

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict



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 2024 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.

ON THE COVER

Bernardo Arévalo supporters cheer after their presidential victory in Guatemala. (Photo by Camilo Freedman/Sipa USA/Alamy Live News)

Key findings

Global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023. The breadth and depth of the deterioration were extensive. Political rights and civil liberties were diminished in 52 countries, while only 21 countries made improvements. Flawed elections and armed conflict contributed to the decline, endangering freedom and causing severe human suffering.

Widespread problems with elections, including violence and manipulation, drove deterioration in rights and freedoms. Ecuador was downgraded from Free to Partly Free status because its elections were disrupted by violent criminal organizations, which killed several state officials and political candidates. In Cambodia, Guatemala, Poland, Turkey, and Zimbabwe, incumbents tried to control electoral competition, hinder their political opponents, or prevent them from taking power after election day. While Thailand edged over the line from Not Free to Partly Free thanks to more competitive elections, a military-drafted constitution allowed unelected entities to distort the subsequent government-formation process. Military forces also ousted the elected government in Niger, leading to the second-largest score decline of the year, and adding another case to the wave of coups in the Sahel region of Africa that began in 2020.

Armed conflicts and threats of authoritarian aggression made the world less safe and less democratic. Around the world, violent conflict—often driven by authoritarian aggression—caused death and destruction and imperiled freedom. Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory that has long received its own assessment in this report, suffered the year’s largest recorded decline in freedom and moved from Partly Free to Not Free after a blockade and military offensive by the Azerbaijani regime led to the capitulation of its separatist government and the de facto expulsion of its ethnic Armenian population. The Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine continued for

a second year, further degrading basic rights in occupied areas and prompting more intense repression in Russia itself. Civilians also bore the brunt of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas, a civil war stemming from the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, and brutal fighting between rival military and paramilitary factions in Sudan.

The denial of political rights and civil liberties in disputed territories dragged down freedom in the associated countries, including some democracies.

People living in disputed territories without access to self-determination were especially vulnerable to abuses by authorities with no meaningful checks on their power. Beijing continued to clamp down on the few freedoms available to residents of Hong Kong and Tibet, while the Russian regime advanced its efforts to repress vulnerable populations in Crimea and enlist local inhabitants in its war of aggression. Repression in disputed territories was largely perpetrated by autocratic regimes, but the democratically elected governments of Israel and India were complicit in violating basic rights in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in Indian-administered Kashmir, respectively. These harmful policies were intertwined with threats to democratic principles and institutions within the larger countries.

Pluralism is under attack but remains a source of strength for all societies. The rejection of pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities—by authoritarian leaders and armed groups produced repression, violence, and a steep decline in overall freedom in 2023. These trends are creating an environment that is unfavorable to democracy just as the world enters a consequential year of elections. But by drawing strength from diversity, protecting dissent, and building international coalitions to support their own norms and values, democratic forces can still reverse the long decline in global freedom.

Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict

By Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe

Introduction

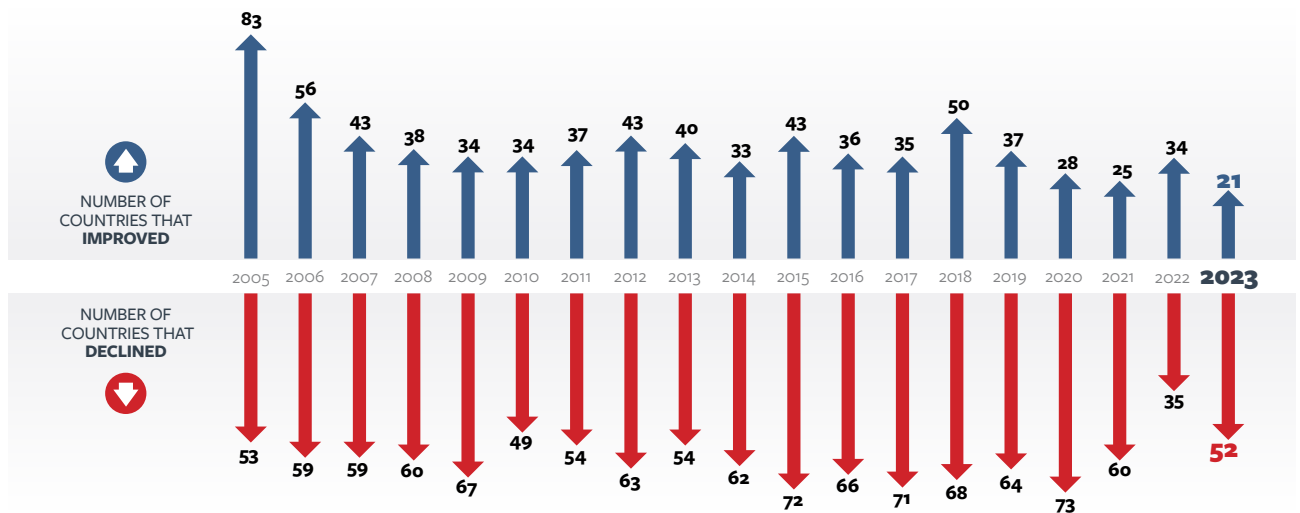
Global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023. The scope and scale of deterioration were extensive, affecting one-fifth of the world’s population. Almost everywhere, the downturn in rights was driven by attacks on pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities—that harmed elections and sowed violence. These intensifying assaults on a core feature of democracy reinforce the urgent need to support the groups and individuals, including human rights defenders and journalists, who are on the front lines of the struggle for freedom worldwide.

A total of 52 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 21 improved. The manipulation of elections was

among the leading causes of global erosion in freedom. In Cambodia, Guatemala, Poland, Turkey, and Zimbabwe, incumbents took steps to prevent the political opposition from competing on an even playing field. Leaders in El Salvador and Venezuela bent the rules to ensure their own victories in planned contests. Ecuador’s elections were marred by widespread violence, including the murders of several state officials and political candidates. As a result, that country declined from Free to Partly Free status. Thailand inched up from Not Free to Partly Free thanks to highly competitive national elections, but a military-drafted constitution allowed unelected forces to distort the government-formation process and box out the leading opposition party.

18 YEARS OF DECLINE IN GLOBAL FREEDOM

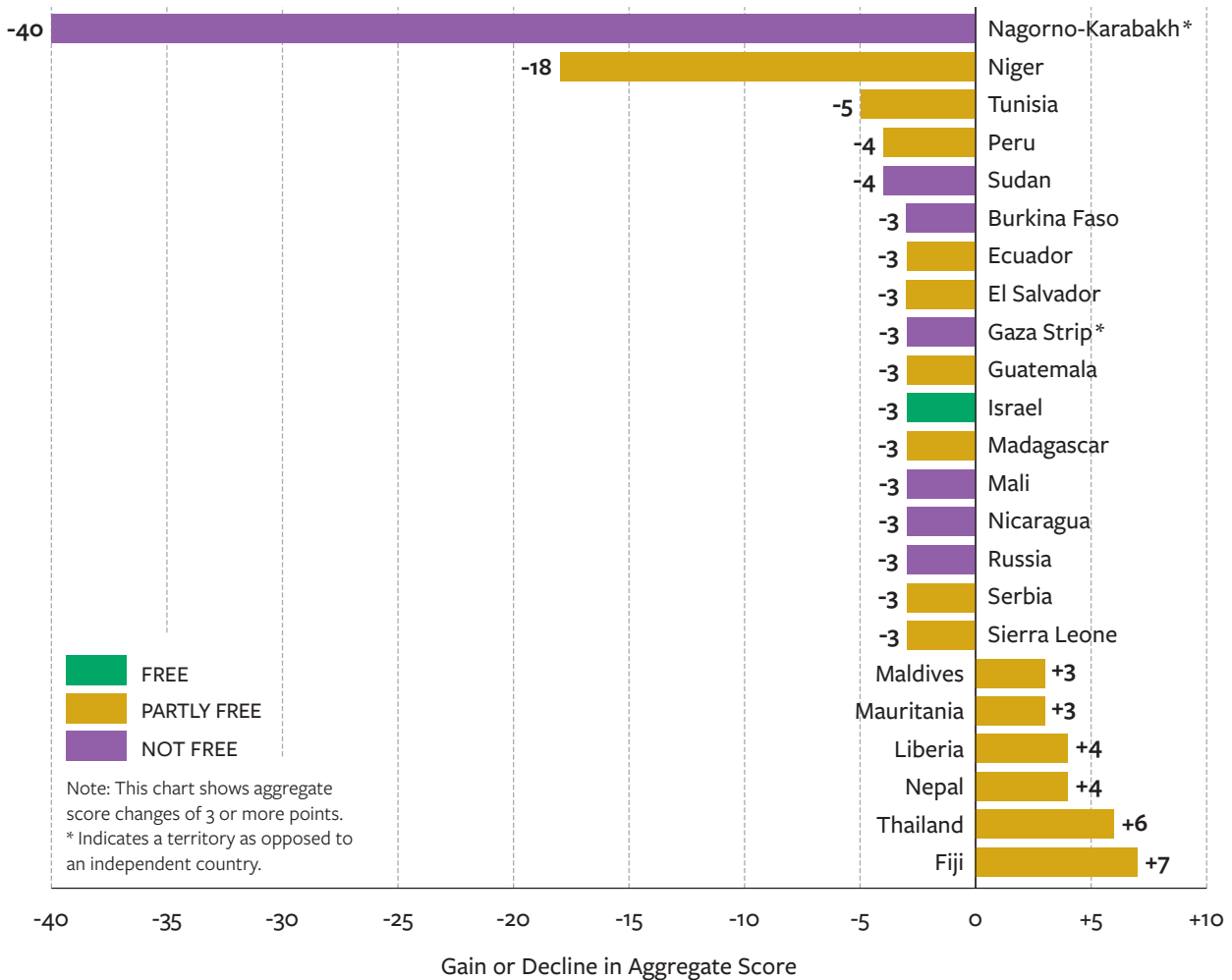
Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 18 years. The scope and scale of deterioration affected a fifth of the world’s population in 2023.



Note: Countries whose scores were unchanged are not included in this comparison.

LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2023

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



Coups continued to obliterate democratic institutions and strip away people’s right to choose their leaders. In July, Niger became the sixth country in the Sahel region of Africa—after Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan—to experience a coup since 2020. A military junta ousted the democratically elected government, resulting in an 18-point decline on *Freedom in the World’s* 100-point scale. Freedoms also continued to deteriorate in Burkina Faso, which suffered two coups in 2022.

Armed conflict over disputed territories unleashed devastating violence and further degraded political rights and civil liberties. Nagorno-Karabakh experienced the most precipitous score decline of the year, losing 40 points after nearly its entire population of 120,000 ethnic Armenians

was forced to flee the enclave under intense pressure from Azerbaijan’s military. Hamas’s massive terrorist raid into Israel on October 7 killed some 1,200 people and destroyed Israelis’ sense of safety in their own homes. Israel’s ensuing military campaign in the Gaza Strip, already among the least free places in the world, had resulted in the deaths of an estimated 22,000 people by year’s end, according to Gaza’s Hamas-run health ministry, as well as the internal displacement of 1.9 million others.

The global struggle for freedom faces a crucial test in 2024, during which about half of the world’s population will head to the polls and conflicts will continue to rage in Myanmar, Sudan, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Ongoing attacks on pluralism have the potential to fuel voter apathy, further division, and

even violence, as they undercut the promise that democracy can deliver for everyone and that diversity of political ideas, belief, and ethnicity is a source of strength. If democracies do not respond to these challenges, more of the world's people will be denied fundamental freedoms in 2025.

There is still a path toward stronger democracies and greater freedom for all. Recognizing that threats to an election can emerge before, during, and even after the day of voting, democratic governments should redouble their commitment to holding free and fair elections at home and supporting the same abroad. Rigged balloting, military coups, and political or disinformation campaigns that promote exclusion should be quickly and widely condemned. Those who claim or come to power through these means should not be recognized as legitimate leaders. On the international stage, democracies should build broad partnerships based on shared principles, and reaffirm the norms of sovereignty and self-determination that are being subverted by authoritarian aggression from China, Iran, Russia, and others. As it has for decades, the United States can play a vital role in the expansion of global freedom. But much depends on whether the November 2024 presidential election reinforces or weakens America's democratic values, processes, and institutions, along with its will to uphold the cause of democracy around the world.

Manipulating elections, undermining democracy

The manipulation of elections was one of the leading causes of the global decline in freedom in 2023, driving down scores in 26 countries. Not only was electoral manipulation widespread, but it also took on a wide array of forms. Among the most shocking were efforts to overturn the outcome of an election after the fact. This happened in Guatemala, Thailand, and Zimbabwe, where attempts were made to keep winning candidates and parties from assuming office. Long-established forms of electoral manipulation that create an uneven playing field for the opposition also remained a serious threat to democracy, affecting elections in Cambodia, Poland, and Turkey. The electoral process in other countries, such as Ecuador, Nigeria, and Taiwan, was disrupted by violence, diminished by voter apathy, or threatened with interference by foreign dictatorships.

Several elected civilian governments were removed by military coups in the Sahel over the past four years, and those that have survived in neighboring countries may be under threat. Repression and violence sparked by previous years' coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Sudan—as well as Myanmar in Southeast Asia—continued to diminish freedom in those countries during 2023.



People supporting Thailand's Move Forward Party protest in front of the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre. (Photo by Teera Noisakran/Shutterstock)

Changing the outcome

Attempting to alter the outcome of an election after voting has taken place is an especially dangerous form of electoral manipulation. It discredits the democratic process by underscoring that voters do not, in fact, have a say in who governs them. It also raises the possibility of attacks on a wider array of freedoms as illegitimate governments seek to crush protests or silence dissent.

In Guatemala, voters elected Bernardo Arévalo, an anticorruption candidate, to be the next president. The country's political establishment, compromised by entrenched corruption, then attempted to undo the public's democratic choice, forcing civil society and ordinary citizens—including large numbers of Indigenous people—to defend the results through peaceful street protests. Before Arévalo's campaign, successive governments had systematically weakened institutions of accountability, in part by closing the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and removing the head of the Special Prosecutor's Office against Impunity. Judges, prosecutors, reporters, and human rights defenders who had worked on anti-impunity efforts fled the country to escape politically motivated prosecutions, arbitrary detention, and physical threats. Before the first round of the 2023 voting, the electoral authority excluded several anticorruption candidates from the presidential ballot over technical problems with their registrations, in a move that was deemed by observers to be politically motivated.

Almost immediately after Arévalo placed second in the initial round of voting in June, authorities began using legal tools to target him and his allies. His political party, Movimiento Semilla, was suspended by a court at the request of the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the police raided both party offices and the offices of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which oversaw candidate eligibility. After Arévalo won the runoff vote in August, efforts to keep him from assuming office escalated into what observers described as an attempted coup. The Public Ministry seized ballots, Congress refused to recognize members elected on the Movimiento Semilla ticket, and the attorney general, who was under US sanctions for obstructing anticorruption investigations, revoked the immunity of judges on the electoral tribunal, causing them to flee the country. Prosecutors repeatedly sought to strip Arévalo and his vice president-elect of immunity so that they could be prosecuted on a range of criminal accusations. Despite a ruling by the Supreme Court late in the year that

Congress should guarantee Arévalo's inauguration, the January event was delayed by 10 hours due to last-minute attempts by the outgoing lawmakers to prevent a peaceful transfer of power. Ultimately, Arévalo assumed the office to which he was elected.

In Thailand, the general elections were widely hailed as an improvement over previous contests. However, government formation by the newly elected legislature was significantly distorted by a constitutional system inherited from the military junta that ruled the country from 2014 to 2019. The prodemocracy Move Forward Party (MFP), which campaigned on promises to decrease the role of the military in political life and amend the country's strict law against insulting the monarchy, surprised observers by winning a plurality of votes. Unelected institutions then sprung into action to exclude it from government. The party's leader and candidate for prime minister, Pita Limjaroenrat, was suspended from holding office as the Constitutional Court took up a dubious legal complaint against him, and the MFP itself faced a separate case that threatened it with dissolution. Meanwhile, the Senate, whose members were appointed by the military government in 2019, twice rejected the MFP's candidates for prime minister. In the end, Pheu Thai, an opposition party that received nearly 10 percent fewer votes than the MFP, abandoned earlier promises not to cooperate with military-aligned political parties and formed a ruling coalition with them. The more competitive balloting, and the fact that the second-ranked opposition party made it into government, led to score improvements that pushed the country across the threshold from Not Free to Partly Free status. But Thailand's democratic future remains in doubt, and its overall score, which dropped by 21 points after the 2014 coup, has yet to substantially recover.

Elections are such a powerful tool for bestowing political legitimacy that even authoritarian leaders continue to hold them, though they also go to great lengths to minimize the risk of defeat. Zimbabwe, which has been rated Not Free since 2020, held deeply flawed general elections in August,

“Attempting to alter the outcome of an election after voting has taken place is an especially dangerous form of electoral manipulation.”

with authorities detaining opposition politicians, harassing journalists and activists, and refusing to grant accreditation to election observers. The presidential contest was predictably won by the incumbent, Emmerson Mnangagwa of the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which has ruled the country without interruption for the last four decades.

The presidential result was not the end of the story, however, because ZANU-PF came up 10 seats short of a supermajority in the National Assembly that would empower it to change presidential term limits prescribed by the constitution. Authorities immediately began to pressure elected members of the opposition. More than a dozen people associated with the opposition party Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) were arrested, detained, or assaulted. Later in the year, nine seats won by the CCC were declared vacant after the National Assembly speaker received a letter claiming that those legislators no longer belonged to the party. Even though CCC leader Nelson Chamisa contested the letter’s authenticity,

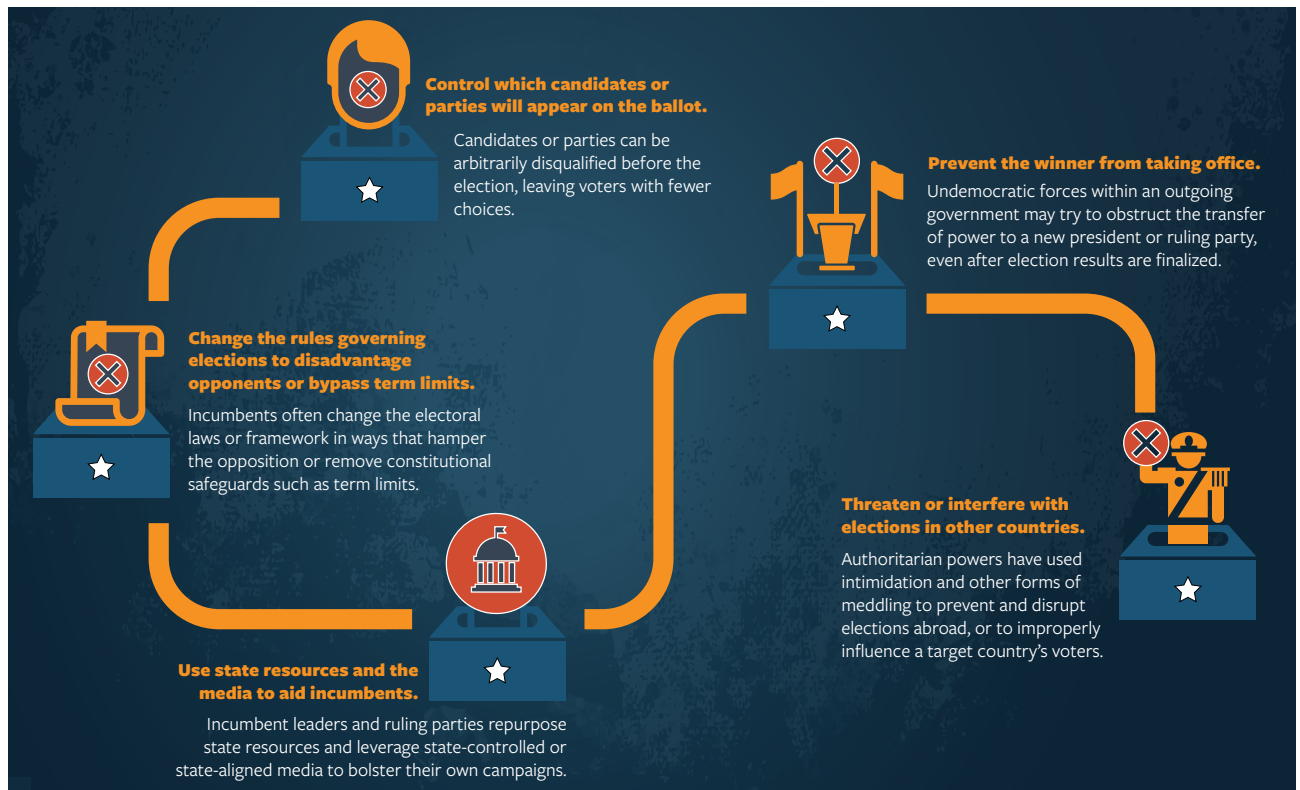
by-elections were scheduled, and a court ruled that CCC candidates could not appear on the ballot. The resulting votes in December delivered seven more seats to ZANU-PF, bringing it closer to a supermajority and significantly altering the results of the August balloting.

Controlling the competition

Given the risks associated with attempting to change the outcome of an election after the fact, it is far more common for governments to lock in unfair advantages before the day of voting. While this is most likely to take place in countries where democracy has already been degraded, preelection manipulation can be found in Free, Partly Free, and Not Free countries. It takes three main forms: controlling who appears on the ballot, changing election rules, and using state resources to tilt the playing field in favor of the governing party. Although often less brazen than postelection manipulation, these tactics are nonetheless corrosive to democracy.

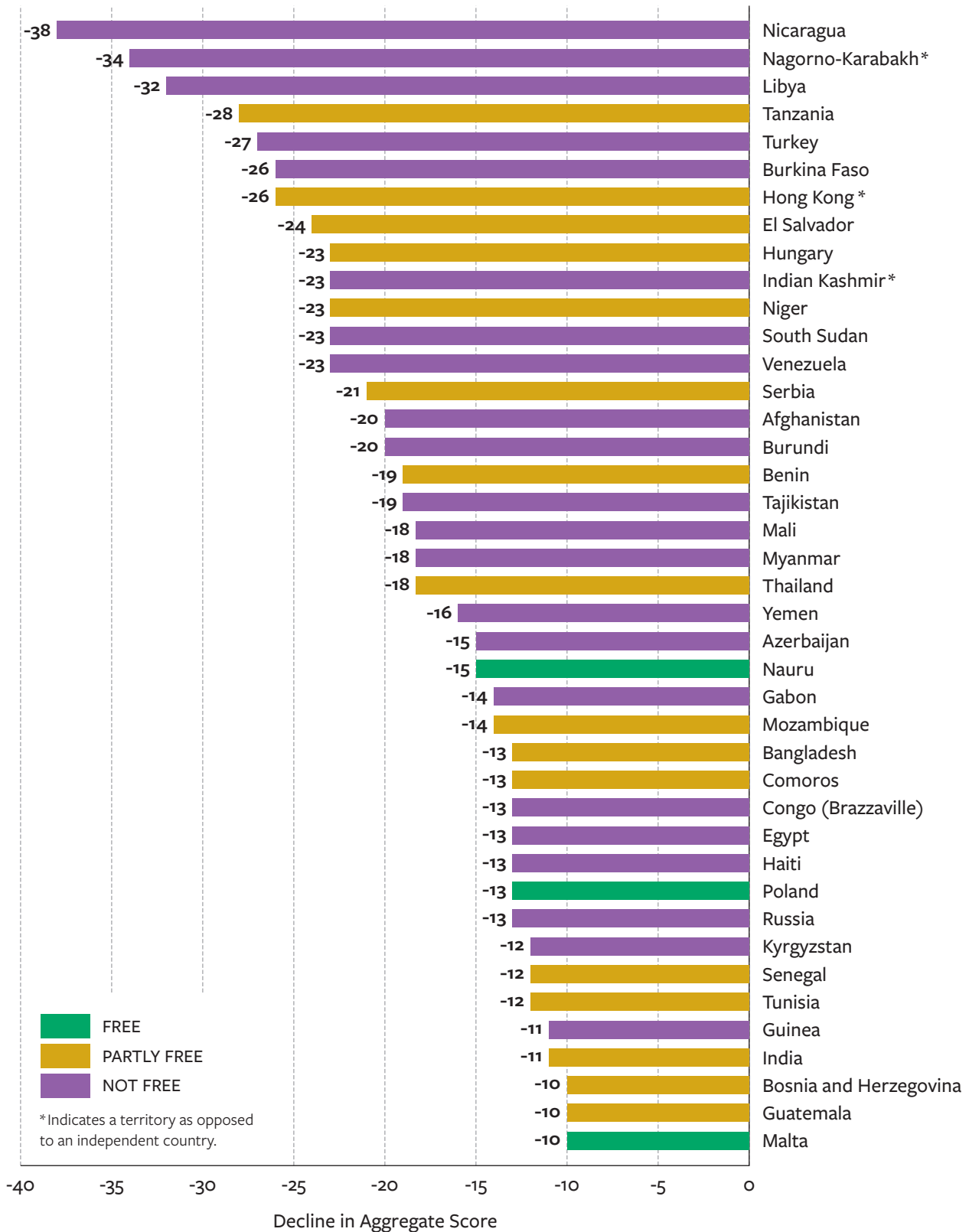
DISTORTING ELECTIONS AT EVERY TURN

Elections are central to democracy, but not all contests are free and fair. Various methods of electoral manipulation can be employed before, during, or after voting day.



LARGEST 10-YEAR DECLINES

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



One of the most widespread methods for manipulating competition in an election is controlling the field of candidates that appear on the ballot. This approach allows authoritarian leaders to maintain a thin façade of competitiveness for elections in which voters have in fact lost the freedom to choose who governs them. The most brazen example of ballot exclusion last year occurred in Cambodia during the July general elections, which were unsurprisingly won by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and its dominant force for 38 years, Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Before the contest, Cambodian authorities barred the most prominent opposition party, the Candlelight Party, on the grounds that it could not provide original registration paperwork to the electoral commission. The paperwork was seized in a police raid in 2017, and its absence had not prevented the party from participating in local elections in 2022. In 2023, however, the problem was used as justification to disqualify the group. The elections were not technically uncontested, as a total of 18 political parties appeared on the ballot, but most had negligible support and only two won seats: the ruling CPP, with 120, and a small royalist party, with just 5. The disqualification of the main opposition group allowed Hun Sen to win and install his son, Hun Manet, as the new prime minister.

A similar bid to clear the field of viable opposition candidates was well underway last year in Venezuela, ahead of a presidential election that was planned for 2024 but not yet scheduled at the time of writing. Opposition forces organized an independent primary to find a unity candidate who would run against authoritarian ruler Nicolás Maduro, the incumbent since 2013. Not only did the Supreme Court ban the winner, María Corina Machado, from participating in elections, but a court also ordered the suspension of the entire primary process, in which 2.4 million people had participated, and authorities threatened the organizers with criminal prosecution. During the primary, state-owned internet providers blocked access to information about where people could vote. Much depends on the Venezuelan presidential

election, as the United States has offered sanctions relief on the condition that authorities allow a fair contest. That prospect now seems increasingly unlikely.

Another common method of preelection manipulation is to change electoral rules in ways that help incumbents compete or simply allow them to run despite constitutional term limits. For example, a constitutional referendum held in the Central African Republic, which has been rated Not Free since 2013 and has one of the lowest scores in the world, approved changes to the constitution that will allow President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to stand for a third term in 2025. In pursuing a third term, Touadéra—who enjoys the protection of the Russian mercenary group Wagner—threatened opponents of the referendum and oversaw the removal of the president of the Constitutional Court, which had initially disbanded the commission drafting the constitutional revisions.

In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has significantly altered electoral rules in order to overcome a constitutional prohibition on presidential reelection and consolidate political power. In 2021, Bukele appointed new judges to the Supreme Court, which reinterpreted the constitution to permit him to stand for a second consecutive term. In 2023, the government-controlled legislature repealed a ban on modifying the electoral system within a year of an election, and quickly pushed through a reduction in the size of the next Legislative Assembly as well as other changes to voting procedures. These changes were expected to help concentrate power in the hands of Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party and diminish the chances of opposition parties gaining seats in the general elections scheduled for February 2024. El Salvador declined to Partly Free in 2019, during Bukele's first year in office, and the country's score has fallen by 24 points over the last decade.

Antidemocratic tactics that target free and fair elections are not always successful in stamping out genuine electoral competition. But long-term manipulation that substantially skews the playing field, particularly by leveraging state resources and media assets, can lead to a situation in which opposition losses reinforce the perceived dominance of an increasingly authoritarian incumbent. This is the pattern that has unfolded in Turkey.

Turkey's elections have long featured harassment, arrests, and criminal prosecutions of opposition leaders and journalists, as well as media dominance and abuse of state resources

“One of the most widespread methods for manipulating competition in an election is controlling the field of candidates that appear on the ballot.”

by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). In 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been in power since 2003, secured another term in office by winning the presidential runoff vote. Despite the fact that the election had to go to a second round and Erdoğan won only by a narrow margin, attention during and after the campaign was focused on the opposition’s shortcomings rather than the country’s many democratic deficits. Ultimately, the failure of opposition forces to win an unfair contest eclipsed major systemic abuses like restrictions on freedom of expression and the criminal prosecution of political opponents that are commonly employed by the government.

In a rare bright spot among the year’s contests, the outcome of Poland’s parliamentary elections showed that opposition forces can win even in the face of electoral manipulation. A coalition of opposition parties was able to unseat the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, which used government-controlled media and state resources to gain an advantage.

Just two months before the elections, the PiS government passed a law that would allow it, for the first time in the country’s history, to hold a national referendum simultaneously with the parliamentary elections. The referendum was carefully designed to aid PiS’s campaign. First, PiS claimed, without evidence, that the inflammatory proposals presented to voters—such as “admitting thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa” and “selling off state resources to foreign entities”—were

actual policies being pursued by opposition parties. Second, the referendum allowed supporters of PiS to get around campaign finance laws by donating to both the party’s electoral campaign and the referendum campaign, which amplified the same themes. Lastly, election observers noted that the referendum compromised the secrecy of the ballot. Voters who wished to boycott the referendum—and invalidate it through low turnout—had to actively refuse to accept the relevant ballot paper and have their refusal recorded by election administrators. The opposition won a competitive contest, and Poland remains Free, but the preelection manipulation resulted in a decline in its freedom score.

Violence, apathy, and foreign autocrats

In addition to manipulation, the integrity of elections may be eroded by violence and poor administration. While violence can sideline candidates and keep citizens away from the voting booth, a loss of confidence in electoral institutions can contribute to voter apathy, significantly weakening the legitimacy of elected governments. A chain reaction of disappointment and disengagement then opens the door to authoritarian threats from within the country as well as from abroad.

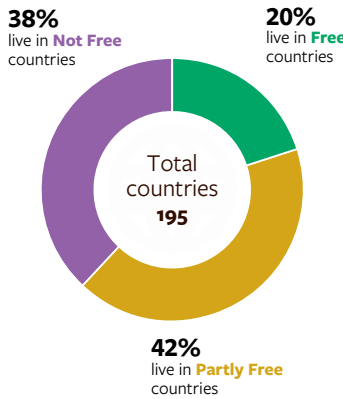
Ecuador declined from Free to Partly Free because the snap 2023 elections, while relatively well-organized and administered, were profoundly affected by high levels of



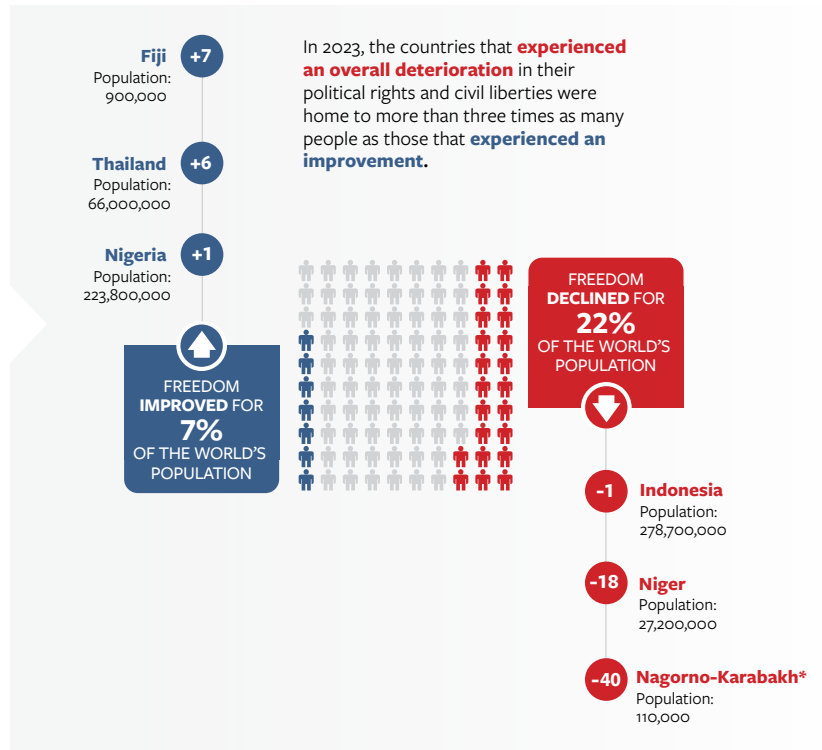
Christian Zurita, presidential candidate for Ecuador’s Movimiento Construye coalition, talks to officials during the country’s national election on Aug. 20, 2023. (Photo by Franklin Jacome/Getty Images)

THE REAL-WORLD IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON FREEDOM

A majority of the world's population live in **Partly Free** and **Not Free** countries.



* Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.



criminal violence. Multiple political candidates and state officials were assaulted or killed, including Fernando Villavicencio, a presidential candidate who was assassinated 11 days before the vote. According to the Organization of American States, attacks on candidates created a climate of fear and forced politicians to limit campaigning and take extra security precautions, including wearing body armor. Journalists were also increasingly targeted for intimidation. Five members of the press fled the country because of death threats last year, and another five received explosive devices in the mail. Violence in the country continued in the new year. Armed men briefly seized a television station in Guayaquil to issue threats against the newly elected government, which declared a 60-day state of emergency to subdue organized crime groups.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, problems with the administration of the February general elections weakened confidence in the democratic process. Despite very high expectations and the addition of over 10 million, mostly young, voters to the rolls, final voter turnout was just 29 percent—the lowest since the transition to democracy in 1999. Continued insecurity in some parts of the country hindered campaigning, and violent attacks on polling stations

discouraged voters from participating. Those who did show up had to wait in long lines because logistical problems delayed the delivery of voting materials. The Independent National Electoral Commission failed to transmit the results from polling stations in a timely and transparent manner, which election observers said damaged public trust. The disruptions fueled rumors of electoral fraud on social media. Postelection protests were largely peaceful, however, leading to an improvement in the country's score for freedom of assembly.

Some countries are struggling to conduct elections in the middle of direct authoritarian attacks on their democracies. The Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began two years ago, continues to cause devastation. In Russian-occupied areas, political rights and civil liberties degenerated further in 2023 as Russian authorities conducted sham regional elections, institutionalized and relocated Ukrainian children, and implemented military conscription. The invasion has also created serious obstacles to holding a presidential election in Ukraine, which was due in March 2024. Voting is unlikely to proceed because the country is under martial law and millions of people have been displaced.

China’s authoritarian regime is also working to undermine democracy abroad by interfering in elections. Taiwan’s January 2024 presidential election took place in the shadow of Beijing’s “three warfares” strategy toward the island, which included efforts to influence public opinion. In late 2023, media reports indicated that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had convened high-level meetings on the need for effective but covert methods of influencing the Taiwanese election. During the campaign, the Chinese leadership issued messages, relied on disinformation, and used military exercises to frame the election for Taiwanese voters as a choice between war and peace, with the aim of deterring them from supporting political parties and candidates that take a harder line on cross-strait relations.

These tactics ultimately did not impede a competitive campaign, and the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) retained the presidency. However, this kind of interference by Beijing is not limited to Taiwan. Alleged meddling in Canada’s 2019 and 2021 federal elections, by authorities from China and other countries, will be the subject of a Canadian public inquiry this year. In the United States, the Department of Justice has charged Chinese officers with harassing a former Chinese dissident who ran for a seat in Congress in 2022.

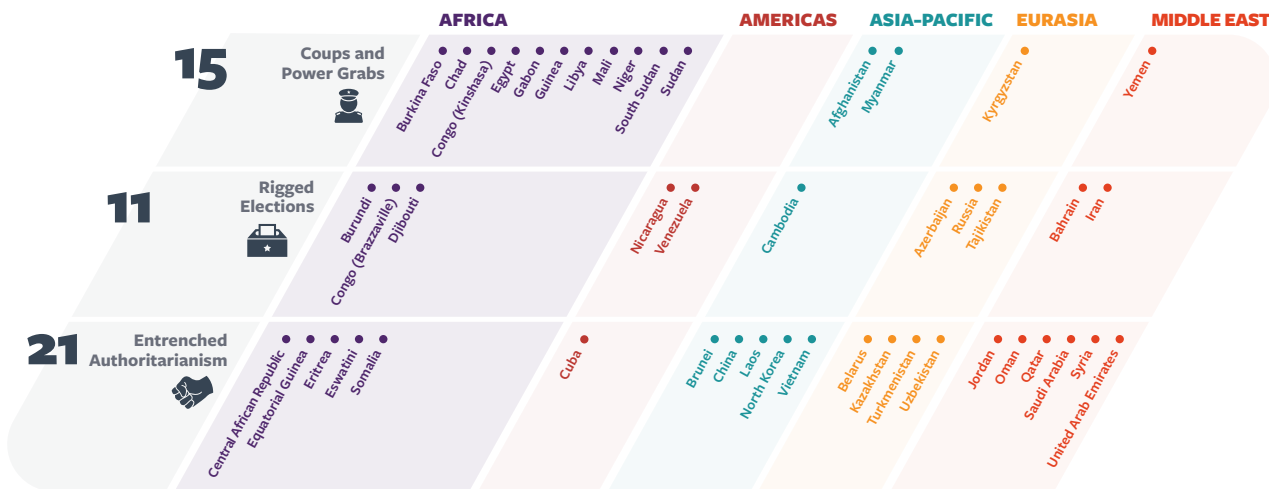
No freedom without an elected government

According to *Freedom in the World* data, 35 countries currently earn the worst possible scores on the indicators for free and fair executive and legislative elections. This tally is up from 21 countries in 2005, when the global decline in freedom began. Over the last 18 years, countries have followed two main pathways to such abysmal scores: rigged elections and military coups. Both have deprived people of an elected government, one of the cornerstones of democracy.

In Eurasia, elections are still regularly held, but the predetermined contests typically serve only as a thin veneer of legitimacy for autocrats. Vladimir Putin, who has been in power for two and a half decades, will undoubtedly win Russia’s next presidential election in March 2024. The government has used legal tools to keep opposition political parties and candidates off the ballot, imprisoned activists and politicians, closed or forced out all independent media, and subjugated the judiciary. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has intensified its domestic control, aiming to restrict people’s public political expression as well as their private discussions. As with other countries in Eurasia, rigged elections in Russia have been accompanied by the deterioration of all other freedoms.

A DESTRUCTIVE RACE TO THE BOTTOM

In the past decade, a growing number of countries have fallen to the worst possible score on the *Freedom in the World* indicator for representative rule. A series of factors have decimated representative governance, leading to a downward spiral of authoritarian abuses.



Coups and Power Grabs: The elected government was overthrown or otherwise replaced through undemocratic means, or it postponed new elections and ruled without a mandate. Common in Africa, particularly the Sahel region.

Rigged Elections: The country held deeply uncompetitive elections, with genuine opposition forces mostly or completely excluded. Common in Eurasia.

Entrenched Authoritarianism: Many countries have lacked representative governance continuously for the past decade or more, including several absolute monarchies and one-party states. Political rights have been systematically denied.

Only in a small number of countries, such as Fiji and The Gambia, has representative rule been restored after it was lost.



A supporter of Niger's National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) holds up a placard with a photo of General Abdourahamane Tiani. (Photo by AFP/Getty Images)

In an increasing number of African countries, elected governments have been ousted through coups. In 2023, Niger became the sixth country, after Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan, to experience a coup in the Sahel region of Africa since 2020. Military officers deposed the democratically elected government of President Mohamed Bazoum in July. After seizing power, the military dissolved the legislature and suspended the constitution and all political parties. As a result of this attack on democratic institutions, the country suffered the world's second-largest decline in freedom, losing 18 points on the report's 100-point scale. The coup cascade continued in August when members of the presidential guard seized power in the Central African country of Gabon, replacing one authoritarian regime with another.

Not only are coups multiplying, but coup leaders are increasingly expressing solidarity with one another, further contributing to the erosion of democratic norms. During the tense standoff that followed the coup in Niger, the military rulers of neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali publicly pledged support for the Nigerien junta's leader, General Abdourahamane Tiani, in the face of pressure from the Economic Community of West African States. The leaders of Burkina Faso and Mali also postponed elections that they had previously promised to hold in 2024.

Previous years' coups continued to harm security and human rights. In Sudan, where a 2021 coup dissolved a transitional government that had shared power with civilian leaders,

fighting between rival military and paramilitary factions began in April and led to the deaths of at least 9,000 people and the displacement of over seven million others—half of them children. The conflict quickly spread beyond the capital to other regions of the country and has featured credible reports of ethnic and gender-based violence. In 2024, civilians are likely to continue to bear the brunt of the ongoing war, not only in terms of direct violence but also as a result of surging rates of illnesses like cholera and a lack of food and vital supplies. With a total of only six points, Sudan has one of the lowest scores in *Freedom of the World*.

Civilians are also in harm's way in Myanmar, where the military junta escalated its campaign to dominate the country last year after seizing power in a 2021 coup. In addition to arresting over 25,000 people and delaying promised elections, the army employed scorched-earth tactics—including the use of a thermobaric bomb in the Sagaing region—in an attempt to offset the gains of a surprisingly successful armed resistance movement.

Denial of self-determination and its impact on global freedom

Disputed territories are among the least free places on earth. In the 15 territories that *Freedom in the World* monitors separately from countries, long-standing conflicts over land, sovereignty, and self-determination have imperiled the basic rights of more than 45 million people.

In 2023, attacks on the ability of people of different political beliefs, ethnicities, and religions to coexist further degraded fundamental freedoms and caused substantial human suffering, both in disputed territories and in the countries that exercised control over them. The Azerbaijani regime's military conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh led to a staggering decline in freedom, while armed conflict exacerbated the already dire conditions in the Gaza Strip and the Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine, including Crimea and Eastern Donbas. In Hong Kong, Tibet, and Western Sahara, the local populations could not exercise political self-determination, leaving them vulnerable to assaults on their civil liberties through the exercise of unchecked power.

Direct occupation or de facto domination by a sovereign country contributed to systemic violence and repression in over half of the territories. The year's events also underscored the fact that conflict and repression in disputed territories can ripple out far beyond their borders, encouraging acts of aggression by the authoritarian leaders of countries such as Russia, China, and Venezuela, and correlating with restrictions on freedom at home in Israel and India.

Territories are selected for assessment in *Freedom in the World* based on the following criteria:

- Whether the area is governed separately from the rest of the relevant country or countries, either de jure or de facto.
- Whether conditions on the ground for political rights and civil liberties are significantly different from those in the rest of the relevant country or countries.
- Whether the territory is the subject of enduring popular or diplomatic pressure for autonomy, independence, or incorporation into another country.
- Whether the territory's boundaries are sufficiently stable for a coherent assessment and whether they can be expected to remain stable enough for comparison in future years.
- Whether the territory is large and/or politically significant.

Freedom House typically takes no position on territorial or separatist disputes as such, focusing instead on the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area.



Demonstrators rally to demand the reopening of a blockaded road linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and to decry crisis conditions within the territory. (Photo by Karen Minasyan/AFP via Getty Images)

Attacks on disputed territories reinforce global authoritarian aggression

People living in disputed territories frequently become victims of an autocrat’s hostility toward pluralism as well as their expansionist agenda. In September, the Azerbaijani regime’s siege of Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in the dissolution of local government institutions and the forced displacement of over 120,000 Armenians in what many foreign observers described as a case of ethnic cleansing. As a result, the formerly Partly Free territory experienced the world’s largest score decline in 2023, losing a total of 40 points.

Baku’s military assault came after a nine-month blockade of the Lachin Corridor—the only remaining land route linking the territory to the outside world—which left residents of Nagorno-Karabakh struggling to access basic necessities such as food, medical supplies, and fuel. For some three decades, the ethnic Armenian population had been at the center of an intractable conflict between the Republic of Armenia and Azerbaijan. While the Russian government had negotiated a new cease-fire after a 2020 offensive yielded major gains for Baku, Moscow’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine limited Russian peacekeeping capacity, and Azerbaijani forces slowly

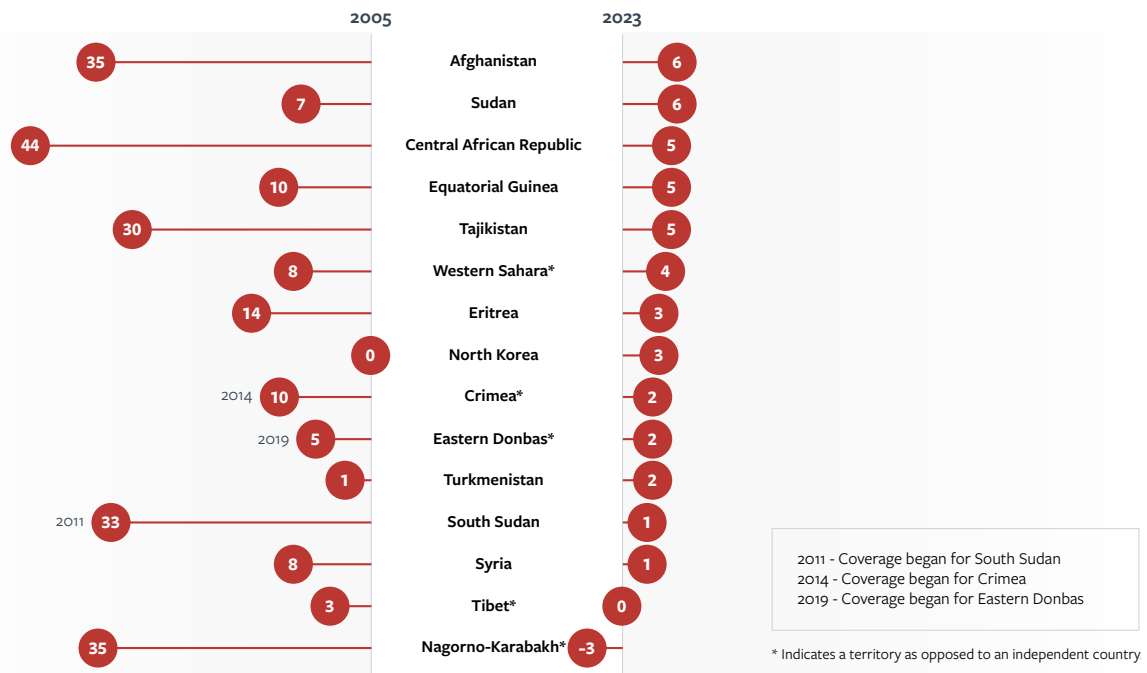
tightened their grip on what remained of the enclave. In the end, there was little standing in the way of the Azerbaijani regime’s ambition to settle the decades-long dispute through a unilateral application of force.

The attack coincided with a deepening of authoritarian repression within Azerbaijan. Since the 1990s, the government has implemented policies that discriminate against ethnic Armenians, and Armenian citizens as well as their descendants are banned from, or face restrictions on, entering the country. Religious discrimination and crackdowns on independent media and civil society have intensified in recent years. The seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh boosted the domestic popularity of President Ilham Aliyev, who has ruled Azerbaijan since inheriting the post from his father in 2003, and raised fears that an emboldened Azerbaijani leadership could launch a full-scale invasion of the Republic of Armenia, the borders of which have already been violated.

Baku may be looking north for inspiration. In the decade since the Kremlin illegally seized Crimea from Ukraine, the level of freedom enjoyed by the nearly two million people living on the peninsula has plummeted. In 2023, occupying Russian

WORST OF THE WORST

Of the 67 countries and territories designated as Not Free, the following 15 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties. Some have remained at the bottom of the rankings since at least 2005, while others have experienced more recent declines that drove them to their current positions.



forces continued to conscript Crimeans into Russia’s military and nationalized private property. The situation is particularly dire for ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars, who have had their language, religion, and culture suppressed as Moscow attempts to Russify the region.

Repressive tactics that were initially deployed in Crimea—like staging rigged referendums, coercing residents to accept Russian citizenship, and destroying Ukrainian culture and identity—have spread to other parts of occupied Ukraine. In 2023, Moscow orchestrated fraudulent regional elections in areas under its occupation, which further cemented Russian domination in Donetsk and Luhansk and trampled political rights in newly occupied portions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

As with Azerbaijan, Moscow’s invasion and occupation of Ukraine have had a serious impact on what little freedom previously persisted inside Russia. Since 2022, the Kremlin has pursued a vigorous effort to stamp out antiwar dissent, silence critical media coverage, and militarize Russian society, accelerating a 13-point score decline over the last decade. In 2023, the rights of LGBT+ people, who were already marginalized under various discriminatory laws, came under further attack, and thousands of people faced administrative charges and denunciations for criticizing the Kremlin’s policies or the war in Ukraine.

Autocrats in other parts of the world also threatened the borders of neighboring states in 2023. In November, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signaled interest in gaining access to the Red Sea, stoking fears of an invasion of Eritrea; he later signed a port-access deal with separatist authorities in Somaliland in early January, which the government of Somalia viewed as an attack on its sovereignty. In December, President Nicolás Maduro revived Venezuela’s claim to Essequibo, an oil-rich region of Guyana, and law enforcement officials ordered the arrest of several politicians who allegedly opposed his efforts. Beijing ramped up its military pressure on Taiwan, carrying out air and sea operations intended to intimidate and exhaust Taiwanese defense forces without triggering an outright conflict. A proliferation of authoritarian land grabs has the potential to crush the freedoms of even more people in the coming years.

Without political self-determination, civil liberties are vulnerable

People living in disputed territories are largely denied the right to participate in political processes by electing their

“People living in disputed territories are largely denied the right to participate in political processes by electing their government or otherwise holding leaders accountable.”

government or otherwise holding leaders accountable. As with countries that have experienced rigged elections and coups, the lack of political rights enables the exercise of unchecked power and the negation of even the most basic freedoms.

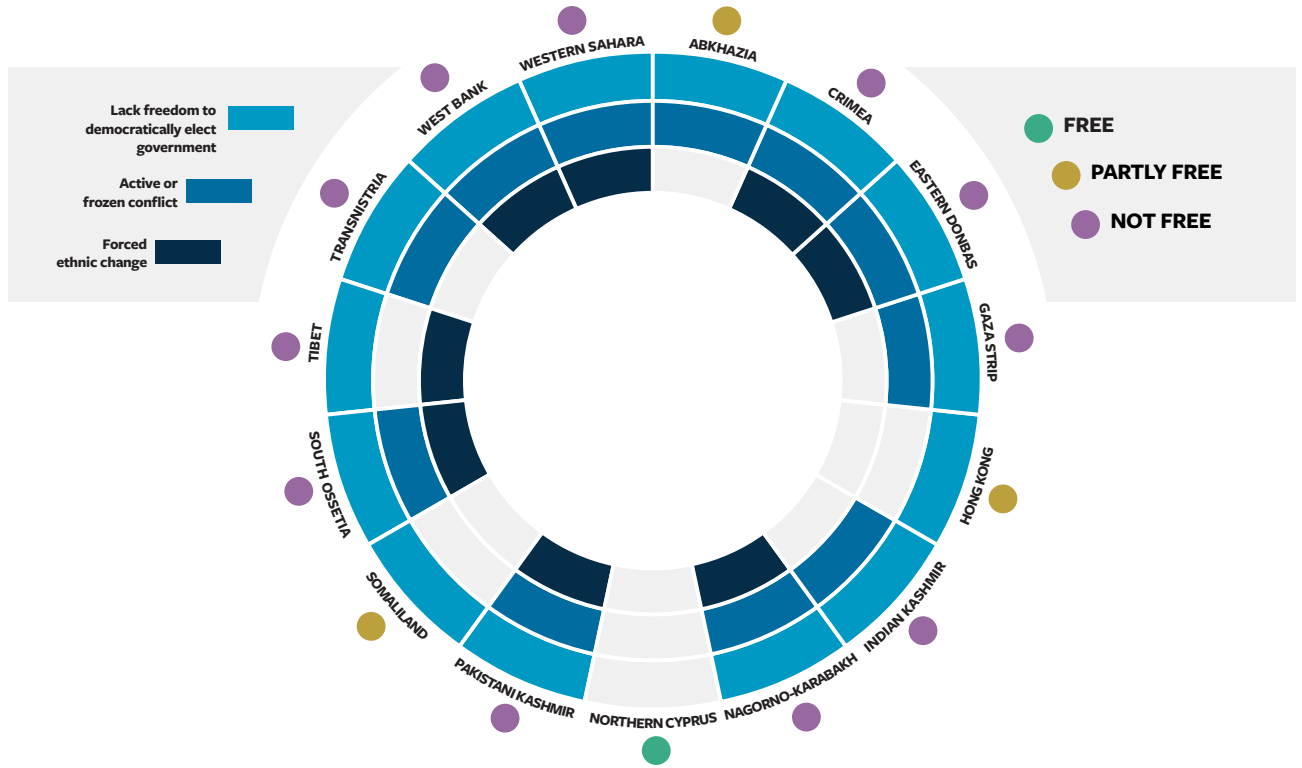
For well over a decade, people in the Gaza Strip have lived without an elected government. Since Hamas seized unilateral control in 2007, no elections have been held, and Palestinians in Gaza have been trapped under the authoritarian rule of a terrorist organization. Hamas has systematically corrupted the rule of law while stifling freedoms of expression and assembly. A 16-year blockade, enforced with varying intensity by the governments of Egypt and Israel, has further impeded freedom of movement, physical security, and economic opportunity. In addition to seriously restricting fundamental freedom in the territory itself, Hamas and other militant groups based in Gaza have a long history of targeting Israel with indiscriminate rocket fire, undermining the safety of Israeli citizens.

On October 7, Hamas fighters led a massive raid into Israel, in which over 1,200 people were killed and about 240 were taken hostage. This was the deadliest terrorist attack in the country’s history and led to a decline in physical security for all Israelis. In response to Hamas’s brutal violence against civilians, the Israeli military undertook an air and ground campaign in Gaza that continued into 2024 and has proven devastating for the 2.2 million people living there.

The Gaza Strip’s score, already among the lowest in the world, declined further in 2023 as Israel’s campaign against Hamas hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid and the work of local and international nongovernmental organizations. The military assault caused the destruction of businesses, hospitals, and an estimated 70 percent of all homes. Space for academic freedom also declined as over 300 schools and universities, some of which had been used for shelter by

REPRESSIVE CONDITIONS PREVAIL IN DISPUTED TERRITORIES

The 15 disputed or occupied territories that are assessed separately by *Freedom in the World* include some of the least free places on earth, where millions of people are systematically denied their basic rights. Many share features that are extremely harmful to political and civil liberties.



displaced civilians, were destroyed in the fighting. By year’s end, 22,000 people had been killed, according to Gaza’s Hamas-run health ministry, and 1.9 million others, a majority of whom were already designated as refugees, were internally displaced. While media freedom has historically been severely limited in the Gaza Strip, the war has made reporting especially dangerous. Roughly 70 journalists and media workers had been killed in Gaza by the end of December.

Little improvement can be expected in the freedoms enjoyed by Palestinians or in the long-term security of Israelis if, after the end of the war, Palestinians in Gaza are not able to exercise their democratic rights and elect a government that is committed to upholding both liberty and peace.

Even without the large-scale violence of war, the removal of political rights is often accompanied by a severe degradation in other freedoms. In Hong Kong, the CCP has brazenly swept away the long-standing “one country, two systems” policy, under which the territory had enjoyed a number of rights that were denied in mainland China, including

semidemocratic elections. The 2020 National Security Law, imposed by the Chinese government, continues to curtail political participation in favor of pro-Beijing candidates and has led to the banning of opposition parties, the jailing of prodemocracy activists, and an aggressive crackdown on dissent. Several prominent activists and journalists, including media owner Jimmy Lai, have faced sham trials under the law, which has not only hollowed out due process but also had a chilling effect on press freedom. In July 2023, the pro-Beijing Legislative Council passed amendments that eliminated a majority of the directly elected District Council seats, closing off one of the last avenues for democratic representation in Hong Kong. These and other legal changes consolidated Beijing’s control over the territory and contributed to one of the largest 10-year declines in freedom globally.

As the experiences of the Gaza Strip and Hong Kong demonstrate, populations stripped of political rights and self-determination are at greater risk of human rights abuses. There are now 14 countries and 8 territories where governments or occupying powers used tactics of forced

ethnic change, the most ever recorded by *Freedom in the World*. States and nonstate actors have promoted settlement in certain territories to tip the ethnic and political balance in their favor, and have deliberately diminished existing communities and cultural identities to bolster their claims of sovereignty.

In Tibet, the CCP aggressively defends its monopoly on political power, and any expression of support for self-determination is severely punished. For decades, Beijing has encouraged the settlement of Han Chinese and forced hundreds of thousands of ethnic Tibetans into reeducation, resettlement, or employment programs that are rife with political indoctrination, effectively attempting to Sinicize the region and erase Tibetan identity. As a result, Tibet is one of the least free places in the world, with an aggregate score that is even lower than China's. During 2023, approximately one million Tibetan children were separated from their families and put into state-run boarding schools where official versions of Han Chinese culture and language are forcibly inculcated.

The native Sahrawi population in Western Sahara, most of which has been under the de facto control of Morocco since 1975, is unable to freely elect leaders in the territory or even field proindependence candidates in Moroccan elections. Following the collapse of a cease-fire between Moroccan forces and the proindependence Polisario Front, as well as the United States' recognition of Morocco's claim to Western Sahara in 2020, Rabat ramped up its violence and repression in the territory by jailing proindependence activists and hindering the work of Sahrawi civil society organizations. The Sahrawi share of the population has been significantly diminished over time, as hundreds of thousands of Moroccans have been encouraged to resettle in Western Sahara in violation of international law, while a desert wall marking the line of control between the two sides in the conflict, known as the Berm, has physically prevented Sahrawi refugees from returning to their land.

The prospects for freedom in disputed territories are greater when residents can participate in elections, exercise their political self-determination, and hold leaders accountable for safeguarding civil liberties. For example, Northern Cyprus is the only separately assessed territory with a Free status, and political rights—including regular multiparty elections—are relatively well protected. While growing political interference by the Turkish government remains a threat, civil liberties have largely been upheld in the territory for the last three decades.

Democracies are not immune to the effects of repression in territories

An overlooked aspect of the deterioration of freedoms inside disputed territories is the extent to which it can harm the democratic governance of countries that exercise control there. While repression of this kind was largely perpetrated by autocratic regimes in 2023, the democratically elected governments of Israel and India were complicit in violating basic rights in the West Bank and Gaza and in Indian-administered Kashmir, respectively, and such policies posed a threat to pluralistic values of diversity and dissent in the larger countries.

Long before the current war in Gaza, Israel's democracy had begun backsliding, and the country's score has declined by 10 points overall since 2008. Much of the erosion of Israeli democratic institutions is linked to discriminatory practices that were adopted as part of the drive to increase control over the occupied West Bank.

Due process in Israel has been degraded by authorities' continued use of administrative detention to hold Palestinians without trial, while Jewish Israeli settlers who commit violent crimes against Palestinians in the West Bank face relative impunity. In the wake of Hamas's terrorist assault, the Israeli authorities arbitrarily arrested thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel, and approximately 2,000 of them were held in administrative detention. The arrests and any related charges added pressure to Israel's court system, which was already strained by a dispute over judicial appointments, and degraded observance of due process protections. The rule of law has also been harmed by authorities' practice of trying some children in military courts, making Israel one of the only countries in the world to do so.

While the legal regime in the occupied West Bank, which is assessed separately from Israel in *Freedom in the World*, is fundamentally discriminatory, legal changes inside Israel itself have chipped away at the democratic principle of equal treatment under the law. According to Adalah, a legal center for Arab minority rights in Israel, over 65 laws have been passed that codify discrimination against non-Jewish Israelis, including Arab and Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up 20 percent of the population. They experience legal discrimination on issues including national budget allocation, land ownership, education, and economic opportunity.



Israelis protest at Rishon LeZion against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his nationalist coalition's proposed judicial overhaul. (Photo by Avivi Aharon/Shutterstock)

The judiciary, which has traditionally acted as a check on political power in Israel, has also come under increased pressure from the ruling coalition. In July 2023, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government passed legislation that would have weakened the oversight powers of the Israeli Supreme Court, which has historically curbed the seizure of Palestinian land in the West Bank and blocked some legislation that disregarded the rights of Palestinians. For months after the reforms were announced, thousands of Israelis took part in largely peaceful protests against the proposed judicial overhaul. The Supreme Court ultimately struck down the new law in January 2024.

Free expression has come under pressure in recent years, and Israeli authorities have increasingly cracked down on speech related to the situations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israelis and West Bank Palestinians have been arrested, fired from their jobs, or suspended from universities, at times for things as innocuous as posting a photo of a Palestinian flag to social media. These restrictions increased in the wake of Hamas's October 7 attack. In November, the Knesset approved a vaguely worded law that criminalized "the consumption of terrorist materials" and significantly expanded authorities' extensive surveillance powers. Israel's long-term investment in military intelligence and surveillance technology to monitor Palestinians has made it a hub for firms like NSO Group to develop and export sophisticated spyware tools, which have been purchased by numerous authoritarian governments and used against peaceful activists and journalists.

The relationship between India and the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir—the subject of a decades-old territorial dispute with Pakistan—has been similarly problematic for Indian democracy. India's *Freedom in the World* score has steadily declined for much of the last decade, dropping 10 points since 2013. Widespread violence against Muslims and members of other religious minorities under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has contributed to this backslide and coincided with the government's dismantling of political rights in the territory officially known as Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority region.

Indian-administered Kashmir has seen one of the largest declines in freedom globally over the last decade. It moved from Partly Free to Not Free for events in 2019, when the Indian government revoked its special autonomous status, dissolved its elected institutions, and arrested its political leaders. The reorganization also split the region, which had been governed as a single state, into two "union territories" under direct federal rule: Jammu and Kashmir, which remained largely Muslim, and thinly populated Ladakh, home to distinct Buddhist and Shiite Muslim ethnic groups. In December 2023, India's Supreme Court upheld the decision to strip the region's autonomous status, a major win for Modi and his Hindu-nationalist agenda, but also called on the government to restore statehood to Jammu and Kashmir, minus Ladakh, and hold overdue elections.

Indian-administered Kashmir's integration is seen as an important and nonnegotiable piece of the government's domestic program. The removal of its special status cleared the way for future population changes, with subsequent legal reforms allowing non-Kashmiri Indian nationals to gain permanent residency in Kashmir. Federal security forces in the region have long used repressive methods to quash dissent and employed extrajudicial violence against suspected insurgents and their alleged civilian sympathizers. Legislative elections, last held in 2014, have been repeatedly postponed.

Repression in Kashmir has gone hand in hand with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. The Modi government has endorsed discriminatory policies against India's large Muslim minority, which, along with other marginalized groups, faces obstacles to full political representation. Authorities have routinely permitted the destruction of mosques, and violence against Muslims has escalated in recent years. Other religious minorities in India have also suffered persecution, which is often intertwined with political and ethnic disputes. In June, churches were burnt down and hundreds of people were killed amid a spike in ethnoreligious violence between Hindu and Christian groups in the state of Manipur.

Discrimination against non-Hindus has had a cascading effect on other civil liberties in India. In February 2023, the British Broadcasting Corporation's offices in Delhi and Mumbai were raided after it released a documentary on Modi's alleged involvement in an outbreak of anti-Muslim violence in 2002. The authorities also used emergency powers to remove posts about the documentary from YouTube and Twitter and detained students who were gathering to watch the film.

Further undermining its democratic bona fides, the Indian government was credibly accused by Canadian and US authorities in 2023 of targeting Sikh activists living overseas with assassination plots. If a direct connection between the Indian government and these incidents of extraterritorial violence is confirmed, India will join a group of far more authoritarian states—including China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—that are known to use lethal tactics of transnational repression.

Choosing democracy in 2024

The rejection of pluralism by authoritarian leaders and armed groups during 2023 produced repression, violence, and a steep decline in overall freedom. This year, voters around

the world will be asked to embrace democracy despite the countervailing forces of division and exclusion. The results of these elections will shape the international environment for years to come.

Citizens of South Africa, once a beacon of democratic hope, will go to the polls this summer. The African National Congress (ANC) has governed without interruption since 1994 but now faces serious challenges, including rising violent crime, xenophobia, high youth unemployment, and insufficient accountability for corruption. Thirty years after antiapartheid leader Nelson Mandela came to power, 70 percent of South Africans are dissatisfied with the way that democracy is working, according to the survey group Afrobarometer.

“This year, voters around the world will be asked to embrace democracy.”

India's elections will take place within a media landscape characterized by increasing legal attacks on critical journalists and outlets, the spread of internet troll farms, and the use of sophisticated spyware against reporters, civic activists, and opposition politicians. During the campaign, potential voters may receive bigoted information from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party through social media, which could further inflame already destructive ethnic and religious hatreds.

In the United States, harassment and intimidation of federal, state, and local politicians, election administrators, and judges pose a serious challenge to the conduct of November's presidential election. Threats of violence can have far-reaching, harmful effects, potentially undermining compliance with election rules or deterring participation entirely. Actual violence related to political disputes can and has cost people their lives. Still haunted by the January 2021 attack on the Capitol and related court cases, Americans are heading into a decisive election starkly divided, with some questioning the very utility of fundamental democratic institutions.

The conduct of national elections in South Africa, India, and the United States, three of the most influential democracies in the world, will have ripple effects across the globe, with implications for international trade, interstate relations, and

movements for freedom in authoritarian settings. But other electoral contests will also have important consequences.

In June, elections for the European Parliament will be held in 27 member states, and the new legislators will elect the president of the European Commission. The current president, Ursula von der Leyen, has been an important supporter of Ukraine's efforts to repel Moscow's full-scale invasion. The United Kingdom is likely to hold its first general elections since the completion of Brexit, its departure from the European Union in 2020. Both the EU and the UK continue to grapple with the issue of migration and have increasingly sought deals with authoritarian leaders that are meant to prevent the irregular entry of migrants and asylum seekers. Two autocrats at the center of such deals, Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed and Rwandan president Paul Kagame, will themselves seek new terms in deeply flawed contests set to take place in 2024.

All of this voting will proceed in a global context that has become increasingly hostile to the sort of respect for different political, religious, and ethnic identities that sustain a democratic society. Over the past decade or more, many democracies have shirked their responsibility as stewards of the international system, failing to condemn coups, work for the peaceful resolution of destabilizing conflicts, and prevent abject repression in places like Afghanistan, China, Iran, and Russia from growing ever worse. In some countries, elections have elevated illiberal leaders who dismantle democratic institutions from within. Amid isolationist and discriminatory rhetoric, democratic governments and citizens may be tempted to wall themselves off from these challenges. But free people and free nations are stronger together, and easier prey for authoritarians on their own. It is only by upholding inclusive principles at home, supporting those on the front lines of the struggle abroad, and building robust international partnerships based on shared values that democracies can reverse the global decline in freedom.

Freedom in the World 2024 Status Changes

Ecuador



Ecuador's status declined from Free to Partly Free because a rise in violent crime, largely perpetrated by organized criminal groups that targeted officials, rivals, and ordinary citizens, resulted in a deepening security crisis.

Nagorno-Karabakh



Nagorno-Karabakh's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to an Azerbaijani blockade and military offensive that culminated in the dissolution of local political, legal, and civic institutions and the departure of nearly all of the civilian population.

Thailand



Thailand's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to competitive parliamentary elections and the formation of a new governing coalition by what had been a major opposition party, though unelected senators ensured that the party with the most votes was excluded.

Freedom in the World Methodology

Freedom in the World 2024 evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2023. 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.

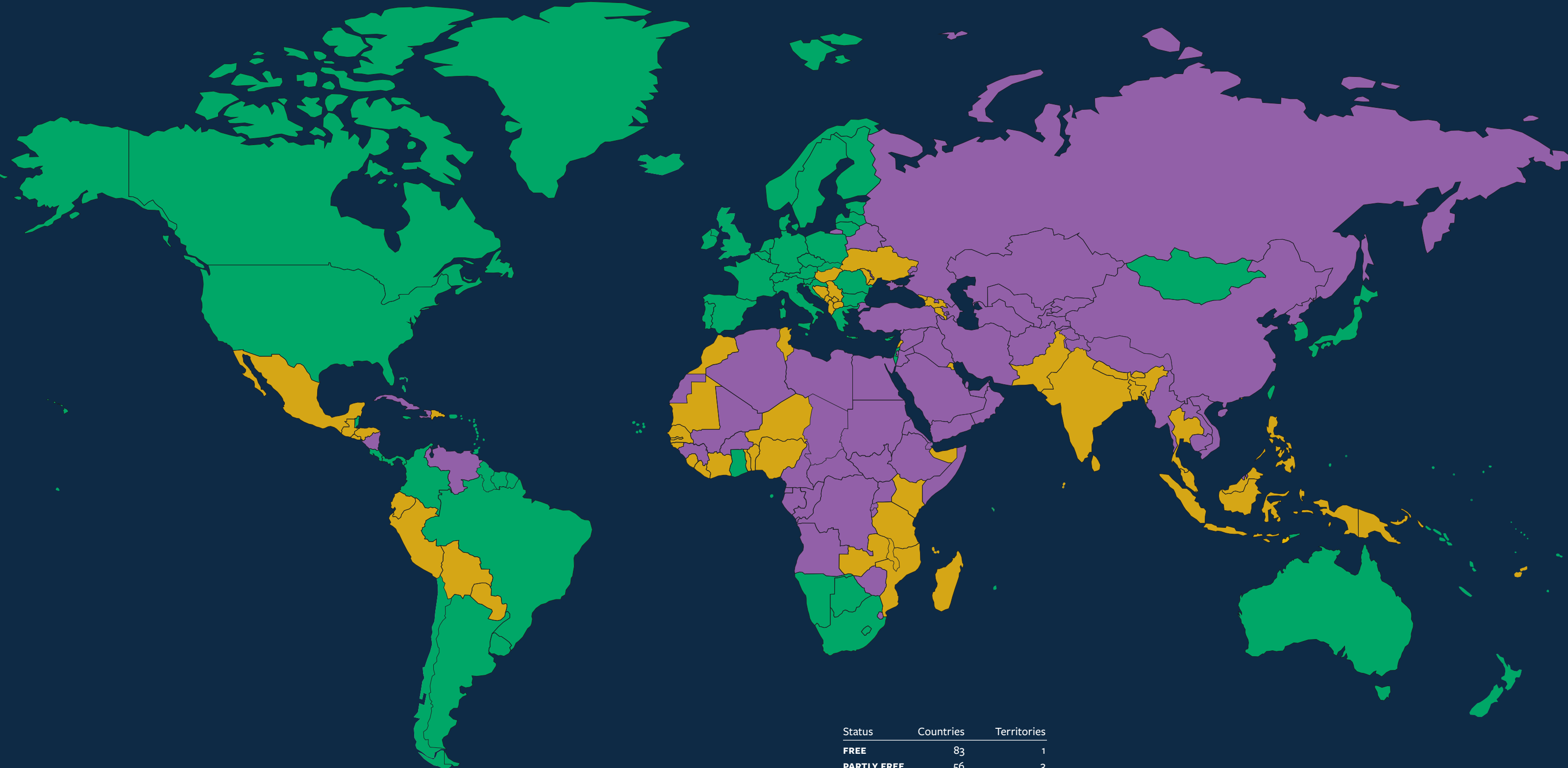
The methodology, which is derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is applied to all countries and territories, irrespective of geographic location,

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 2024



■ FREE
 ■ PARTLY FREE
 ■ NOT FREE

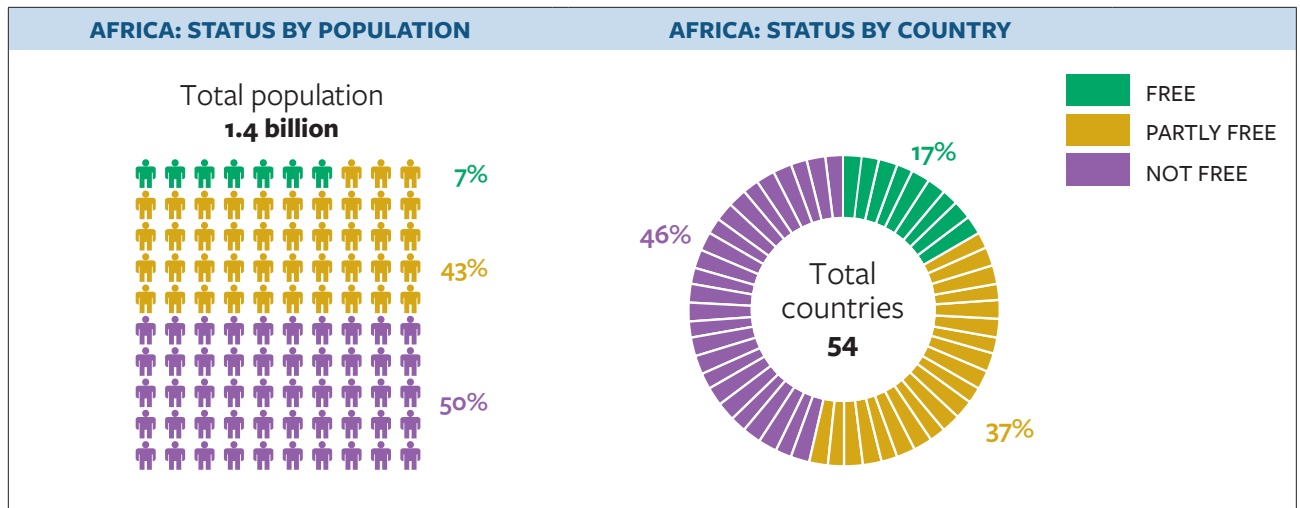
Status	Countries	Territories
FREE	83	1
PARTLY FREE	56	3
NOT FREE	56	11
Total	195	15

Freedom in the World 2024 assessed 210 countries and territories around the globe.

Regional Trends

AFRICA:

Amid coups and flawed elections, glimmers of hope for democracy and judicial independence



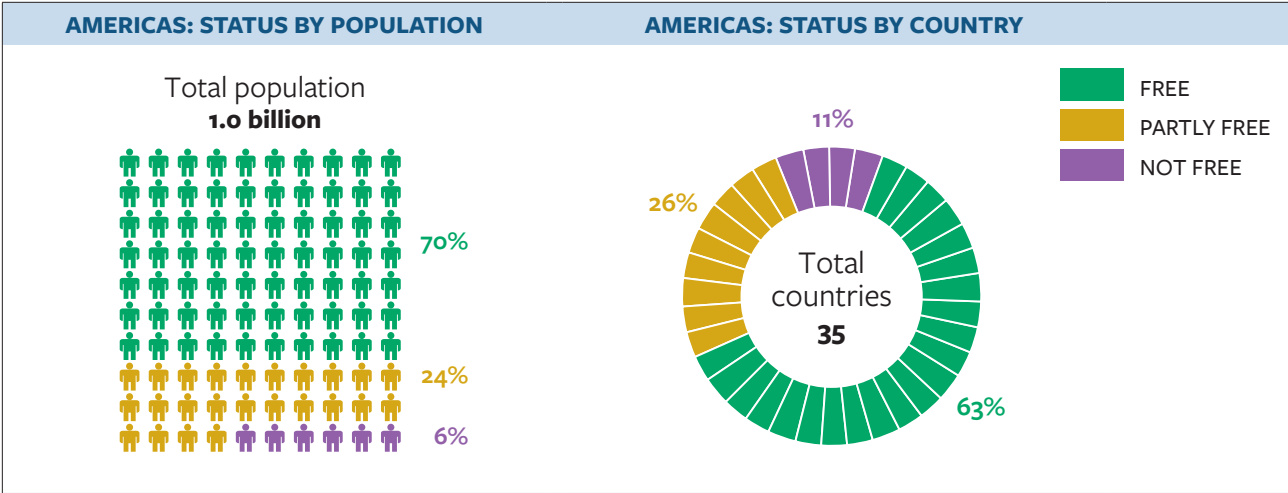
Freedom declined across Africa for the 10th straight year in 2023. Elections in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar were marred by political violence and accusations of fraud, while conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo led to devastating human rights abuses. Military juntas ousted civilian governments in Niger and Gabon, continuing a wave of coups on the continent. Against this backdrop, successful elections in Liberia and a number of court rulings that protected LGBT+ people's rights stood out as bright spots during the year.

Liberia's general elections represented a moment of democratic hope for West Africa, where the recent coups have been concentrated. The elections, deemed free and fair by international observers, were the first to be independently managed by Liberian electoral authorities, without foreign assistance, since a 1999–2003 civil war. Outgoing president George Weah became the first incumbent since the war to peacefully concede defeat after opposition leader Joseph

Boakai won the presidency in a runoff vote. What followed was the country's second consecutive democratic transfer of power after a gap of more than seven decades.

Restrictions on same-sex relations remained severe across much of Africa, and grew worse in some cases during 2023, but courts in at least two countries took modest steps to protect the rights of LGBT+ citizens. Kenya's Supreme Court ruled against the government's NGO Coordination Board after it refused to register the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, deeming the board's decision discriminatory and unconstitutional. In Namibia, the Supreme Court ordered the government to recognize and provide residency permits to the foreign same-sex spouses of Namibians who married abroad. These favorable rulings underscored the important role played by an independent judiciary in protecting the rights of individuals and marginalized groups in an electoral democracy.

AMERICAS: Voters defy authoritarian obstacles and criminal violence



Freedom faced extraordinary challenges in the Americas in 2023, as nine countries recorded overall score declines, and none registered improvements. The negative trend was driven by crackdowns against the political opposition and escalating criminal violence, which continued to corrode democratic institutions. Nevertheless, 22 of the 35 countries in the Americas were still classified as Free, making the region one of the freest in the world. The ballot box proved a powerful tool for democratic renewal, and more countries moved to lift harsh historical restrictions on reproductive health care.

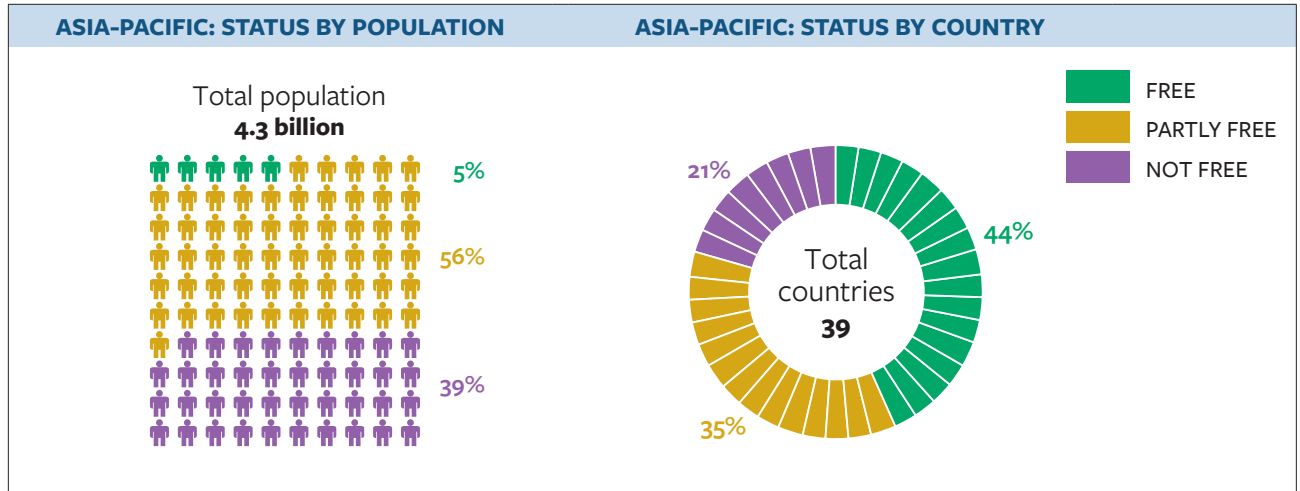
Voters across the region turned out at the polls, at times overcoming tremendous adversity or outright repression to do so. In Guatemala, Indigenous voters helped propel anticorruption candidate Bernardo Arévalo to a resounding presidential election victory, and were instrumental in blocking dubious attempts by incumbent officials to overturn the results. Following a turbulent campaign period marred by political violence, more than 80 percent of registered

voters in Ecuador participated in that country’s relatively well-administered snap elections. The new president, Daniel Noboa, has pledged to confront deepening insecurity, corruption, and organized crime. In Venezuela, one of the least free countries in the region, 2.3 million people cast ballots in an independently organized opposition primary that was meant to select a unity candidate ahead of the 2024 presidential election, demonstrating Venezuelans’ resolve to reverse the authoritarian misrule of incumbent Nicolás Maduro through democratic means.

Continuing a positive regional trend from the past several years, Mexico’s Supreme Court decriminalized abortion at the federal level and reinforced a state-level decriminalization process that had already been underway. In Honduras, an executive decree lifted the country’s strict ban on emergency contraception—an important step forward in a country where abortion remains prohibited in all cases.

ASIA-PACIFIC:

Despite electoral inequalities, efforts to increase political pluralism persist



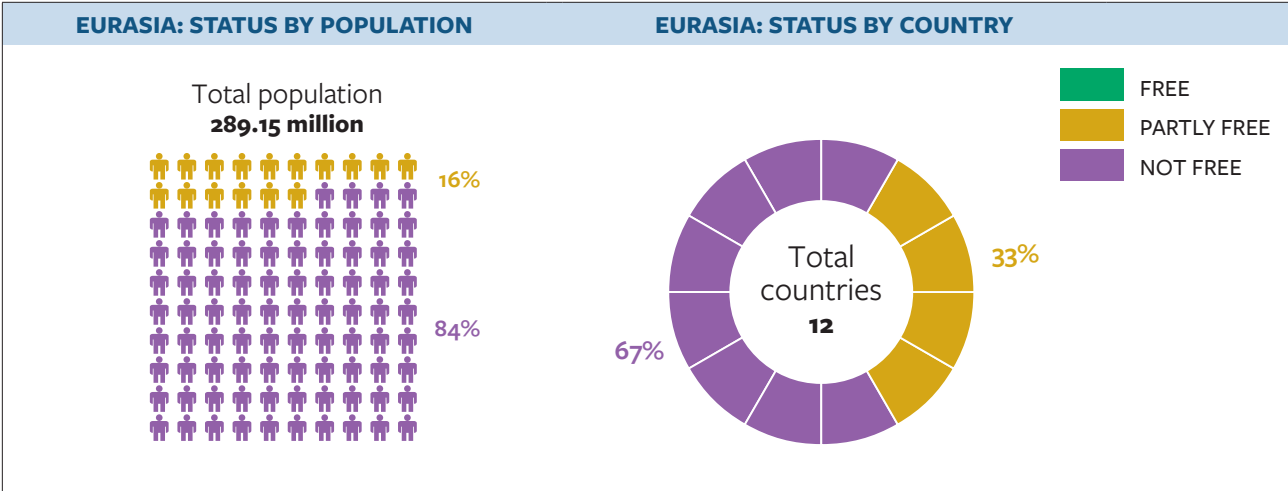
Freedom declined in the Asia-Pacific region in 2023, with efforts to undermine the political opposition threatening electoral integrity as a record number of countries prepared for polls in 2024. Pro-democracy candidates were kept out of district elections in Hong Kong, and the electoral campaign in Bangladesh was marred by violence and boycotted by the opposition.

Despite this overall deterioration, there were several meaningful improvements. Fiji experienced the world's largest score improvement for 2023 thanks to a smooth transfer of power after watershed elections in late 2022, moving the country further away from the antidemocratic legacy of a 2006 coup. In Nepal, a new amendment to the Citizenship Act allowed more than 400,000 stateless individuals born in Nepal to officially become Nepali citizens and participate in the country's politics. In Bhutan, the first round of parliamentary elections featured robust competition among five different parties. The rise of the new Bhutan Tendrel Party and the defeat of two well-established parties marked

a step forward for political pluralism in the kingdom, where freedom has been steadily improving over the past decade.

Reinvigorated political participation, particularly among young people and newer parties, also had a positive impact elsewhere in the region. In Thailand, young voters mobilized ahead of national elections that were ultimately more competitive than past votes and contributed to Thailand's status improvement from Not Free to Partly Free. Although the reformist Move Forward Party, which won a plurality of votes, was blocked from forming a government, the results compelled the military-backed establishment to allow another opposition party to lead the new ruling coalition. In Taiwan, political pluralism was widely upheld in the months leading up to the January 2024 general elections. The Taiwan People's Party, a relatively new political faction, mounted a significant challenge against the well-established Democratic Progressive Party and Kuomintang. The balloting and subsequent transfer of power went smoothly despite Beijing's attempts at intimidation and interference.

EURASIA: Democratic forces push back against growing authoritarian pressure



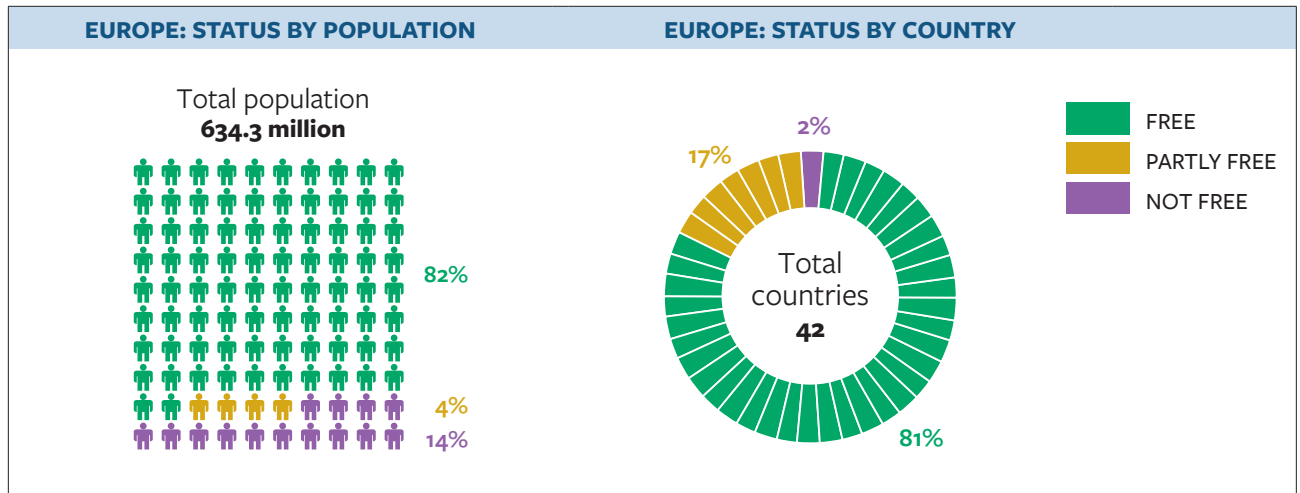
Eurasia experienced a staggering decline in freedom in 2023, driven largely by the Azerbaijani regime’s conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh and the expulsion of its ethnic Armenian population, as well as deepening authoritarian repression within Russia during the second year of the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine. Freedom also declined in Tajikistan due to increased government efforts to suppress free expression and heightened persecution of the country’s ethnic Pamiri community. While Eurasia remained dominated by Not Free countries in 2023, with none rated Free, democratic forces in several Partly Free settings made efforts to resist authoritarian pressure during the year.

Repressive governments across the region have followed Moscow’s lead by proposing or enacting laws that label independent media outlets and civil society organizations as “foreign agents.” In early 2023, the government of Georgia attempted to pass its own version of a foreign agents law, which would have significantly undermined freedoms of association and expression. The draft bill was rescinded

following massive public demonstrations by its opponents, though ruling party lawmakers indicated that the legislation could be resubmitted following public consultation.

Citizens and elected governments in other countries took steps to distance themselves from Moscow’s authoritarian influence in 2023. Despite potential reprisals by the Kremlin, Moldovans pushed to confirm their path toward European Union membership, with tens of thousands of people attending a rally in support of the project. The government passed several related reforms, and both Moldova and Ukraine were given the green light for EU accession talks at the end of the year. After receiving a massive influx of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia’s government deepened its rift with the Russian regime, whose lackluster peacekeeping performance did little to stem the Azerbaijani military’s assault in September. Since then, Yerevan has worked to reduce its dependence on Russia by diversifying its military and foreign policy partners while maintaining its commitment to democratic reforms.

EUROPE: *Strides toward equal treatment for LGBT+ people*



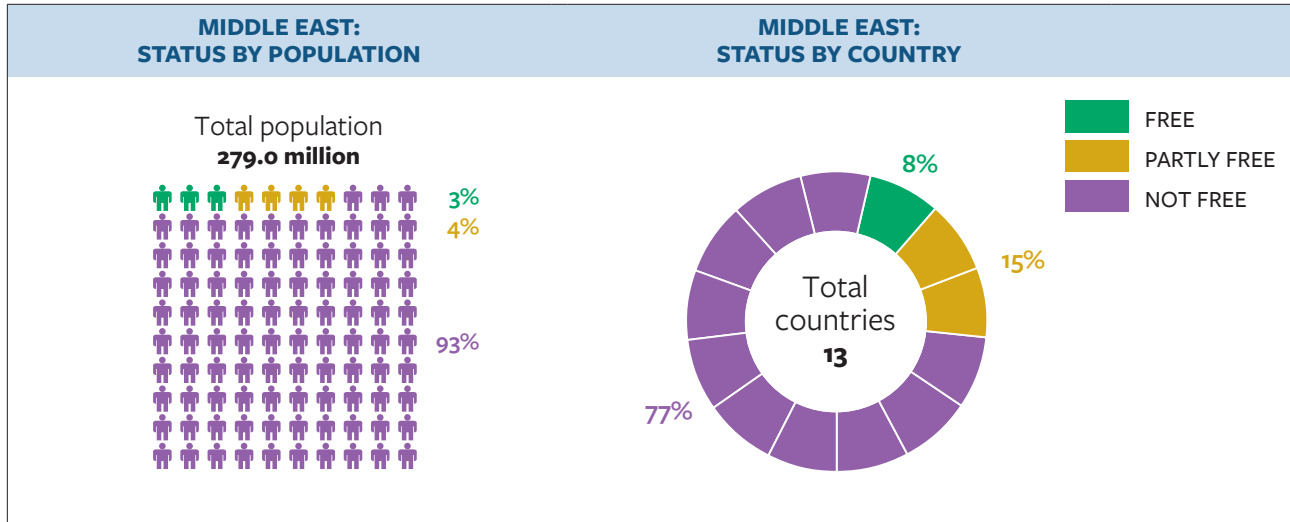
While freedom declined in Europe in 2023, more than 80 percent of European residents still live in Free countries. The decline was largely a result of worsening government dysfunction, including growing concerns about official corruption and a lack of transparency. Despite these challenges, European states remained global leaders in the protection of LGBT+ people’s rights, and several countries passed measures to improve legal equality. Poland’s newly elected government included similar changes in its ambitious reform agenda, raising hopes for a reversal of the country’s nearly decade-long democratic deterioration.

In June, Estonia became the second Eastern European country (after Slovenia) to legalize same-sex marriage; the new law took effect in January 2024. In November, Latvia’s parliament legalized same-sex civil unions, providing some

official recognition to same-sex couples. A law guaranteeing the right of same-sex couples to adopt children entered into force in the tiny principality of Liechtenstein, where the government also made progress toward the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The centrist coalition that came to power in Poland in December took swift steps to dismantle its illiberal predecessor’s political control over public media, which could lead to a more free and diverse information environment. The new government also pledged to decriminalize abortion and support same-sex civil unions, in sharp contrast to the previous government’s hostility toward the LGBT+ community and efforts to tighten restrictions on reproductive health care.

MIDDLE EAST: War in Gaza shakes an already repressive status quo



Hamas’s massive terrorist attack on October 7 and Israel’s ensuing military campaign in the Gaza Strip caused catastrophic human suffering. The conflict, which threatened to metastasize into a wider war, contributed to an overall decline in freedom for Israel, Gaza, and the Middle East as a whole in 2023. It also highlighted the critical need for a peaceful solution that prioritizes democratic freedoms and long-term security for both Palestinians and Israelis, and it illustrated the chronic instability stemming from the denial of political rights and civil liberties across the region, where 90 percent of the population lives in Not Free countries and territories.

Public outrage over the Israeli military’s actions led a number of governments to loosen generally tight restrictions on freedom of assembly. In Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and elsewhere, state-sanctioned demonstrations in solidarity with

Palestinians were relatively peaceful and allowed to proceed without the usual crackdowns by authorities. However, other types of public gatherings—including demonstrations ahead of a climate summit in the United Arab Emirates and ongoing antigovernment protests in Iran—continued to draw harsh responses from security forces.

The Gaza conflict had a far more dangerous effect on Yemen, where an April 2022 truce had raised hopes for a permanent end to the country’s decade-long civil war and an associated humanitarian crisis. The pause in fighting between the Houthi militant group, backed by Tehran, and a Saudi-led military coalition led to decreased violence and a slight improvement in the humanitarian situation in 2023, but these modest gains were cast into doubt when the Houthis began attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea in an ostensible bid to force the Israelis to withdraw from Gaza.

NOTABLE THREATS TO FREEDOM IN 2023

In addition to the problems of electoral manipulation and armed conflict, the following threats frequently affected specific freedoms—or the freedoms of specific groups—over the course of the year.



Organized crime groups menaced democratic institutions, security, and freedom. In Ecuador, a presidential candidate was assassinated after leaving a campaign rally. Early in the new year, as the authorities cracked down on the organized criminal groups believed to be responsible, gangs retaliated with a wave of violence and threats, including the seizure of a television station in Guayaquil by heavily armed men and a hostage video warning that “police, civilians, and soldiers are the spoils of war.” Incidents of violent crime, kidnapping, and extortion also spread across Mexico, where an important presidential election is scheduled for June. Gang violence in Haiti, including abductions and killings, continued to proliferate, particularly in areas that were previously considered to be safe. In Myanmar, a corrupt military junta and the chaos touched off by its 2021 coup have allowed criminal groups engaged in human trafficking to expand their activities in the country and throughout the Mekong River region.



Freedom to practice a chosen religion was suppressed. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan intensified its efforts to enforce religious conformity by instructing universities to remove religious books not aligned with its version of Sunni Islam and preventing the public celebration of Shiite Muslim and Hindu holidays. In India, separate incidents of violence resulted in damage to mosques, Muslim-owned businesses, and Christian churches. In the United States and several other countries, antisemitic and anti-Muslim threats and violence increased amid heightened tensions following Hamas’s October 7 terrorist attack and Israel’s ensuing military campaign in Gaza. In a startling act of violence, a 6-year-old Palestinian American boy was killed outside Chicago by his landlord in what police described as a hate crime. In Seattle, synagogues received suspicious envelopes containing white powdery substances, prompting alerts among Jewish communities.



LGBT+ people’s rights were targeted through restrictive laws. Ghana’s Parliament considered a highly repressive bill that would increase penalties for same-sex relations and criminalize advocacy on behalf of LGBT+ people’s rights. The Kremlin extended its already extensive anti-LGBT+ policies during the year. In July, President Vladimir Putin signed a law that dissolved transgender people’s marriages and barred them from adopting children. In November, the Russian Supreme Court labeled the “international LGBT public movement” as an extremist organization, despite the lack of any specific entity with that name, opening the door for arbitrary criminal prosecution of people accused of identifying as LGBT+. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan blamed LGBT+ communities for the erosion of “the institution of the family.” His ruling Justice and Development Party has proposed legally codifying the definition of family as a unit centered on a man and a woman.



Migrants and refugees were subjected to arbitrary deportation and physical violence. The Lebanese military summarily deported thousands of Syrians who were seeking refuge in the country, including unaccompanied children in April and May, disregarding the international legal principle of nonrefoulement. In October, the government of Pakistan announced that it would expel all unregistered migrants. The declaration itself and subsequent efforts to enforce it compelled more than 500,000 of the 1.7 million Afghan refugees in the country to cross into Afghanistan. After an incendiary speech by President Kais Saïed of Tunisia, in which he decried the influence of migrants and asserted the country’s Arab and Muslim identity, violent attacks on African migrants surged. In Cyprus, anti-immigrant demonstrations were followed by vandalism targeting migrant-owned businesses and properties in Limassol and Chloraka. Authorities in Germany also recorded a rise in the number of attacks on migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees living in the country in 2023.

Policy Recommendations

Over the past 18 years, attacks by authoritarian forces have contributed to a global decline in political rights and civil liberties. Yet those facing relentless oppression on the front lines have not given up, and they remain crucial to sustaining the fight for freedom around the world. In every country and territory, there are human rights defenders, democracy activists, journalists, and ordinary voters working to defend and expand freedom for their compatriots. Their individual victories are tied directly to the success of the larger democratic struggle against authoritarian rule.

We can and must meet this moment with unwavering political will. Democratic governments, donors, and the private sector must deepen their solidarity with front-line allies, hold dictators accountable for rights abuses and corruption, and invest in democratic institutions at home and abroad. They must also reject any weakening of their core principles for the sake of illusory short-term interests. Only a global order in which democratic norms prevail can deliver liberty, prosperity, and security—for those living now and for future generations.

To achieve their goals, democratic societies should prioritize the following actions.

Provide steady support and flexible funding to those on the front lines of the struggle against tyranny.

Democratic governments and donors must increase and sustain support for those working to defend and promote fundamental freedoms around the world. Failure to do so emboldens autocrats and can result in the loss of hard-won progress.

Democratic governments and donors must be alert to setbacks that could precipitate further declines in fundamental freedoms. Freedom House research has shown that once a country tips into the Partly Free or Not Free category, it often struggles to recover. Over the last 50 years, [freedom of expression has declined more than any other civil liberty](#). In 2023, four types of repression were notably common: attacks against LGBT+ people’s rights, violence against migrants, rising rates of organized crime that threatened democratic institutions, and attacks on religious freedom, including acts of antisemitism and Islamophobia. Each of these trends should be met with strong international

condemnation, financial assistance to support victims and activists, and sanctions as appropriate.

Donors should provide rapid and flexible support to countries at critical junctures. Amid a panoply of competing needs, the democratic community and donors should be prepared to surge assistance to countries at critical junctures. These are places where recent democratic gains require reinforcement, or where freedom is threatened by authoritarian aggression, conflict, or illiberal leaders. In 2024, such settings include Colombia, Liberia, Thailand, Nigeria, Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan, and Tunisia. The US Agency for International Development’s “Democracy Delivers Initiative” and the US Department of State’s “Fundamental Freedoms Fund” are examples of projects that focus support on countries at critical junctures. Donors should build on the lessons learned from these existing frameworks to further systematize rapid-response funding mechanisms that will allow the democratic community to address emerging developments.

Democracies should uphold their commitment to a Ukrainian victory. Ukraine is unique among other countries at critical junctures, both in the extent to which the fate of its democracy could affect the security of other democracies around the world, and in the decisive role to be played by continued military support from the United States and other foreign partners. Democratic governments should not delay or hesitate in providing Ukraine with the resources it needs to defend and reclaim its territory from Russian forces, and to proceed further down the democratic path. For more detailed recommendations on the war in Ukraine, visit freedomhouse.org.

Uphold the rights of people living in disputed territories. The events of the past year in places such as Nagorno-Karabakh and the Gaza Strip provided stark evidence that populations without self-determination are at greater risk of extreme human rights abuses or atrocities.

Donors should provide resources to support human rights defenders (HRDs) and civil society organizations from these territories. Technical assistance and training on issues like coalition and constituency building, advocacy, organizational development, and physical and digital security are particularly helpful. Because locally elected leaders,

even in disputed territories, can help safeguard civil liberties and provide an accountable and constructive channel for addressing residents' interests, election-related programming should be considered. Protection for HRDs should be of paramount importance, and donors should be ready to offer medical, legal, psychosocial, and relocation support as needed. Democratic governments should also be prepared to help HRDs evacuate when necessary. (See also the recommendations below on support for HRDs in exile.)

Democratic governments should leverage existing international mechanisms to shine a spotlight on repression in disputed territories. These mechanisms, such as regional and international special rapporteur mandates, can provide people living in disputed territories with an international platform to raise awareness of any human rights concerns, facilitate the documentation of injustices, and drive collective responses. Support and training must be given to the local human rights and democracy activists who are central to collecting evidence of human rights violations, war crimes, and other international crimes, which can then be shared with international investigators.

Democratic governments must be champions of international laws and norms. When international law, peace agreements, or established borders are violated, democratic governments should publicly condemn the breaches and use international and regional normative frameworks and standards as a basis for responses. In the event of widespread state or nonstate violence, the democratic community should be vociferous advocates for resolving conflicts in accordance with international law, ensuring that humanitarian assistance flows unhindered, securing safe passage for those seeking to flee or return to their homes, and holding perpetrators of violence accountable by imposing sanctions and pursuing charges in the appropriate national and international venues.

Protect free and fair elections in 2024. From the United States to India, Russia, and Mexico, at least 40 countries—representing more than two-fifths of the world's population—are holding national-level elections in 2024, and many more will conduct other types of balloting. Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of any democracy, and independent and transparent electoral processes are necessary to foster genuine competition and public trust.

Democratic governments should immediately and publicly condemn electoral manipulation or the refusal to honor electoral outcomes. Efforts to rig elections, including through

the abuse of state resources or media to unfairly benefit the incumbent, or by changing election rules on short notice to put the opposition at a disadvantage, should be met with diplomatic pressure or sanctions. Democracies should not recognize the legitimacy of leaders who come to power through systematic electoral manipulation.

Democratic governments should protect elections from the threat of foreign interference. Democratic governments should share with one another any information pertaining to electoral threats. Prior to an election, they should review their physical and digital voting infrastructure for malign intrusions and ensure that electoral management bodies are impartial and independent.

Democratic governments should bolster public trust in electoral processes and address voter apathy. The administration of any election should be transparent and allow observation by all stakeholders and political parties, and existing electoral laws should be impartially enforced. Neutral election observers from internationally accredited organizations and reputable domestic groups should be invited to monitor the totality of election processes—from preelection developments to postelection dispute resolution—without any undue restrictions and regardless of whether a country is rated Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

Democratic governments, civil society, and technology companies should defend against the harms of artificial intelligence during election periods. As noted in [Freedom on the Net 2023](#), artificial intelligence (AI) has increased the scale, speed, and efficiency of online harms and digital repression during electoral periods, and the affordability and accessibility of generative AI technology has lowered the barrier of entry to the disinformation market. Against this backdrop, political parties, committees, and campaigns should refrain from intentionally misrepresenting candidates in advertising that features AI-generated or AI-manipulated imagery.

Tech companies should increase efforts to defend election integrity. Specifically, companies should support the accessibility of circumvention technology and resist government orders to shut down internet connectivity or ban digital services during an election period. They should work closely with independent researchers who can study the effects that their services have on information integrity and free expression. Finally, companies should invest in staff dedicated to working on human rights issues, including

regional and country specialists, to better understand the local impact of their products.

Respond consistently to attempts to overthrow duly elected governments. When the international community fails to address coups and coup attempts in a firm and principled manner, it normalizes these illegitimate actions and encourages their proliferation.

Democratic governments should review existing laws to clarify the scenarios that warrant a reevaluation of bilateral relations and foreign assistance. The [Lomé Declaration](#) enumerated four scenarios for unconstitutional changes in government that could provide a model definition: (1) a military coup d'état against a democratically elected government, (2) an intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected government, (3) replacement of a democratically elected government by an armed dissident group or rebel movement, and (4) refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party after free, fair, and regular elections. Some experts have suggested that violations of term limits should also be included as an action-forcing event. In the United States, the conditions outlined in Section 7008 of the annual State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations legislation—that is, whether a country's military has overthrown, or played a decisive role in overthrowing, the government, and whether the deposed leader was “duly elected”—could be expanded to mirror those of the Lomé Declaration or to otherwise account for takeovers by nonmilitary actors.

Democratic governments' responses should be public, swift, and coordinated with one another. Government decisions to enforce provisions like Section 7008 should be both timebound and public. In the US context, the State Department should have a set period of time to determine the applicability of Section 7008, in consultation with Congress, and publicly announce its decision. As is the case with Section 7008, democratic policymakers should scrutinize the elements of assistance that particularly benefit the chief executive and upper echelons of the government, such as access to preferential trade arrangements, investment in infrastructure, or sales of arms and other forms of military cooperation. Any suspension of assistance should be publicly explained in detail to serve as a deterrent.

Democratic governments should impose targeted sanctions on those seeking to prevent a peaceful transfer of power

or overthrow a duly elected government. Immediate cuts to foreign assistance should not be the only recourse. Existing laws should be modified—or new laws added—to concurrently mandate immediate, targeted sanctions against individual perpetrators responsible for the overthrow of duly elected governments.

Democratic governments and donors should give long-term priority to assistance for governance and security-sector reform. When resuming aid to a country where the United States' Section 7008—or a comparable law in another country—has been applied, donors should consider mandating needs assessments to ramp up existing portfolios related to democratic, human rights, governance, and security-sector reform.

Hold autocrats accountable for human rights abuses and corruption, and limit their ability to evade the rule of law and undermine democratic institutions.

As authoritarian leaders increasingly work together to avoid accountability and bolster their regimes, it is vital for democracies to operate in a coordinated fashion to robustly defend free institutions and impose meaningful penalties on those who violate fundamental rights.

Democratic governments should impose targeted sanctions on rights abusers and corrupt officials in a way that maximizes their impact. Targeted sanctions, which include visa bans and asset freezes, can be a powerful tool for deterrence and accountability, particularly in countries where the local legal system is unlikely to provide justice. However, selective application, failure to combine it with other tactics, and challenges in addressing unintended negative effects have made this tool less powerful than it could be. Targeted sanctions are most effective when they are clearly and narrowly defined; when they are multilateral; when they are applied as part of a comprehensive strategy in combination with other foreign policy instruments, such as diplomatic pressure and suspension of foreign assistance; and when the names of those sanctioned and the reasons for sanctioning them are made clear [publicly](#). Public naming and shaming can deter repeat abuses by perpetrators and similar abuses by others, and can encourage victims and activists to continue their work. Democratic governments should impose sanctions consistently and not overlook egregious violations simply because the perpetrator is a partner or ally. In the United States, the Immigration and Nationality Act should be updated to allow officials to publicly name those receiving visa bans.

Democratic governments should limit the ability of authoritarian regimes to evade sanctions. Sanctions alone are not a sufficient mechanism for ensuring full accountability, in part because ill-intentioned leaders and governments are often able to evade sanctions by creating networks of shell corporations, stashing money in accounts belonging to associates, and collaborating with other authoritarians. Regimes in countries like Russia and Iran, for example, continued to export oil and acquire arms in 2023 despite facing broad sectoral and targeted sanctions. Democratic governments and the private sector should work with civil society to identify and close legal loopholes and improve compliance. Democracies should pass transparency laws that require the submission and collection of identifying information about shell companies' owners and beneficiaries. The private sector should consult with anticorruption and human rights organizations as part of their "know your customer" efforts. These expert groups will be able to provide detailed context on corruption and human rights abuses, how perpetrators may be networked, and how they may seek to avoid detection. Individuals and entities found to be enabling, facilitating, or otherwise supporting sanctions evasion should themselves face sanctions.

Democratic governments should work together to reform and better protect international democratic institutions. Democratic member states should closely monitor upcoming elections at international bodies to ensure that there is a robust slate of democratic candidates running for open seats. Democracies should push back when authoritarian rulers seek to [invoke and redefine the language of democracy](#) to obfuscate their abuses of power, denouncing these efforts publicly and explaining why and how they mislead the intended audiences. At the United Nations, serious reform is needed. Rules and practices should be changed to prohibit egregious and consistent human rights abusers from holding seats on the Human Rights Council. Democratic governments should work within the UN system to limit state reprisals against participating activists—by maintaining their confidentiality, providing transparency regarding state requests for accredited activists' information, and responding swiftly and vocally when states attempt to thwart their participation.

Protect human rights activists in exile and facilitate their work. While studies indicate that HRDs overwhelmingly prefer to work from within their home countries, authoritarians are increasingly targeting them through judicial

harassment, violent political persecution, torture, and arrests. As a result, many HRDs have been forced to flee abroad.

Donors should continue to support HRDs in exile so that they may continue their work. Flexible financing and innovative technological solutions are essential to empower HRDs in exile and allow them to safely communicate with people in the countries they were forced to flee.

Democratic governments that shelter HRDs should adjust their laws to address the threat of transnational repression. Because many exiled HRDs remain outspoken critics of their repressive home governments, authoritarian regimes routinely engage in transnational repression to silence and intimidate them. Governments that shelter such individuals should ensure that they have in place a clear definition of transnational repression and the laws necessary to address the threat. Government officials who may encounter perpetrators or victims of transnational repression—including those at the national, subnational, and local levels who work in law enforcement and with immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—should receive training to respond appropriately. Additional recommendations for responding to transnational repression are [available](#) on the Freedom House website.

Governments that shelter HRDs should provide visas for those facing imminent danger. Countries where such visas do not exist should create a new category for democratic activists that allows multiple entries and long stays, providing individuals in need with the option of a swift temporary relocation. Democratic states with existing categories of this kind could increase the transparency and consistency of their procedures for issuing humanitarian visas to civic activists. For those who must flee permanently, host countries should review their asylum processes to ensure that exiled HRDs are not being denied legal status as a result of illegitimate criminal charges leveled against them by origin-country governments. Permanent legal status offers a better safeguard against transnational repression and reduces HRDs' reliance on identification documents from their home countries, which can be canceled or put holders at risk when they seek renewal at the issuing country's consulates and embassies. Permanent residency status can also enable family reunification, which reduces the origin-country government's ability to pressure exiles through their loved ones—a practice known as coercion by proxy.

Democratic governments should address the apparent proliferation of spyware attacks against HRDs in exile. Governments in at least 49 of the 70 countries studied in the [2023 Freedom on the Net report](#) were suspected of having access to sophisticated spyware or data extraction technologies. Some reports have indicated that even democracies may have misused commercial spyware against HRDs. Democracies should ensure that any surveillance they undertake is legal, necessary, and proportionate. They should consider joining the [Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative](#) and uphold the principles of the [Joint Statement on Efforts to Combat the Proliferation and Misuse of Spyware](#).

Governments, the private sector, and civil society should work together to limit the unintended impact on activists of sanctions against their home countries. HRDs should not be denied access to commercial services as a result of overcompliance with sanctions or derisking practices. For example, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a number of Russian activists noted an increase in denials of service by banking institutions due to their nationality. Companies should meet with exiled HRDs to better understand how their current efforts to mitigate risk—whether reputational, regulatory, or sanctions-related—may adversely impact exiled dissidents.

Support the liberation and resilience of political prisoners. Many current and former political prisoners have stated that the worst fear of those in detention is to be forgotten. Democratic governments and human rights organizations must keep a spotlight on the [staggering number](#) of HRDs who are imprisoned worldwide.

Democratic governments should advocate for the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners. One way to draw attention to the issue is to recognize October 30 as the [International Day of Political Prisoners](#). Governments should regularly and proactively raise cases of political prisoners during bilateral engagements with perpetrator governments, and ensure that political prisoners and the abuses they suffer remain a point of discussion at multilateral forums. Governments should collectively increase their requests for information or for specific actions related to prisoners' medical care.

Donors should increase targeted assistance to political prisoners, their families, and their lawyers. The legal needs of detained HRDs vary, but they can include attorney fees, funds to support the preparation and submission of appeals to higher courts following an unjust ruling, and funds to prepare legal inquiries as to detention conditions and official complaints. In cases where political prisoners are transferred deliberately to remote locations, donors should consider covering the costs incurred by family members or lawyers as they visit relocated prisoners or attend distant court hearings. If and when released from prison, HRDs often require support to address the psychological and physical toll of imprisonment and any ongoing stigma and ostracization in their countries. Additional recommendations on how to support the release of political prisoners can be found at freedomhouse.org.

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