russia, having already overseen the illegal occupation of Ukrainian territory in Crimea and eastern Donbas since 2014, launched a full-scale invasion of the country. Whatever false justifications for this war of aggression have been promulgated by the Kremlin's state-controlled media, its clear purpose is to remove the elected leadership in Kyiv and deprive Ukrainians of their fundamental right to free self-government.

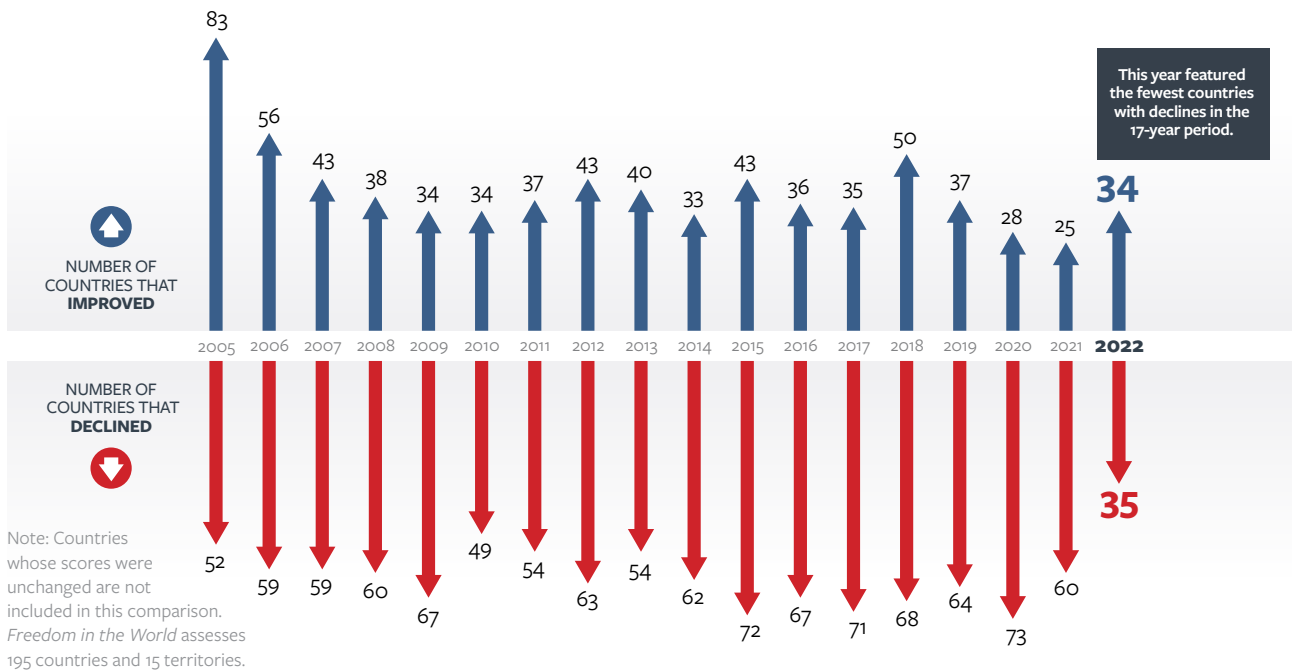
The war has been, as Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy put it, a disaster with a high price. In his desire to destroy democracy in Ukraine and deny Ukrainians their political rights and civil liberties, Putin has caused the deaths and injuries of thousands of Ukrainian civilians as well as soldiers on both sides, the destruction of crucial infrastructure, the displacement of millions of people from their homes, a proliferation of torture and sexual violence, and the intensification of already harsh repression within Russia.

## Military coups

While the assault on Ukraine's democracy came from a neighboring state, a growing number of countries faced attacks from within. Burkina Faso experienced the steepest

## 17 YEARS OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 17 years. However, events in 2022 generated the smallest margin—and the smallest number of countries with declines—since the negative pattern began.





Captain Ibrahim Traoré, installed as leader of Burkina Faso following a coup, gives a news conference in October 2022, in Ouagadougou. (Image credit: Stringer / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

decline in freedom in this year's report, losing a total of 23 points on the 100-point scale and falling from Partly Free to Not Free status as a result of two successive coups. In January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, leading a self-proclaimed Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration, ousted the elected president, suspended the constitution, dissolved the legislature, and instituted a curfew. Just eight months later, he was replaced by another officer, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who dismissed the transitional government, again suspended the constitution, closed the borders, and issued orders that prevented civil society organizations from operating. Both coup leaders ruled by decree and made only vague commitments to holding democratic elections in the future.

Events at the end of 2022 showed that even unsuccessful coup attempts can do immediate harm to the political system and human rights, especially when they take place in a country that has previously experienced authoritarianism. In December, Peru's President Pedro Castillo tried to avoid imminent impeachment by suspending Congress and declaring a nationwide curfew. Castillo's attempted "autogolpe," or self-coup, happened 30 years after President Alberto Fujimori seized legislative and judicial powers in the country with help from the military and began a decade-long dictatorship. Even though Castillo was quickly removed from office and replaced by the vice president, his arrest sparked large protests across the country and triggered

the implementation of a state of emergency that granted special powers to security services and limited the right to assembly. Over two dozen people were killed and hundreds were injured in December alone as police responded to the protests with deadly force, and unrest continued into the new year. The crisis caused the country to drop from Free to Partly Free status and threatened to further undermine a political system that has endured multiple presidential resignations and impeachments in recent years.

In addition to the dangers they pose in the moment, coups and coup attempts can have repercussions that substantially degrade protections for human rights in the long run. Thailand's civil society continues to feel the effects of a 2014 coup by army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha. Perceived critics of the military-backed government face charges under *lèse-majesté* laws, which forbid insulting the monarchy, and human rights organizations were subjected to increasingly intense legal harassment in 2022. The ruling junta in Guinea, which came to power in a 2021 coup, has continued to roll back rights and reverse the democratic gains of the past decade, banning all political protests last year. Since a 2021 coup in Myanmar, the military junta there has waged a relentless and brutal campaign of violence across the country, detaining and killing thousands of people, displacing approximately one million residents, and destroying an experiment with elected civilian rule that the military itself had initiated with a new constitution in 2008.

In Turkey, a failed 2016 coup attempt has cast a long shadow over political rights and civil liberties. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) used the incident to justify the removal of key democratic checks and balances and the elimination of political rivals. This process continued in 2022, as Turkey prepared for a pivotal presidential election in the first half of 2023. Ahead of the vote, the government adopted a new law to control the selection of judges who will review challenges to election results, and approved a “disinformation” law that could further stifle opposition campaigns and independent media.

### The threat from incumbent leaders

Democratic institutions suffered from abuses by powerful incumbents in 2022. After assuming office through elections, these leaders rejected the established democratic process and sought to rewrite the rules of the game to maintain their grip on power.

Tunisia experienced the third-largest score decline of any country as a direct result of the actions of the elected president. Kaïs Saïed, who had unilaterally dismissed the prime minister and suspended the parliament in 2021, continued to consolidate power by formally dissolving the parliament in March. He then rolled out a new constitution that gave more authority to the presidency and dismantled legislative and judicial checks on the executive branch, securing approval for the document through a flawed referendum. December parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by most opposition parties, drew a voter turnout of just 11 percent and prompted calls from the opposition for Saïed to resign.

In El Salvador, the parliamentary supermajority gained by President Nayib Bukele’s allies in 2021 elections continued to help him undermine democratic controls. In March 2022, the legislature approved his request for a state of exception intended to address gang violence, which has led to the indefinite detention of tens of thousands of people, with

## CONTROLLING LAND BY CHANGING ITS PEOPLE

Governments and occupying powers in 21 countries and territories use a variety of methods to forcibly change the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance.

The infographic is set against a dark blue background and features three columns, each with a colored trapezoidal icon at the top. Each icon contains a white fist icon and a white symbol representing the method: an open book for Cultural Persecution, a person silhouette for Mass Detention and Expulsion, and a building for Directed Settlement. Below each icon is a grey box containing text about specific countries.

Method	Country/Territory	Description
Cultural Persecution	Ukraine	Russian occupation authorities have destroyed Ukrainian cultural sites, suppressed the Ukrainian language in education, and forcibly transferred Ukrainian children to Russia for adoption by Russian families.
	China	Communist Party authorities have forced Uyghur children to attend boarding schools away from their families and receive Mandarin-only instruction and indoctrination.
Mass Detention and Expulsion	Myanmar	The military has methodically destroyed the villages of Rohingya and other ethnic minority groups, forcing residents to flee.
	Ethiopia	Ongoing civil conflict in the Tigray region has resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people based on their ethnicity.
Directed Settlement	West Bank	Israeli authorities have promoted the growth of Israeli Jewish settlements and demolished Palestinian housing in the occupied West Bank.
	Tibet	Communist Party authorities have forcibly resettled members of ethnic minorities.



A woman holds an infant inside a school in Mekelle, within the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The school was turned into a temporary shelter for people displaced by conflict in the region. (Image credit: Reuters/Baz Ratner)

little regard for their due process rights. Under the state of exception, authorities have also suspended anticorruption mechanisms that would shed light on government spending and contracts. In September, Bukele announced that he would compete for a second term, a year after the Constitutional Court—newly packed with his appointees after a wholesale purge—overturned a ban on consecutive presidential terms.

The victory of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary's April 2022 elections was facilitated by his government's campaign since 2010 to systematically undermine the independence of the judiciary, opposition groups, the media, and nongovernmental organizations. Among other advantages, Fidesz benefited from legislative changes it had pushed through two years earlier, which raised the vote threshold that parties must reach to enter the parliament.

Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's warnings that he would not accept election results if he lost stoked mistrust in the democratic process among his supporters. After losing to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in a runoff, Bolsonaro avoided formally conceding, and his campaign later attempted to overturn the result in court by claiming that a computer error had disqualified large batches of votes. Just before Lula's January 1 inauguration, Bolsonaro traveled to the United States, avoiding participation in the traditional transfer of the presidential sash to the new leader. The next week, thousands of the former president's loyalists, who had repeatedly called

for a military coup against the new government, stormed Congress, the Supreme Court, and the presidential palace. Although the elected administration retained power and cracked down on the perpetrators, Brazilian democracy remained on the defensive after this destructive event.

## The worst excesses of unchecked power

When assessing the stakes of the struggle for democracy, it is important to remember the devastating costs that authoritarian rule can impose on entire populations. In the absence of any meaningful constraints on political power and the use of force, a growing number of regimes around the world have engaged in wholesale persecution of women or ethnic minority groups, in some cases drawing accusations of genocide.

Since overthrowing Afghanistan's elected government in 2021, the Taliban have presided over a catastrophic economic collapse, a surge in hunger and poverty, and mass emigration. Rather than taking steps that would reduce its international isolation, however, the regime has moved in the opposite direction. The Taliban authorities barred girls from attending secondary school in March 2022, effectively ending education for women after the sixth grade, and in December they ordered private and public universities to prohibit female students from attending classes, preventing women who already reached higher education from completing their



studies. Also in December, authorities issued a decree banning women from working in national and international nongovernmental organizations. Lacking any recourse within the political system, Afghan women took their demands to the streets, where they were met with water cannons, beatings, and arrests.

The number of countries and territories where the government or an occupying power is deliberately changing the ethnic composition of the population in order to destroy a culture or tip the political balance increased from 19 to 21 last year. Ethiopia and Ukraine were added to the list, joining longtime sites of forced ethnic change like China and Myanmar.

In Ethiopia, the ongoing civil conflict centered on the northern Tigray region has resulted in, among other abuses, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes on the basis of their ethnicity. Like other countries and territories in the Not Free category, Ethiopia lacks many aspects of the rule of law that might protect its citizens' fundamental human rights.

Moscow's occupation of Crimea and eastern Donbas has entailed a long-standing campaign of forced ethnic change in those Ukrainian territories. Since 2014, many Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians have left the regions, driven not only by political persecution and the violence of war but also by overt policies of Russification, including encouragement

**When assessing the stakes of the struggle for democracy, it is important to remember the devastating costs that authoritarian rule can impose on entire populations.**

of migration from Russia, transfers of local prisoners and conscripts to Russia, deportations of those who refuse Russian citizenship, and repression of the Ukrainian and Tatar cultures and languages within the education system. These practices were expanded to other parts of occupied Ukraine after the full-scale invasion, and augmented with horrific projects like the mass abduction and removal of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Forced ethnic change is also a matter of official policy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which aims to deliberately break up the cultures and geographic concentrations of ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia. Among the 57 Not Free countries in the world, China ranks near the absolute bottom in terms of overall political rights and civil liberties. It is joined there by Myanmar, where the military has engaged in violent attacks on and expulsions of the Rohingya population as well as several other ethnic groups.

# A possible turning point for global freedom

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There were signs during the past year that the world's long freedom recession may be bottoming out, which would set the stage for a future recovery. The gap between the number of countries that registered overall improvements in political rights and civil liberties and those that registered overall declines in 2022 was the narrowest it has ever been through 17 consecutive years of deterioration. The number of countries with declines, at 35, was the smallest recorded since the negative pattern began. Thirty-four countries registered improvements.

The gains came in various forms. Eight countries registered modest improvements in civil liberties due to the rollback of COVID-19 restrictions that had disproportionately infringed on the freedoms of assembly and movement. But the most significant positive developments were driven by competitive elections in Latin America and Africa, with politicians and ordinary people in the affected countries reaffirming their commitment to the democratic process.

The year also brought fresh evidence of the limits of authoritarian power, as key regimes faltered in their attempts to exert influence at international organizations and their internal governance flaws led to dramatic policy setbacks.

## Consolidating democracy through elections

Two countries, Lesotho and Colombia, improved from Partly Free to Free last year following successful competitive elections. In Lesotho, Sam Matekane's Revolution for Prosperity party won a plurality of seats in the parliament and replaced the incumbent government. Representing a departure from years of instability, the elections were hailed as fair and peaceful by observers from numerous international organizations. In Colombia, a broad coalition enabled Gustavo Petro to win the June presidential runoff vote, overcoming political forces associated with former president Álvaro Uribe, who has dominated the political scene since the early 2000s. The country had been making gains

in respect for fundamental rights even before the election period, as the government granted temporary protection permits to more Venezuelan refugees and the Constitutional Court decriminalized abortion.

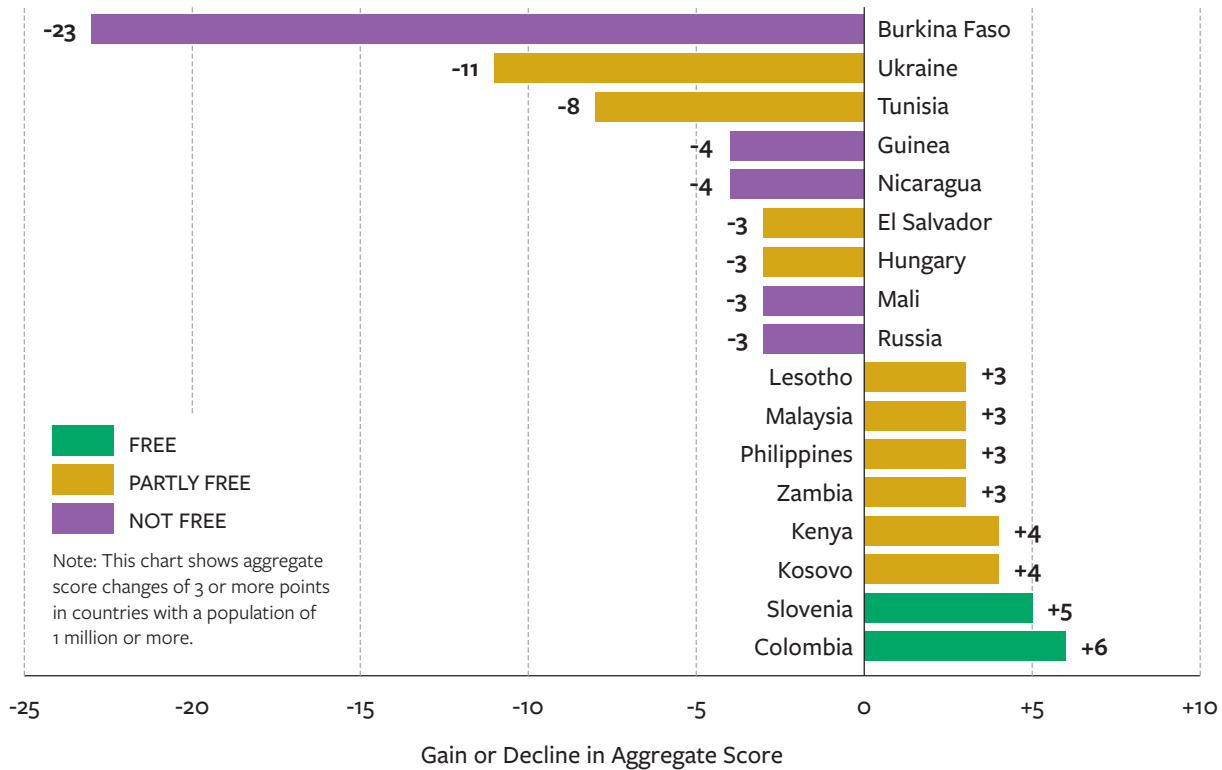
Establishing a strong record of peaceful political competition and democratic power transfers can be a long and arduous process. The elections in both Colombia and Lesotho were not without problems, and obstacles to further progress remain. Lesotho continues to struggle with ills including police brutality, a legacy of political influence exercised by the security agencies, and chronic political turmoil. In Colombia, politicians faced threats of violence while on the campaign trail, and illegal armed groups associated with the far left and far right remain a menace to the rule of law and civil society. The country is one of the deadliest in the world for human rights defenders.

The United States navigated its 2022 midterm elections without any violence of the sort that occurred during the January 2021 assault on the Capitol. The elections produced a divided Congress, with the Republican Party winning a narrow majority in the House of Representatives while the Democratic Party maintained control in the Senate. Although hundreds of Republican candidates who explicitly denied the legitimacy of President Joseph Biden's victory over former president Donald Trump in the 2020 election ran for office across the country, they lost in almost all key statewide races. This comparative stability on the political front was offset by the Supreme Court's removal of constitutional protections against strict abortion bans.

In Slovenia, a competitive election with the highest voter turnout in 20 years resulted in defeat for the right-wing populist government, which had repeatedly threatened media freedom and other democratic norms. Kenya held what observers hailed as its most transparent presidential election ever, and the results were confirmed by an independent Supreme Court. The country's political leaders notably refrained from the boycotts and incitement of ethnic violence that had disrupted some previous elections.

## LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2022

Gains in aggregate score reflect improvements in conditions for political rights and civil liberties.



### Checks on autocrats’ international influence

Authoritarian powers have made an effort to reshape the international system by exercising their influence at the United Nations. They have embraced UN participation and multilateralism primarily as a means of defending themselves against international mechanisms aimed at transparency and accountability. Elected five times to the UN Human Rights Council, the Chinese government has repeatedly blocked resolutions addressing its own policies. It has also joined with its counterparts from Iran, Belarus, North Korea, Cuba, and other member states in the so-called Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations to criticize the use of sanctions.

Regional organizations too have been used to prop up autocrats. The Russian-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), for example, deployed troops in January 2022 to protect Kazakhstan’s President Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev from large-scale antigovernment protests sparked by a sharp rise in fuel prices.

However, authoritarian cooperation is motivated by narrow self-interest and centers on low-cost actions, meaning it can fracture when regimes’ priorities diverge or they encounter determined democratic pressure. The CSTO’s response to the crisis in Kazakhstan, for instance, stood in stark contrast to the organization’s failure to assist Armenia, the only member state that is rated Partly Free, as it suffered repeated attacks on its sovereign territory by fellow member state Azerbaijan.

Few of Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian allies have openly supported his war of aggression against Ukraine. CCP leader Xi Jinping has not endorsed the invasion or provided military support despite describing the bilateral partnership as having “no limits” early in 2022. The countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia are often seen as lying within Moscow’s geopolitical orbit, but Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have declined to recognize Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territory, and they have all complied with sanctions against Russian banks. The Kremlin’s most steadfast ally in the region continues to be President Alyksandr Lukashenka of Belarus, who is dependent on Russian support to maintain his own tenuous grip on power.



Valentyna Buhaiova embraces Ukrainian marines in her home village of Kyselivka, outside of Kherson, Ukraine, in November 2022. Ukrainian forces had recently retaken Kyselivka, liberating it from Russian occupation. (Image credit: Reuters/Valentyn Ogirenko)

Meanwhile, democracies are standing up for human rights at international organizations. After years of being shielded by diplomats from Russia and China, Myanmar's junta was condemned by the UN Security Council in December for using violent tactics against prodemocracy activists. Similarly, despite the presence of authoritarian member states, the UN Human Rights Council voted to suspend Russia in April. In October, the council went further, appointing a special rapporteur to monitor the human rights situation in Russia by a vote of 17 to 6.

Venezuela was denied a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in October elections by the General Assembly. While most regional groups did not nominate more candidate countries than available seats, democratic Costa Rica and Chile both ran to block Venezuela's bid for a seat from the Latin America and Caribbean group. In December, Iran was removed from the UN Commission on the Status of Women and prevented from serving the rest of its four-year term as a result of a resolution introduced by the United States and supported by 28 other countries. The measure noted that the Iranian government's campaign to suppress the rights of women and girls by using force against protesters flew in the face of the UN body's mission to promote gender equality.

The contest between democratic and authoritarian norms at international organizations is far from over. But the positive developments of the past year should encourage even more active democratic engagement in multilateral forums.

## Control over competence

Autocrats' behavior at the international level is a reflection of their governing methods at home, where in the absence of a genuine popular mandate, they rely on a crude combination of corruption and force to maintain control. The democratic institutions that might moderate graft and state violence—such as opposition parties, independent courts, a free press, and civil society groups—are suppressed as potential threats to the leader's power. When such corrosive problems are allowed to go unchecked, they can undermine the regime's own goals and threaten the lives of ordinary people.

Corruption comes at a high cost to both public services and government revenue. In Venezuela, endemic corruption orchestrated by the regime of Nicolás Maduro has stripped the land of natural resources and undermined crucial infrastructure, impoverishing the population and impeding the government's ability to address health and economic emergencies. The country consequently faces an ongoing humanitarian crisis, with shortages of electricity, medicine, and food. Over seven million people have fled abroad.

In Russia, Putin's long history of enabling corruption at the highest levels has left him unable to fulfill the goals of his war of aggression. Despite the fact that the Kremlin spent hundreds of billions of dollars on modernizing the Russian military over the last two decades, it remains a poorly

equipped force, with soldiers who lack food and basic medical supplies and use Soviet-era maps and weapons. Many in the United States and elsewhere believed Putin’s boasts that Russian military capabilities matched those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and far outmatched those of Ukraine, but the progress of the war quickly disproved those claims. The families of Russian conscripts are now being asked to provide them with everything from body armor to gauze for bandages. None of this has stopped the Kremlin from sending such soldiers to their deaths as the war grinds on, since admitting defeat would threaten the illusion of strength and shrewdness on which Putin’s illegitimate authority partly depends.

As with corruption, the need to maintain control through overwhelming force—and the lack of mechanisms to moderate it—can interfere with an autocrat’s ability to adjust policy in response to public frustrations. China’s disastrous experience with the CCP’s “zero COVID” policy illustrated what can happen to people caught in an authoritarian system that is more focused on compelling their obedience than ensuring their well-being.

President Xi, who has been in power since 2012 and secured a third term as CCP leader in October 2022, has repeatedly claimed that China’s political system is superior to democracy in providing stability, prosperity, and even protection from the spread of COVID-19. In dealing with the health threat, CCP officials leaned on existing tools of repression, expanded

the use of surveillance technologies, and imposed mass quarantines on whole cities that disproportionately restricted freedom of movement and often threatened access to food and medical care. In December 2022, the CCP abruptly abandoned zero-COVID restrictions without adequate preparation. At the end of the month, reports emerged of overwhelmed hospitals and as many as 1 million new infections per day.

The about-face was triggered in part by nationwide protests that followed a deadly residential fire in Urumqi in late November, in which both victims and rescuers were reportedly hampered by COVID-related restrictions on movement. As Freedom House’s *China Dissent Monitor* has shown, protests in China on a variety of issues are not uncommon. Despite the likelihood of grave punishments, citizens participated in 638 demonstrations and similar dissent events between June and September 2022. The zero-COVID protests in the wake of the Urumqi blaze were preceded by other acts of defiance, including the “bridge man” protest against the central government in Beijing in October. But even in the face of clear public outrage on a national scale, the CCP remains unable to address people’s underlying grievances. It failed to make health restrictions more tailored or humane, or to lift them with appropriate caution. Indeed the party provoked further anger by promoting officials who were responsible for some of the greatest suffering, including Li Qiang, who had overseen harsh lockdowns as party chief in Shanghai.



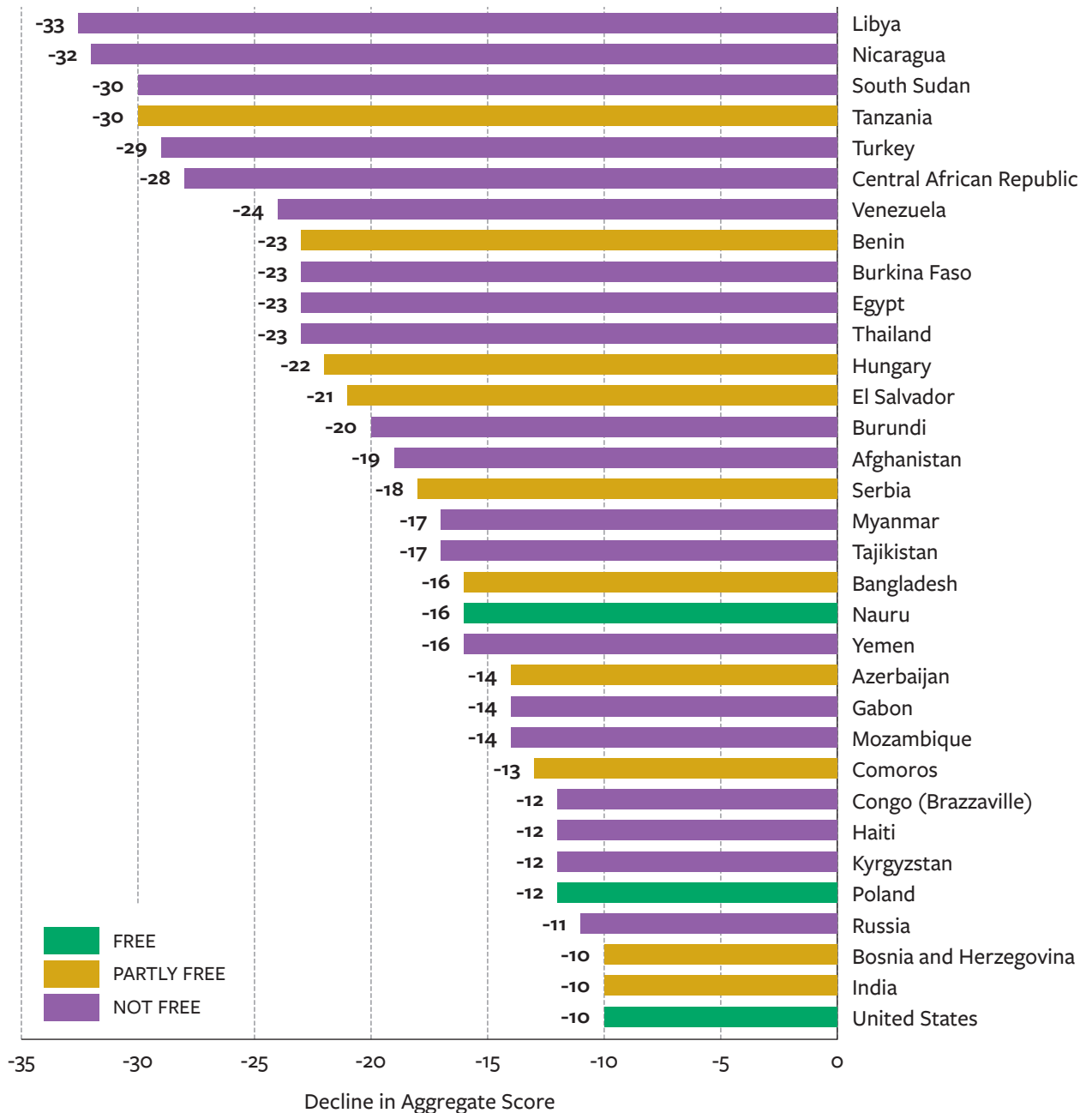
People hold white sheets of paper in protest over COVID-19 restrictions in Beijing on Nov. 27, 2022. Crowds had gathered for a vigil honoring the victims of a fire in Urumqi, which took place during COVID-19-related lockdowns in China. (Image credit: REUTERS/Thomas Peter)

The policy blunders committed by Moscow and Beijing demonstrate that the fallibility of authoritarian governments, and not just their malice, can take an incredibly large toll on human life. Corruption, criminality, and feckless leadership have made the Russian army far more deadly to soldiers and civilians on both sides of the front line, despite the force’s failure to achieve stated war

aims. Similarly, the Chinese government’s botched reversal of its procrustean COVID-19 policies may prove even more destructive than the years of brutal lockdowns themselves. Authoritarian shortcomings must be assessed with clear eyes. These regimes are unlikely to govern more effectively than democracies, but their errors are part of what makes them so dangerous.

### LARGEST 10-YEAR DECLINES

Dramatic declines in freedom have been observed in every region of the world.



# Free expression: A leading indicator of democratic decline

Freedom of expression, a fundamental component of democracy, has been under sustained attack around the world for the last 17 years. Of all the indicators that *Freedom in the World* uses to assess political rights and civil liberties, freedom of the media and freedom of personal expression have declined the most precipitously since 2005. This assault coincided with the rapid uptake of information and communication technologies that have effectively broken many states' media monopolies. In too many places, however, authorities responded to new forms of online expression with harsh offline punishments and technological innovations of their own.

## Press freedom in retreat

Freedom for independent journalism has plummeted. The number of countries and territories that have a score of 0 out of 4 on the media freedom indicator has ballooned from 14 to 33 during the 17 years of global democratic decline, as journalists faced persistent attacks from autocrats and their supporters while receiving inadequate protection from

intimidation and violence even in some democracies. The past year brought more of the same, with media freedom coming under pressure in at least 157 countries and territories assessed by *Freedom in the World*.

In Russia, a multiyear media crackdown went into overdrive as the government sought to eliminate domestic opposition to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian independent journalists and outlets had long contended with laws that labeled them as foreign agents, extremists, or “undesirable.” In 2022, the expansion of criminal laws targeting the spread of false information related to the war empowered Roskomnadzor, the federal media and telecommunications regulator, to block websites more aggressively without a court order. Authorities blocked access to most of the independent media outlets that were still available in the country, including Ekho Moskv, Dozhd, Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Meduza. Some foreign journalists were also denied entry to Russia.

Moscow's tactics have spread to Central Asia, where Kyrgyzstan has adopted many similar laws targeting the



A protester holds a placard during a demonstration at the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London. The demonstration was held in response to the closure of several media outlets in Hong Kong and concerns about media freedom. (Image credit: Hesther Ng/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

media. Kyrgyz authorities recently tried and failed to convict a prominent investigative journalist, Bolot Temirov, on dubious charges of forgery. In an outrageous violation of the rule of law, Temirov was summarily stripped of his citizenship and transported to Russia in late November 2022, despite the fact that he had been born in Kyrgyzstan.

## The number of countries and territories that have a score of 0 out of 4 on the media freedom indicator has ballooned from 14 to 33 during the 17 years of global democratic decline.

Journalists routinely face harassment and threats in reprisal for their efforts to expose corruption. Two reporters, including a Cable News Network (CNN) correspondent, fled Guatemala last year after they received explicit threats, while another was arrested by the government in July. José Rubén Zamora, director of the newspaper *El Periódico*, which has faced severe harassment in the past, was charged with financial crimes in what many observers describe as a bid to censor an outlet that has reported critically on the government of President Alejandro Giammattei. Zamora remained in pretrial detention through the end of the year, with the trial reportedly not scheduled to start until May 2023.

Authorities in a variety of countries failed to offer effective protections to media professionals who were at risk of extralegal violence from nonstate actors. Journalists reporting on the security situation in Haiti, which had worsened since the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, experienced an extraordinary amount of physical violence in 2022. Members of the media were executed by gangs, killed while in police custody, and shot at while on their way to work.

### The risks of personal expression

Beyond the news media, ordinary people are less free to express their views to others, whether online or off. Many governments have been quick to reapply existing repressive laws to the online sphere and adopt invasive technologies to monitor digital communication. Others continue to resort to old-fashioned methods of control over speech, like the use of human

informants and physical searches. The result is a pervasive sense of fear among civic activists, members of marginalized communities, and average citizens when discussing sensitive topics in public, semipublic, or private settings.

From 2005 to 2022, the number of countries and territories that scored a 0 out of 4 on this indicator rose from six to 15, signaling a nearly complete lack of freedom to voice antigovernment opinions even in private. In Nicaragua, years of worsening crackdowns on opposition to the regime of President Daniel Ortega culminated in show trials of dozens of people—accused of crimes ranging from treason to spreading false news and undermining national integrity—based almost solely on evidence that they made critical remarks about the government. Such cases clearly discourage others from speaking out. Conditions are at least as grim in Afghanistan, Belarus, Russian-occupied eastern Donbas, and Eritrea, where authorities have deployed networks of informants and checked people's phones to suppress the sharing of dissenting opinions.

The penalties for nonviolent criticism can be extreme. Myanmar's military junta executed prodemocracy activist Kyaw Min Yu, better known as Ko Jimmy, for speaking out against the 2021 military coup that displaced an elected civilian government. In August 2022, a terrorism court in Saudi Arabia sentenced Nourah bint Saeed al-Qahtani to 45 years in prison merely for social media posts, just weeks after handing a 34-year sentence to another woman, Salma al-Shehab, for sharing posts by Saudi dissidents. In Hong Kong, following Beijing's imposition of the draconian National Security Law in 2020, authorities began pursuing national security and sedition charges against both political activists and ordinary residents for expressing dissent, for example by playing protest songs, clapping in court, or putting up posters.

There are fewer and fewer spaces where people can express themselves without fear of surveillance. At a time when the internet has become fundamental to people's daily lives, virtually all online activities generate data that are subject to monitoring by authorities, whether directly or through commercial systems and advertising technology that can be exploited to reveal sensitive information. Many countries employ police units to search social media posts for banned forms of political, artistic, religious, or sexual expression. Networks of street cameras equipped with artificial intelligence can identify protesters and track their whereabouts. And the proliferation of spyware has made electronic surveillance potentially ubiquitous; even the presence of an internet-connected device can be enough to deter uninhibited discussion.



## TO STIFLE DEMOCRACY, SILENCE FREE SPEECH

Of all the indicators tracked by *Freedom in the World*, media freedom and freedom of personal expression have declined the most precipitously over the past 17 years.



No country can match the scale and sophistication of China's surveillance state, in which residents' activities are invasively monitored by public security cameras, urban grid managers, and automated systems that detect suspicious and banned behavior, including innocuous expressions of ethnic and religious identity. Workers at private digital platforms in China are required to censor an ever-changing list of prohibited terms and to notify authorities about users who dare to criticize the CCP. Those identified as dissidents can face consequences including forced disappearance and torture.

But surveillance has also chilled freedom of expression in countries rated Free and Partly Free. Technology companies are generally required to maintain a log of their users' online activities, and in many countries, they must share it with authorities through a process that lacks judicial oversight and guardrails against abuse. The growing and unregulated global market for commercial spyware has enabled infringements on the right to private expression that often stretch across international borders. Rather than collecting data or intercepting traffic at fixed points in the telecommunications

infrastructure, spyware targets a victim's smartphone or other electronic device regardless of its location, and allows the capture of phone records, contact lists, geolocation data, keyboard strokes, and even camera and microphone inputs. The Pegasus spyware product has been found on devices in France, Hungary, India, Israel, Mexico, and Poland. Victims included journalists and politicians, while the perpetrators remained unknown and unaccountable for their abuses.

These pernicious encroachments on freedom of expression pose an obvious threat to democracy. While professional journalists and media outlets disseminate information, ensure transparency, and hold the powerful to account, the freedom of personal expression reinforces individual autonomy and facilitates discussion of differing opinions. It is also crucial to fostering associations and communities within a larger society, including those based on ethnic, cultural, sexual, gender, and religious identities. The denial of press freedom and freedom of personal expression bolsters authoritarian control by cutting citizens off from accurate information and, just as importantly, from one another.

# Lessons from 50 years of *Freedom in the World*

Over the past five decades, people in every region of the world have demanded and built democracies even under extremely difficult circumstances. Once fully established, most democratic systems have stood strong against a wide array of challenges.

In 1973, when Freedom House published its first comprehensive assessment of political rights and civil liberties, only 44 of 148 countries were classified as Free. Today, 84 of 195 countries are Free. The varied paths that these countries followed show there is no single method for improving or protecting political rights and civil liberties. However, popular self-government through credible, competitive, free, and fair elections continues to be the hallmark of democracy and a guarantee of its associated benefits.

## A record of progress

The first editions of *Freedom in the World* coincided with the beginning of the “third wave” of democratization, when

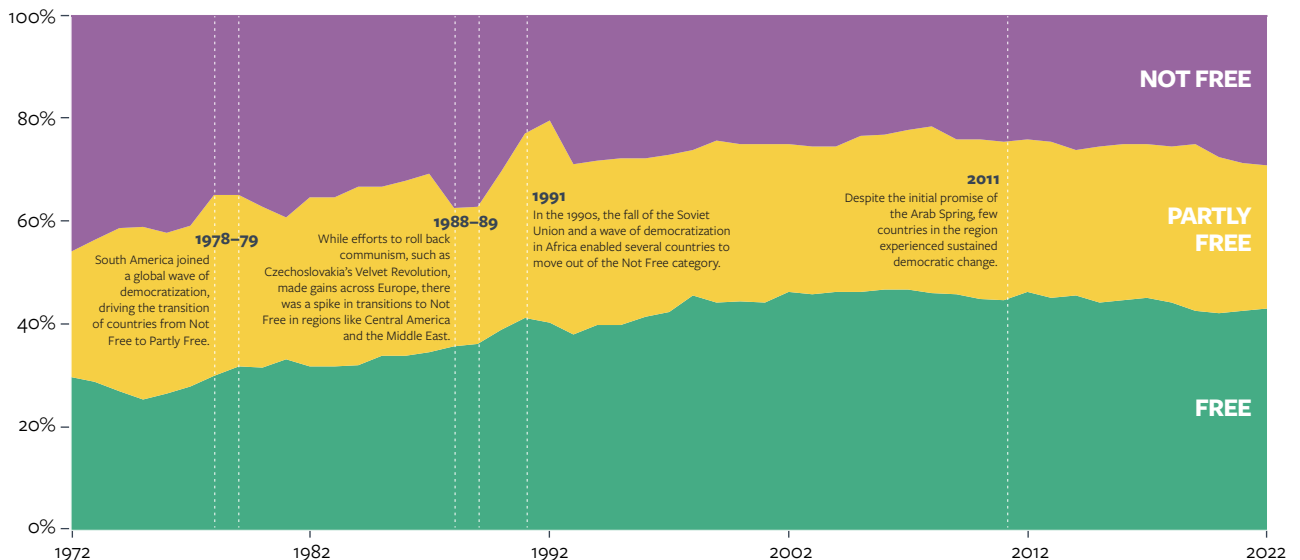
many military dictatorships were giving way to elected civilian leaders. A military junta in Greece collapsed in 1974 amid a confrontation with Turkey over control of Cyprus. Greek democracy was restored through general elections that were held just 142 days after the beginning of the crisis.

After right-wing dictator Francisco Franco died in 1975, Spain began its own transition to democracy, which took years and required overcoming the commitment of the armed forces to the old regime. The transition was confirmed through a free general election in 1977 and the adoption of a new constitution the following year. Spain’s democracy proved resilient in the early 1980s, when the government survived a coup attempt and a second general election resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to the socialist opposition.

Positive change followed in Latin America. After a disastrous invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982, the military leaders who had presided over Argentina’s “dirty war”—a bloody campaign of state terrorism against political

## THE EBB AND FLOW OF DEMOCRATIZATION

The share of countries rated Free has generally increased over the past 50 years, but progress faltered beginning in the early 2000s.



dissidents—finally stepped down, allowing for a general election that returned the country to civilian rule. Democracy also returned to Brazil after the military, which had begun to oversee gradual political liberalization, lost control in the 1985 elections. A military regime that caused Uruguay to be called “the torture chamber of Latin America” faltered after a failed attempt to reform the constitution in 1980, and ended with elections four years later. Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship in Chile also came to an end through the power of the ballot box when referendum voters rejected a proposal to give the general eight more years in office.

In the 1990s, Taiwan cemented a status of Free after holding its first direct presidential election, having previously ended 38 years of martial law in 1988 and instituted full multiparty legislative elections a few years later. In 1992, South Korea elected its first civilian president since 1961. South Africa, which was rated Free for the first time in the 1994–95 edition of *Freedom in the World*, broke from a violent and entrenched system of racist hierarchy in order to create the conditions for an inclusive, free, and fair election. The balloting resulted in the elevation of Nelson Mandela to the presidency and the formation of a new government of national unity.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and of the Soviet Union itself in 1991 eventually brought freedom to a host of Central and Eastern European states, many of which sought closer ties to their fellow democracies in Western Europe. In 2004 alone, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia all joined the European Union, with Romania and Bulgaria following in 2007.

Despite pressure from illiberal forces since the mid-2000s, the gains of the third wave of democratization have mostly held. Consolidated democracies, where political rights and civil liberties have been secured, continue to endure in a dangerous world.

## Setbacks and slowdowns

The 50 years of data generated by *Freedom in the World* offer heartening proof that democratic progress is always possible. Forty countries that exist today have always had the status of Free in the report, while only 12 countries that exist today have always been Not Free. Whereas Free countries tend to stay Free for decades, Not Free and Partly Free countries are less static, often experiencing waves of liberalization or repression that move them from one category to another.

However, the possibility of progress does not make it inevitable. The overall decline in global freedom over the last two decades has created a more hostile environment for individual countries’ democratization efforts and provided transnational support for illiberal leaders. *Freedom in the World* data show that consolidating and protecting nascent democratic institutions has become more difficult than in the heyday of democratization following the end of the Cold War. More and more countries are remaining Partly Free instead of continuing their march to Free status. Worryingly, some Free countries are losing ground, including India, which was downgraded to Partly Free two years ago, and Peru, which was downgraded in this edition after its latest, one-year stint in the Free category.

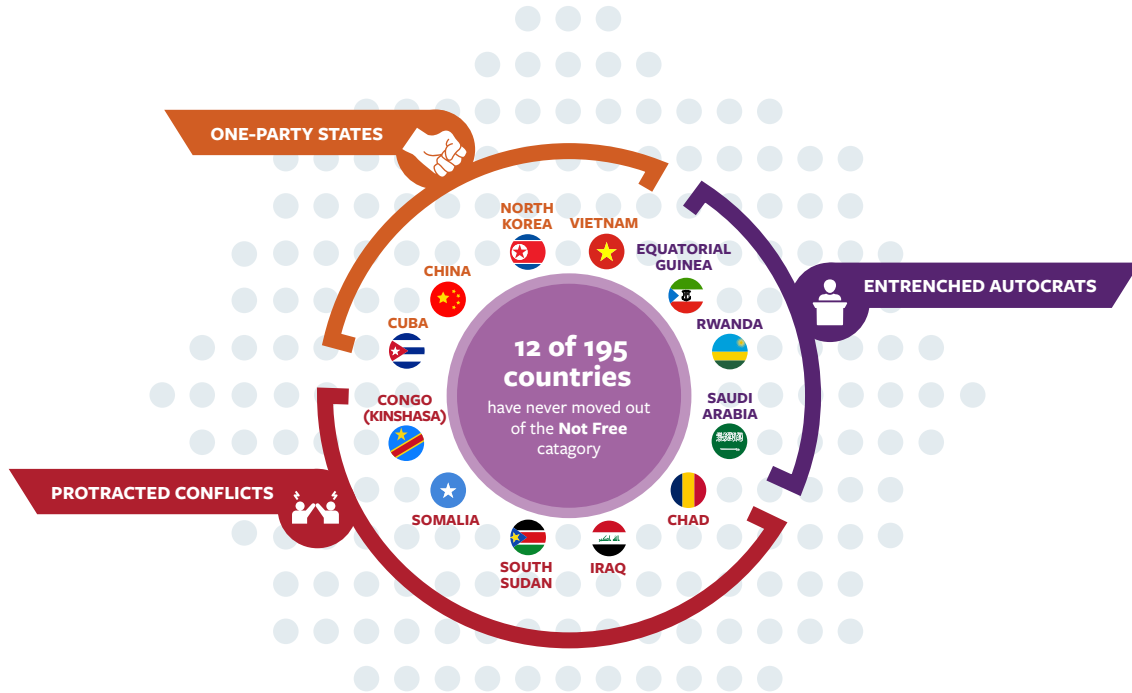
**Popular self-government through credible, competitive, free, and fair elections continues to be the hallmark of democracy and a guarantee of its associated benefits.**

Democratization has also failed to take hold in certain clusters of countries. Most of the states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union remain dominated by strongmen who transformed Soviet-era connections into kleptocratic networks, which have enriched their members while impoverishing ordinary citizens. These corrupt authoritarian regimes have also fomented instability and threatened democracies across the region. In addition to Moscow’s war against Ukraine, other recent conflicts include border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the growing incursions by Azerbaijani forces into Armenia.

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, which began by driving out Tunisian dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and sparked new hope for democratization in North Africa and the Middle East, ended in disappointment. Monarchs in Jordan and Morocco approved modest or illusory constitutional reforms in a bid to defuse popular discontent with their rule, while the hereditary rulers of the wealthy Persian Gulf region moved to stamp out any embers of dissent at home and assist authoritarian partners elsewhere. Security forces cracked down on prodemocracy protesters in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and the ensuing violence devolved into civil wars that were made even more chaotic by multiple foreign interventions. Two years

## STILL WAITING FOR A CHANCE AT FREEDOM

Most of the countries now rated Not Free have spent at least some time in the Partly Free band over the past 50 years, but these 12 holdouts have never left the Not Free category since their first Freedom in the World analysis.



Vietnam and South Sudan have been assessed since 1976 and 2011, respectively. All other countries above have been assessed since 1972.

after the revolution in Egypt, the military removed the elected president through a coup, and instituted a new and even more repressive authoritarian regime.

In Africa, countries such as Burundi, the Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, and Uganda showed promise at times but later saw their status improvements reversed, while more recent backsliding in Benin and Senegal led both to drop from Free to Partly Free status. Mali, which had been rated Free since 1995, was rocked by a military coup and rebel insurgencies in 2012 that pulled it down to Not Free.

### The imperative of solidarity

Democracies must maintain external pressure on authoritarian regimes and make sure that in maneuvering to thwart one dictator's acts of aggression, they do not cultivate partnerships with other despots or downplay human rights

principles in their foreign policies. International solidarity and support will remain vital to the expansion of political rights and civil liberties worldwide.

Advocacy for human rights norms must also be paired with support for the key proponents of democratic values within their respective countries: human rights defenders. Today, in every region of the world, people striving to build more democratic societies and expand the exercise of fundamental freedoms are instead being subjected to arbitrary detention and sentenced to lengthy terms in prison, where they often experience torture and other cruel or degrading treatment.

Supporting the work of human rights defenders is essential for the promotion of freedom in both open and closed political spaces. Human rights defenders are agents of change. In 2022, for instance, the Indonesian parliament

passed a law against sexual violence after a years-long advocacy campaign by civil society groups. The previous year, women’s rights activists in El Salvador secured a favorable ruling at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the country’s broad ban on abortion.

Human rights defenders are sometimes the only ones in their countries with the will and capacity to protect others against severe abuses, expose official wrongdoing, and alert the rest of the world to acts of repression, often at considerable risk to their safety. Activists in Cameroon have received death threats for documenting human rights violations amid a conflict between security forces and separatists in the country’s Anglophone regions. An activist and journalist in Vietnam who helped to expose the disastrous impact of a 2016 chemical spill was sentenced to seven years in prison the following year. In addition to facing intimidation, legal censure, harassment, and physical assaults, hundreds of rights defenders are killed every year.

Democratic governments must recommit not only to standing up for these activists in their public statements and diplomacy, but also to providing concrete support and protection in the form of emergency assistance, capacity-building programs, and democracy shelters. Though unarmed, human rights defenders are on the front lines of the global struggle for freedom. They should never be treated as if the struggle is theirs alone.

## The desire for freedom

More than anything else, five decades of *Freedom in the World* reports demonstrate that the demand for freedom is universal. The years have shown that popular challenges to authoritarian rule are a recurring theme in even the most repressive societies.

Tanks smashed the prodemocracy movement that made its stand in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in 1989, and the CCP’s fear of renewed calls for freedom has motivated escalating

## PUTTING POINTS ON THE BOARD FOR DEMOCRACY

Despite the overall decline in freedom in 2022, small wins occurred around the world. Below are just a few examples of these incremental gains for justice and democracy.



## The years have shown that popular challenges to authoritarian rule are a recurring theme in even the most repressive societies.

campaigns of repression against targets including mainland dissidents, ethnic and religious minority populations, and the people of Hong Kong. But Beijing's rejection of direct executive elections in Hong Kong in 2014 led to a series of massive protests that signaled abiding public support for universal suffrage. And despite crackdowns on demonstrations large and small, protests of all types continue across the mainland.

Cuba, with its long history of repression and international isolation, has been shaken by growing resistance to the regime. Demonstrations in July 2021 that drew attention to a dearth of fundamental freedoms and serious economic problems marked the largest antigovernment mobilization since the *Maleconazo* protests of 1994, which were sparked by police blocking Cubans from fleeing the country by boat. In both cases, security forces responded violently, yet outbreaks of dissent continue. People took to the streets again in 2022 to protest mismanaged infrastructure in the wake of hurricane-related blackouts.

Recent events in Iran are another reminder that millions of people are willing to call for democracy and defend their rights even at great personal risk. The current regime itself took power after popular protests brought down the monarchy in 1979, and Iranians have repeatedly voiced their objections over the years as it descended deeper into dictatorship. In 2009, shortly before the Arab Spring, citizens protested for the better part of a year in what came to be known as the Green Movement, after a fraudulent election handed victory to incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Conditions have worsened since then, with authorities using lethal violence to put down successive waves of protests. In 2022, fresh demonstrations were sparked by the death in custody of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young woman arrested by the morality police. The movement spread to more than 80 cities and was viciously opposed by the government, resulting in hundreds of deaths on the streets, thousands of arrests, and a growing number of summary executions.

Reflecting on the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Raymond Gastil wrote in the 1980 edition of the *Freedom in the World* report: "Iran will remain for generations a difficult land in which to institutionalize democracy. Yet I suggest Iranians will repeatedly try, that they will be unsatisfied with anything else.... If the Revolution establishes a new tyranny, these people will soon feel cheated and strive again for freedom." This prediction has certainly proven true for Iranians, and the same could be said for people everywhere. So long as human beings remain true to their natural yearning for liberty, authoritarians will never be secure, and the global movement for democracy will never be defeated.

## What is democracy?

Fundamental to the restoration of democracy is a correct understanding of what it is. The word democracy has been applied, rightly or wrongly, to states of all types, from the “Democratic People’s Republic” of North Korea to the freest polities in Scandinavia. A December 2021 joint op-ed by the Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the United States called both of their dictatorships “democratic.” Misappropriation of the word is a testament to democracy’s widespread appeal. Yet this unfortunate practice has generated confusion, allowing opponents to simultaneously claim democratic credentials and argue that actual democracies are ineffective or hypocritical.

Moreover, it has contributed to a misperception that all democracy requires is the regular performance of elections. Democracy means more than just majority rule, however. In its ideal form, it is a governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights. It is a network of mutually reinforcing structures in which those exercising power are subject to checks

both within and outside the state, for example, from independent courts, an independent press, and civil society. It requires an openness to alternations in power, with rival candidates or parties competing fairly to govern for the good of the public as a whole, not just themselves or those who voted for them. It creates a level playing field so that all people, no matter the circumstances of their birth or background, can enjoy the universal human rights to which they are entitled and participate in politics and governance.

Democracy is also more than just an ideal. It is a practical engine of self-correction and improvement that empowers people to constantly, peacefully struggle toward that ideal. When one part of the system falters, the others can be used as tools to repair and strengthen it. This unique and inherent capacity for self-correction is what makes democracy so successful at delivering long-term stability and prosperity. No democracy in the real world is perfect, and those demanding democracy in places like Cuba and Hong Kong are not demanding perfection. What they desire are the freedoms and the institutions that will allow them to create a better life and a more just society over time.

## Freedom in the World Methodology

*Freedom in the World 2023* evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2022. Each country and territory is assigned between 0 and 4 points on a series of 25 indicators, for an aggregate score of up to 100. The indicators are grouped into the categories of political rights (0–40) and civil liberties (0–60), whose totals are weighted equally to determine whether the country or territory has an overall status of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

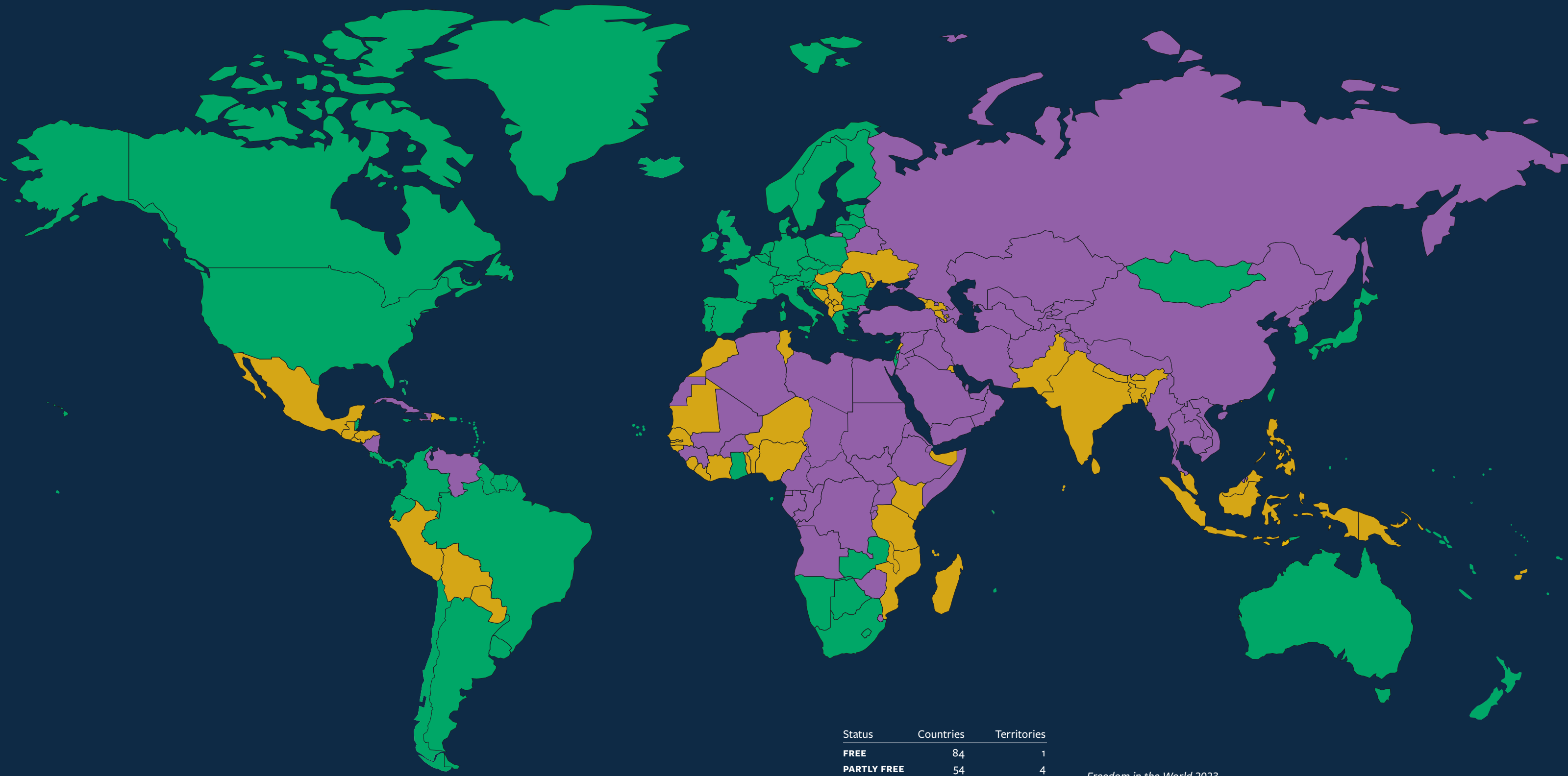
The methodology, which is derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is applied to all countries and territories, irrespective of geographic location,

ethnic or religious composition, or level of economic development.

*Freedom in the World* assesses the real-world rights and freedoms enjoyed by individuals, rather than governments or government performance per se. Political rights and civil liberties can be affected by both state and nonstate actors, including insurgents and other armed groups.

For complete information on the methodology, visit <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/research-methodology>.

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023



■ FREE   
 ■ PARTLY FREE   
 ■ NOT FREE

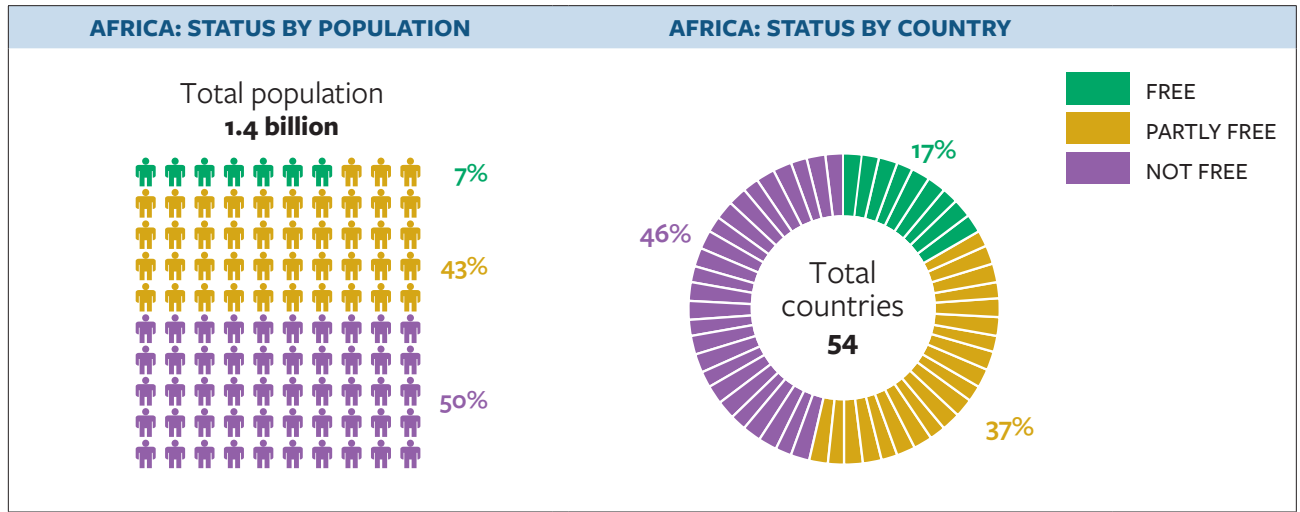
Status	Countries	Territories
<b>FREE</b>	84	1
<b>PARTLY FREE</b>	54	4
<b>NOT FREE</b>	57	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>15</b>

*Freedom in the World 2023* assessed 210 countries and territories around the globe.



# Regional Trends

## AFRICA: Transfers of power, for better or worse



Changes in leadership were a major tension point in Africa over the past year. Chronic problems such as corruption and misgovernance, combined with the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have left African states more vulnerable to irregular seizures of power by military or executive officials. Despite these threats, however, several countries held free and fair elections that ushered in new governments and reinforced democratic institutions.

In Burkina Faso, the year's two military coups eliminated many of the gains from a 2014 political transition, sidelined electoral bodies and accountability mechanisms, and exacerbated a security crisis in which Islamist militant activity has displaced millions of people. But the country is not an outlier in the region: coup attempts were also made during 2022 in Guinea-Bissau, The Gambia, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

Past coups have had lasting repercussions for political rights and civil liberties. In Guinea, the military junta that took control in 2021 has delayed a planned return to civilian rule until January 2025, incarcerated its critics, and brutally repressed street protests. Similarly, in the wake of Mali's 2021 coup, the military authorities scrapped elections that

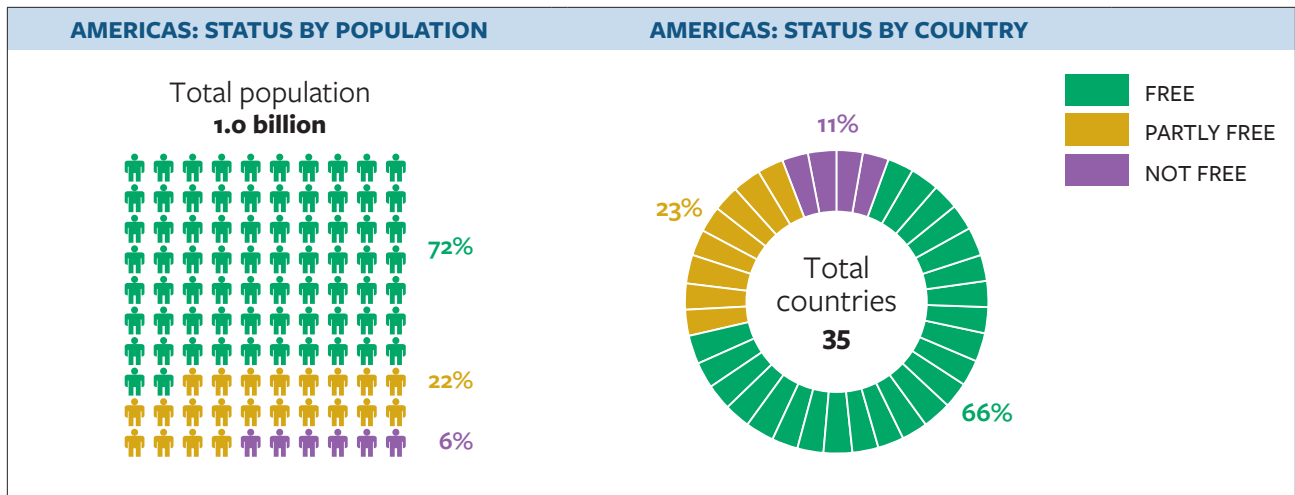
had been scheduled for February 2022. Under international pressure, they announced a transition plan that would culminate in a presidential vote in 2024. Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed, who had asserted extraordinary powers and suspended the parliament in 2021, pressed ahead with his unilateral overhaul of the political system, mounting a flawed constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections that were boycotted by the opposition and the vast majority of eligible voters.

Other power transfers have been far more democratic. Kenya's election featured increased transparency, fresh evidence of judicial independence, and a peaceful handover of the presidency from one political bloc to another. The process represented a stark improvement over previous balloting, which has repeatedly been marred by ethnic violence, electoral misconduct, and politicians' refusal to accept defeat. In Lesotho, a newly established party secured a legitimate victory in general elections, and Zambia's successful rotation of power through elections in 2021 led to some progress in the fight against corruption, greater transparency and access to information, and fewer restrictions on freedom of assembly in 2022.

Countries with a record of respecting term limits and ensuring orderly presidential succession exhibited notable signs of good governance during the year. In Botswana, President Mokgweetsi Masisi held a historic meeting with representatives of a leading LGBT+ rights organization and promised to work toward decriminalizing same-sex relations. Liberia’s government implemented new initiatives to counter human trafficking,

which have led to successful prosecutions. And under President Samia Suluhu Hassan in Tanzania, civil society groups enjoyed somewhat more space to operate after a period of intense repression under the previous administration. These examples underscore the potential for further democratic gains in the region if the virtuous circle of free elections and policy improvements is allowed to take hold.

## AMERICAS: Despite successful elections, freedom remains in jeopardy



Although *Freedom in the World* has recorded the downfall of many long-standing dictatorships in the Americas over the last 50 years, the countries of the region continue to grapple with serious threats to political stability and fundamental rights. The relaxation of harsh or abusively enforced COVID-19 restrictions resulted in some improvements to freedom of movement in 2022, but dire political, economic, and humanitarian crises in repressive settings such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have reignited mass emigration. Independent media are also under pressure as powerful figures resist public scrutiny: authorities in Guatemala arrested the founder and president of one of the country’s most prominent newspapers, and journalists in Uruguay faced threats and lawsuits for their reporting.

Rotations of power through elections continued to provide opportunities for democratic progress, though the risk of antidemocratic breakdowns persisted. Free, fair, and

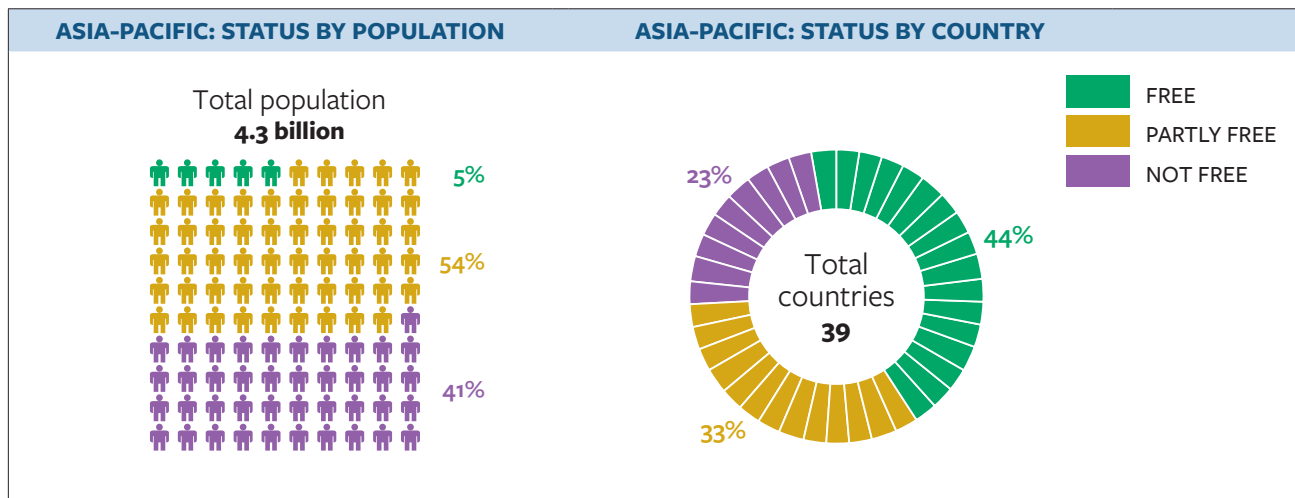
competitive balloting in two of the region’s most populous countries led to victories for opposition candidates. In Colombia, Gustavo Petro became the nation’s first left-wing president, and his running mate, Francia Márquez, became the first Black woman to serve as vice president. Another leftist challenger, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, defeated incumbent Jair Bolsonaro for the presidency of Brazil, and calls for a military coup to reverse this outcome were rebuffed amid violence by Bolsonaro’s supporters. But Pedro Castillo, who rose from obscurity to become Peru’s president in 2021, was impeached and arrested after an unsuccessful attempt to dissolve Congress, leaving his successor, former vice president Dina Boluarte, to cope with widespread protests and a lethal crackdown by security forces.

Perennial weaknesses in the rule of law remained a challenge for many countries in the region. Amid a prolonged political vacuum in Haiti, gangs took over the capital and violently

restricted people’s freedom of movement and access to basic resources. President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador declared a state of exception and suspended constitutional rights as part of a crackdown on gangs. The resulting arbitrary arrests, deaths in custody, lack of due process, and restrictions on speech severely damaged civil liberties. In neighboring Honduras, President Xiomara Castro

similarly announced a state of exception and suspended constitutional protections in many neighborhoods, ordering the military to lead the campaign against gang violence. These official responses were aimed at addressing a genuine threat to public security, but their undemocratic methods made a poor foundation for the observance of basic freedoms in the future.

## ASIA-PACIFIC: *Democracy movements contend with authoritarian retrenchment*



While some countries in the Asia-Pacific region have overcome decades of dictatorship to establish resilient democracies, authoritarian forces elsewhere continue to push back against domestic calls for liberty and justice.

Examples of progress in 2022 were largely driven by prodemocracy political movements and small improvements in judicial independence, anticorruption efforts, and freedom of movement. In Sri Lanka, protesters persevered through police violence and ultimately forced the resignation of the long-dominant Rajapaksa family from their multiple positions in government, though years of mismanagement left the country with serious economic and governance challenges. In Malaysia, the results of general elections offered the promise of political and social reforms, and the judiciary displayed increased independence by upholding the 2020 corruption conviction of former prime minister Najib Razak. The Philippines also held elections, and

while the son of a former dictator won the presidency, the competitive campaign had the effect of mobilizing millions of young voters. In Myanmar, broad-based resistance to the military junta that ousted elected leaders in 2021 kept the regime from consolidating control over the country or gaining international legitimacy.

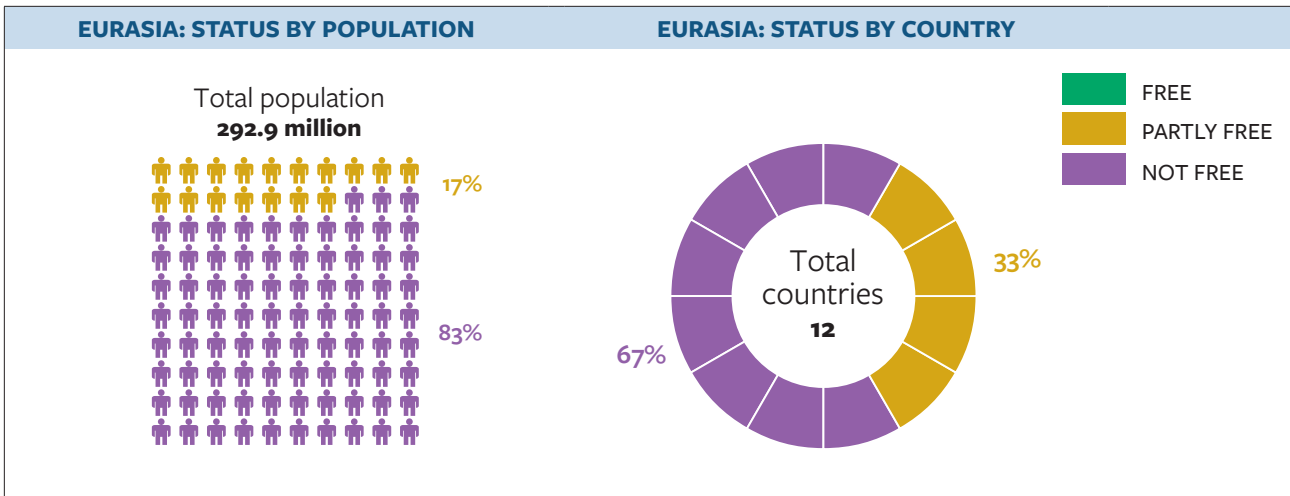
Residents of several countries, including India and Australia, enjoyed greater freedom of movement following the rollback of COVID-19 restrictions. However, democratic rights in India remain under pressure, particularly for marginalized groups, with authorities in Uttar Pradesh responding to Muslim-led protests by demolishing the property of Muslim citizens. In Vietnam, a one-party state where freedom is still heavily restricted, the government made notable efforts to combat COVID-19-related corruption, including by investigating and prosecuting officials implicated in price-fixing and bribery scandals.

Despite these limited gains, the freedoms of expression, belief, and association came under attack in other settings from across the democratic spectrum. In the Solomon Islands, the government asserted greater financial and editorial control over the public broadcaster and threatened to prevent critical foreign journalists from entering the country. Religious freedom was hamstrung in Hong Kong amid broader crackdowns on dissent, with some churches and clergy self-censoring their sermons and limiting other religious activity. In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime dealt another blow to academic freedom and gender equality

by extensively censoring educational materials and barring women from attending universities.

The Communist Party regime in China remained one of the world’s worst abusers of political rights and civil liberties, and those who criticized the party received severe penalties. Chinese citizens did take to the streets to protest the government’s harsh “zero COVID” policy in a rare nationwide display of dissent that resulted in the abrupt abandonment of many restrictions. Nevertheless, protesters continued to encounter pervasive surveillance, abusive interrogations, and intimidation at the hands of authorities.

## EURASIA: *Military conflict and domestic unrest as autocracies stumble*



Three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, authoritarianism dominates Eurasia, with no formerly Soviet countries designated as Free aside from the three Baltic states. This lack of democratic governance has destabilized the region, as strongman rulers use military force to lash out at their neighbors and smother domestic dissent. In 2022, Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine took center stage amid a broader array of active and frozen conflicts between Eurasian governments. The February attack marked a dramatic escalation after eight years of more limited Russian aggression, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths, Europe’s largest refugee crisis, and far-reaching economic and security implications for the entire world.

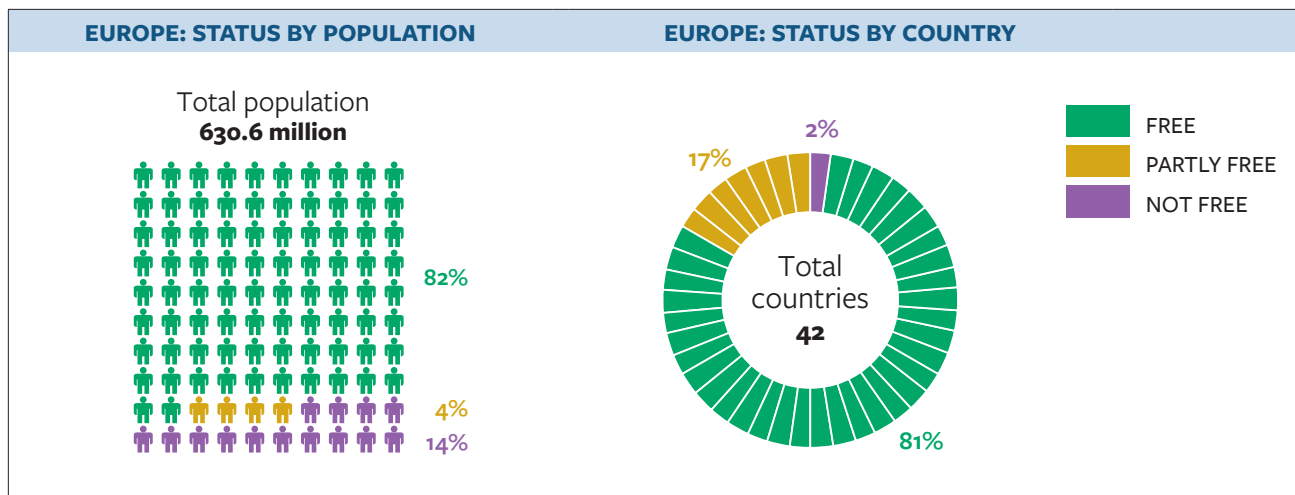
The war in Ukraine had significant repercussions for Belarusian sovereignty, as Russian troops operated from Belarusian soil. It also raised the threat of renewed conflict in Moldova, whose separatist Transnistria region has long hosted a Russian garrison, and increased tensions in Georgia’s Russian-backed breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, from which Moscow withdrew some of its forces to help relieve units in Ukraine. The Kremlin’s preoccupation with Ukraine hampered its ability to manage or manipulate rivalries elsewhere. Azerbaijan’s regime stepped up its military aggression toward Armenia despite a Russian security guarantee, and a surge in cross-border shelling occurred between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in September, killing approximately 100 people.

The limited space for free media in Eurasia has diminished further due to new criminal laws and legislative restrictions. Russian authorities criminalized criticism of the war in Ukraine, expanded a punitive “foreign agents” law, and cracked down on the few independent outlets that still operated in Russia. Pro-Kremlin propaganda efforts have become more aggressive abroad, with officials in Belarus and Turkmenistan bolstering Moscow’s image and criticizing democracies for supporting Kyiv. In Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, lawmakers placed additional constraints on media outlets and journalists, passing new legislation that obliged foreign online platforms to register

as local legal entities and empowered authorities to censor “undesired” information and ban media outlets without court approval.

These efforts to suppress criticism did little to address the root causes of public discontent, which continued to erupt into protests and elicit lethal responses from security forces. Mass demonstrations triggered by increased fuel prices in Kazakhstan resulted in over 200 deaths, and protests in Uzbekistan over proposed constitutional amendments left more than a dozen people dead and hundreds injured.

## EUROPE: Illiberal forces challenge solidarity against external aggression



Peace and freedom in Europe have been threatened not only by Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine, but also by far-right leaders who could undermine democratic solidarity.

The war in Ukraine forced European democracies to rethink their security needs in 2022. Finland and Sweden dropped their long-standing policies of military neutrality and applied to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while Germany moved to double its defense budget. The European Union (EU) stood firm and united in imposing sanctions on Russia, providing billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine and welcoming large numbers of Ukrainian refugees.

At the same time, a series of important elections signaled the growing strength of right-wing populist parties, which often

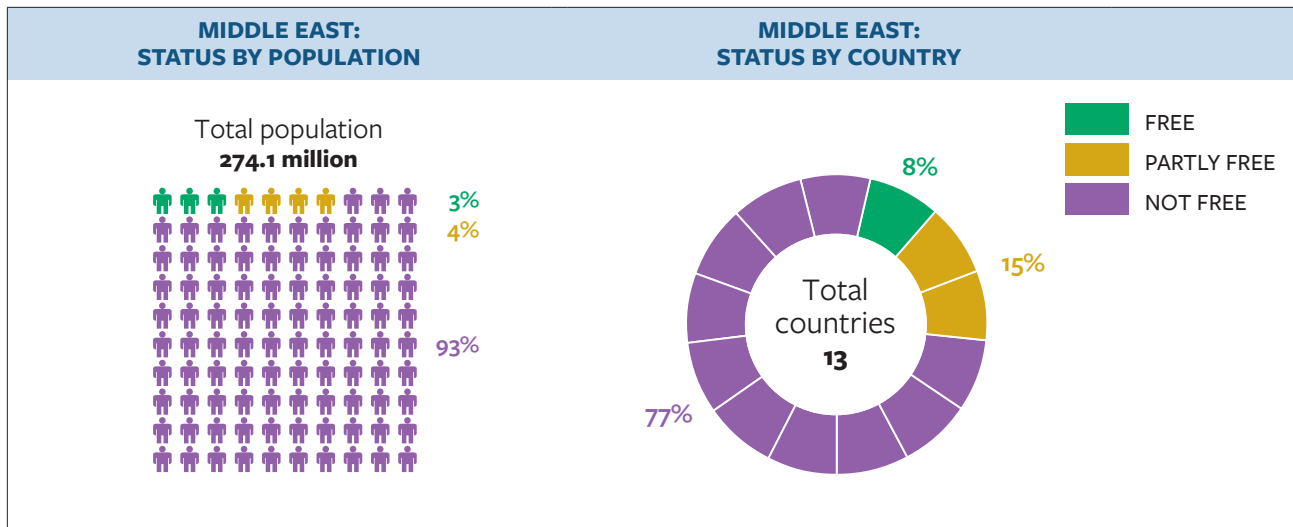
stray from democratic principles and seek cooperation with authoritarian powers. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party took the helm of a new governing coalition, though she expressed more support for Ukraine than some of her partners. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats emerged as the second-largest force in the parliament and enabled a new right-leaning government to take office. In Hungary and Serbia, entrenched illiberal nationalist leaders reasserted their power: Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán defeated a united opposition front, winning a fourth consecutive term, and Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić secured a second five-year term after a decade in government. Nonetheless, illiberal forces were defeated in some countries. French president Emmanuel Macron turned back a strong challenge from far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, and Slovenians

elected a new left-liberal government, rejecting the abuses of power associated with right-wing populist prime minister Janez Janša.

While free expression is generally protected across most of the region, the EU was plunged into spyware scandals in 2022 after journalists and politicians came under surveillance in Spain, Greece, Hungary, and Poland. In addition, the

authoritarian government in Turkey adopted a draconian “disinformation” law that hindered free speech and independent journalism ahead of elections in 2023. Despite these setbacks, several European states strengthened safeguards for personal autonomy. San Marino decriminalized abortion, Andorra and Slovenia legalized same-sex marriage, and Liechtenstein passed a measure on full adoption equality for same-sex couples.

## MIDDLE EAST: *Searching for fresh hope in a bitter campaign for freedom*



Popular demand for greater freedom in the Middle East continues to run up against some of the most entrenched systems of repression in the world, many of which are propped up or shielded by foreign powers—including democracies—with vested trade and security interests in the region.

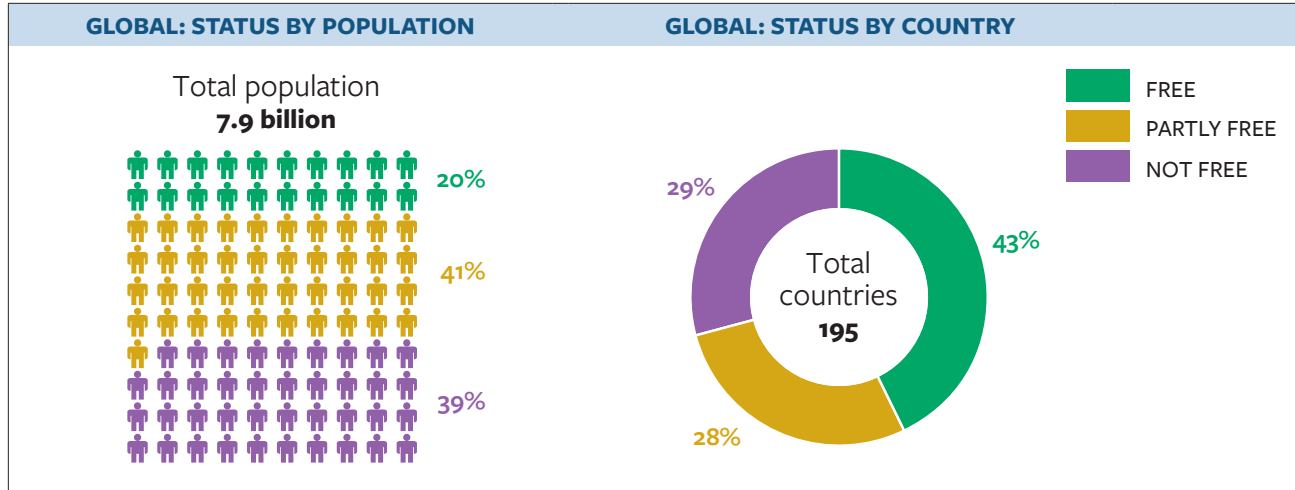
In Iran, massive prodemocracy protests broke out following the death of a Kurdish woman in police custody, bringing global attention to the Islamic Republic’s long history of discrimination and brutality. Citizens returned to the streets again and again despite an acute risk that they would be beaten, arrested, shot, or executed by security forces.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, journalists and human rights defenders faced an uphill battle in their efforts to highlight and address state abuses. A Palestinian-American journalist was killed by Israeli forces while covering a military raid on a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. Ahead of

international soccer’s World Cup in Qatar, a number of local activists were given life sentences for their participation in peaceful protests.


While political rights and civil liberties are few and far between in a region dominated by despotic regimes, there was some piecemeal progress during the year. In Kuwait, a court overturned a law used to prosecute transgender people, finding that it violated the right to personal freedom. In Lebanon, members of a rising civic opposition bloc gained representation in parliamentary elections, eroding the dominance of established sectarian parties. But in Israel, the region’s only country ranked Free, election results painted a grimmer picture: former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power at the head of a coalition with far-right elements, and the new government’s agenda posed a direct threat to judicial independence and other democratic principles, as well as to the basic rights of Palestinians.

# GLOBAL DATA




## Freedom in the World 2023 Status Changes


### Burkina Faso

 Burkina Faso's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the effects of two successive military coups, including the suspension of the constitution and dissolution of the legislature, and an expanding conflict with Islamist militant groups.


### Colombia

 Colombia's status improved from Partly Free to Free due to more open and competitive national elections, a decline in restrictions on assembly and movement, and the decriminalization of abortion. However, illegal armed groups remained active, and the country was still one of the deadliest in the world for human rights defenders.

### Lesotho

 Lesotho's status improved from Partly Free to Free due to the formation of a new government following competitive parliamentary elections, though the country continued to face serious security and governance challenges.

### Peru

 Peru's status declined from Free to Partly Free because the president was impeached and arrested after attempting to dissolve the legislature and rule by decree, and protests by his supporters led to deadly clashes with police.

## Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries featured important developments in 2022 that affected their democratic trajectory, and they deserve special scrutiny in 2023.



**Armenia:** Azerbaijani forces continued to attack and occupy Armenian territory along the border, threatening the democratic government in Yerevan and raising the risk of full-scale war.



**Brazil:** Challenger Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won a presidential runoff against incumbent Jair Bolsonaro, but the outgoing president's supporters rejected the results and called for a military coup.



**Haiti:** A government with no electoral mandate sought international support amid persistent protests and a growing humanitarian crisis, with gang violence displacing tens of thousands of residents.



**Israel:** Elections resulted in a new government with far-right elements, and critics warned that its policy agenda could undermine judicial independence and other core elements of democracy.



**Kenya:** William Ruto's election as president, and the peaceful transfer of power that followed, marked a major improvement over the disputed contest of 2017 and strengthened Kenya's democratic credentials.



**Poland:** The ruling Law and Justice party grappled with the European Commission over judicial independence concerns as it prepared for crucial parliamentary elections in late 2023.



**Solomon Islands:** After signing a security pact with Beijing, the government asserted control over the media and postponed general elections from 2023 to 2024.



**Sri Lanka:** Following protests over a worsening economic crisis, the president and prime minister fled their posts, and the ruling party was due to face frustrated voters in 2023 local elections.



**Turkey:** The government manipulated electoral laws and imposed harsh penalties for "disinformation" as it worked to fend off the opposition ahead of planned 2023 general elections.



**United Kingdom:** The ruling Conservative Party cycled through three prime ministers in two months, advanced new restrictions on strikes and protests, and attempted to remove certain asylum seekers to Rwanda.

### Worst of the Worst

Of the 57 countries designated as Not Free, the following 16 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate Score
South Sudan	1
Syria	1
Turkmenistan	2
Eritrea	3
North Korea	3
Equatorial Guinea	5
Central African Republic	7
Tajikistan	7
Afghanistan	8
Belarus	8
Saudi Arabia	8
Somalia	8
Azerbaijan	9
China	9
Myanmar	9
Yemen	9



## Policy Recommendations

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Political will is essential to the protection and expansion of freedom. The powerful and unified response to Moscow's unprovoked war of aggression in Ukraine demonstrated how rapidly democracies can take action—within a matter of days—when there is political will to do so. That same political will is needed globally to push back on clear authoritarian threats to democracy and freedom around the world.

Autocrats persist in flouting laws and norms in part because they do not believe democracies are serious about upholding them. For decades, Freedom House and others have recommended that democratic governments work to defend fundamental freedoms, support and create space for civil society, protect rights defenders at risk, and hold authoritarian regimes accountable for abuses. And for decades, democratic governments have failed to consistently muster the political will to implement these recommendations in a coordinated, sufficiently scaled, sustainable manner, with political leaders too willing to turn a blind eye to rights violations for the sake of perceived short-term gains in prosperity or security.

But the protection of rights and democratic principles is an economic and security imperative. Economic prosperity and a more secure global community require a global order based on the rule of law, anticorruption safeguards, and a willingness to abide by international security norms; only democracies can maintain such an order. Democratic leaders who ignore this fact imperil not just global freedom, but also security and economic growth.

In 2023, as the deterioration of political rights and civil liberties slows and the limits of authoritarian power become clearer, democracies should prioritize the following actions to help reverse the damage caused by the 17-year democratic recession.

1. Help Ukraine win.
2. Stop enabling authoritarians.
3. Be clear and unapologetic about the virtues of democracy and tireless in efforts to uphold and defend it.
4. Protect press freedom and personal expression.
5. Dramatically ramp up support for human rights defenders and for countries and regions at critical junctures.

**Help Ukraine win.** Achieving victory in Ukraine, on Ukraine's terms, is an imperative not just for the people of Ukraine or for Europe, but for the world. Beyond its devastating physical destruction and emotional toll, the war is also a direct attack on Ukraine's domestic efforts to build a robust democracy. Anything less than victory in Ukraine will all but guarantee further Russian aggression in the region, could discourage or undermine democratization efforts in neighboring countries for fear of escalatory coercive measures by the Kremlin and additional malign interference, and could encourage other authoritarian rulers to undertake more brazen efforts to undermine democracy and human rights.

Democratic governments must remain unwavering in their support for Ukraine and its people, including by providing weapons and technical and security assistance to help ensure victory on the battlefield. They must continue to provide financial resources to the government of Ukraine, with appropriate oversight, to help it withstand the considerable economic and social shocks that the full-scale invasion has caused. Such funding is critical for keeping basic government services operational, and for responding to humanitarian need.

Democratic countries must also continue to support individuals engaged in the vital wartime work of monitoring and reporting on human rights violations and collecting evidence of war crimes. Russian authorities and any other individuals or entities that are materially supporting this illegal invasion must be held accountable through sanctions, asset freezes or seizures that support Ukrainian reconstruction, and justice in a court of law for the war crimes that have been committed.

Finally, democracies must be prepared to support Ukraine as it rebuilds and continues to strengthen its democratic institutions and norms. Close partnership with Ukrainian civil society will be essential in this process.

**Stop enabling authoritarians.** Too often, democracies remain silent about authoritarian behavior because they have security or economic interests with the government in question. They frequently take an “all or nothing” approach to bilateral engagement—either cutting off the relationship entirely, out of concern for the authoritarian's

abusive practices, or engaging fully and muting any criticism of human rights violations. In a globalized world in which there are multiple overlapping interests, democracies must find ways to pursue economic and security goals while simultaneously advancing democracy and freedom agendas through their bilateral engagements. Prioritizing the economic and security matters without also exerting pressure on regimes for their undemocratic behavior only emboldens autocratic leaders, contributing to the continuation of their rule and the instability it produces.

Democracies must stop legitimizing dictators. It is often necessary for democratic leaders to engage with undemocratic counterparts while conducting diplomacy; they should not, however, provide them with the same degree of symbolic recognition that freely elected officials receive. Democratic leaders should refrain from congratulating “winners” of rigged elections and should work with partners and allies to swiftly denounce coups or the violation of legally established term limits, restricting foreign assistance as appropriate. Significant international sporting and cultural events should not be held in countries governed by authoritarian regimes.

Democracies must address corruption and kleptocracy head on by closing the many financial loopholes that allow authoritarian rulers to hide or launder stolen assets in democratic nations. Despots rely on their cash stores to pay off the cronies who help keep them in power, and they are able to deploy massive financial resources to crush democratic opposition.

Democracies should significantly reduce their reliance on natural resources or manufactured goods from authoritarian regimes. Companies should adhere to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and exercise caution when doing business in authoritarian states, conducting periodic assessments to fully understand how their products and actions might affect human rights. Members of the public should exert pressure on businesses by refusing to purchase goods from those that cannot demonstrate that their practices ensure responsible supply chains.

When rights abuses or corrupt activity occur, democracies should coordinate to impose meaningful penalties, including targeted sanctions, suspension of nonhumanitarian economic support, and ostracization on the international stage. Sanctions should also be imposed on individuals or

entities that knowingly help authoritarians evade sanctions. Particularly in situations where those in power are violating human rights with impunity, such as in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or where large-scale atrocities are occurring, as in China, democracies should work together to impose legal and financial consequences.

At international forums, democracies should focus on deepening solidarity between Free and Partly Free countries, working together to censure autocrats, promote the election of democratic nations to positions of power, and give greater scrutiny to member-state compliance with charters and treaties.

**Be clear and unapologetic about the virtues of democracy and tireless in efforts to uphold and defend it.** Leaders should communicate frequently with the public about why and how democracy outperforms more autocratic systems, citing its reliance on the will and consent of the governed, deliberation and fair competition, mechanisms for accountability and self-correction, and the inclusion of all people regardless of the circumstances of their birth or background. Though no democracy is perfect, democracies are safer and more stable because when one institution falls short of democratic standards, the others are used as tools to repair and strengthen the system.

Democracies, both Free and Partly Free, must address backsliding at home, working to reduce barriers to democratic participation, such as social exclusion and poverty, and addressing polarization and extremism. The protection of free and fair elections, adherence to term limits by election officials, and respect for laws and institutions are essential to a strong democracy.

Democracies should make the protection of freedom and democratic governance a fundamental component of all international policy—including foreign, security, and economic policy—and of every diplomatic engagement. Human rights concerns should be raised in meetings at all levels. Democratic leaders should routinely meet with exiled democracy activists and rights defenders from authoritarian states before traveling to those countries, and with in-country activists while traveling, if they can do so without endangering their interlocutors. Democracies should also guard against foreign influence and interference and work together to build resilience against authoritarian economic coercion.

Democracies should collaborate to incentivize democratic progress. This effort must include a wide range of democracies, not just those in North America, Europe, and East Asia, and must incorporate solutions driven by democratic governments all over the world. Democracies should use development finance and country compacts to boost inclusive growth, encourage democratic governance, and prevent debt traps. They should focus on negotiating narrow, high-impact economic agreements that set high standards for governance and rights protection.

### **Protect press freedom and personal expression.**

Among the many rights under attack globally over the last 17 years, Freedom House data show that freedom of expression, both for the media and for individuals, has declined more than any other civil liberty, and infringement on free expression is one of the biggest drivers of global democratic decline.

Democracies should scale up efforts to support independent media—including public-interest journalism and exile media—through financial assistance and innovative financing models, technical support, skills training, and mentoring, and should condemn attacks against journalists and media outlets. They should work to address disinformation and misinformation and support technologies that allow for expanded transmission of fact-based reporting and information into countries where authoritarian regimes are controlling or limiting the internet. They should also expand protections for journalists who face physical attacks and harassment, including by supporting the creation of emergency visas for those at risk and bringing those who threaten or attack them to justice. Laws should protect the free flow of information, grant journalists access to elected officials, allow the public to use freedom of information requests, and guard against state monopolization of media outlets. Governments and internet service providers should make every effort to support and maintain reliable access to the internet.

Like media freedom, the freedom of personal expression faces growing threats, both online and off. The expression of individual identities, religious views, and political opinions is a core component of being human. Democracies must fiercely guard this right at home and vigorously work to defend it abroad, as the climate of fear created by harsh repression of personal expression helps dictators remain in power. To protect expression online, foreign assistance

for internet freedom should prioritize the provision of technologies that help individuals in closed environments circumvent government censorship, protect themselves against surveillance, and overcome restrictions on connectivity. Assistance should also include digital security and digital activism trainings for human rights defenders, and programs that seek to strengthen judicial independence and enhance technical literacy among judges and others within the legal system. Governments should carefully scrutinize the export of technologies and products that could be used to violate human rights, placing strict limits on the sale of those that enable monitoring, surveillance, interception, or collection of personal information and communications.

Democracies should reform domestic surveillance practices so that they adhere to the [International Principles on the Application of Human Rights to Communications Surveillance](#); strictly regulate the use of surveillance tools; protect robust encryption, which is vital for the security of activists, journalists, and ordinary people around the world; and strengthen data-privacy protections.

**Dramatically ramp up support for human rights defenders and for countries and regions at critical junctures.** While governments, movements, and activists working for democratic progress must lead the change in their own countries, the odds may be stacked against them without significant support from foreign governments and organizations that are committed to the expansion of democracy and human rights. If democracy assistance is to be effective, it must be provided at a sufficient scale and in a sustained manner. Those working on the front lines to uphold and protect fundamental freedoms for their fellow citizens are the true agents of positive change in any country. But courageous action of the sort the world has witnessed in Iran, where protesters are boldly defying a brutal regime, warrants a clear demonstration of international solidarity.

Democratic governments should help human rights defenders and civil society groups remain in their countries of origin whenever possible. Technical assistance and training on issues like coalition and constituency building, advocacy, organizational development, and physical and digital security are particularly helpful, as is flexible funding that affords groups the agility to respond to needs as they arise. Government agencies that provide foreign assistance

should seek to create opportunities for groups that could play an important role in a future civic mobilization to connect with national, regional, and international prodemocracy organizations—and with one another—to share strategies, tools, and approaches.

When rights defenders come under threat, democracies should help provide medical, legal, and psychosocial support as needed. When these defenders are imprisoned, democratic governments, international civil society groups, and members of the public should condemn their detention, seek their immediate and unconditional release, and call for the dropping of all charges. Should it become necessary for rights defenders to relocate, temporary internal relocation is often most desirable. When a situation becomes so dangerous that defenders and activists need to be evacuated from their country, democratic governments should be prepared to provide temporary visas or long-term residency, and support for exiled activists to resume their lives and vital work. Activists and rights defenders from authoritarian states that have been sanctioned also sometimes experience banking obstacles or other challenges related to private-sector risk aversion. Democratic governments should work with the private sector to minimize such inadvertent impacts.

Democracies must remain vigilant to combat transnational repression. Between 2014 and 2021, Freedom House found that authorities in at least 36 origin countries had reached beyond their own borders to intimidate, harass, and even kidnap or murder exiled dissidents and members of diaspora communities across 84 countries. Democratic governments should guard against the commission of transnational repression on their soil by ensuring that laws are updated as needed, providing officials with training to recognize and respond to transnational repression, reaching out to diaspora groups that may be targeted, and prosecuting or imposing sanctions on perpetrators.

In addition, democracy assistance should be focused on countries and regions facing critical junctures. Freedom House research has shown that once a country tips into

the Partly Free or Not Free categories, it often struggles to recover. This makes the provision of diplomatic, technical, and financial support especially important for countries that have seen promising democratic development or are at risk of democratic deterioration. These include Kenya and Zambia, which have experienced recent improvements; Armenia, Sri Lanka, and El Salvador, where democracy is under pressure; and Nigeria, Turkey, India, and Thailand, which face important upcoming elections, among others. Democracies should help democratically inclined leaders and local civil society organizations in these countries deliver tangible expansions of political rights and civil liberties.

Democratic governments should also work with civil society to prepare for change. No authoritarian regime is permanent; autocracies can seem durable until they suddenly collapse. Only 12 countries that exist today have always been rated Not Free in *Freedom in the World*. And even within those countries—including Cuba and China—protests against governance problems like corruption, societal restrictions, and economic mismanagement can draw large numbers and broad support. Democratic governments should provide vocal, public endorsements of grassroots prodemocracy movements and respond to any violent crackdown by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance if the country had been receiving any, and public condemnation. Democracies must be prepared for political upheaval in Not Free countries and draw up serious contingency plans for responding to political change, both negative and positive, including the emergence of widespread popular movements for a more open society. More broadly, policy strategies for Not Free countries should not rely on the assumption that the current systems and conditions will persist indefinitely.

Detailed policy recommendations can be found here: <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations>

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More than anything else, five decades of *Freedom in the World* reports demonstrate that the demand for freedom is universal.

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Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works to create a world where all are free. We inform the world about threats to freedom, mobilize global action, and support democracy's defenders.

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