

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022

The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule



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 2022 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

People gather in Myanmar to protest the February 1, 2021, military coup. (Image credit: Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule

By Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz

Global freedom faces a dire threat. Around the world, the enemies of liberal democracy—a form of self-government in which human rights are recognized and every individual is entitled to equal treatment under law—are accelerating their attacks. Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same. In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power. Those countries that have struggled in the space between democracy and authoritarianism, meanwhile, are increasingly tilting toward the latter. The global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy’s defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail.

The present threat to democracy is the product of 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom. A total of 60 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 25 improved. As of today, some 38 percent of the global population live in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997. Only about 20 percent now live in Free countries.

During this period of democratic decline, checks on abuse of power and human rights violations have eroded. In

the decades after World War II, the United Nations and other international institutions promoted the notion of fundamental rights, and democracies offered support—however unevenly—in their domestic and foreign policies as they strove to create an open international system built on shared resistance to totalitarianism. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, leaders of countries in transition felt compelled to publicly embrace the same ideals in order to win acceptance in the international community, even if their commitment was only skin deep. Governments that relied on external economic or military support had to stage at least superficially credible elections and respect some institutional checks on their power, among other concessions, to maintain their good standing.

For much of the 21st century, however, democracy’s opponents have labored persistently to dismantle this international order and the restraints it imposed on their ambitions. The fruits of their exertions are now apparent. The leaders of China, Russia, and other dictatorships have succeeded in shifting global incentives, jeopardizing the consensus that democracy is the only viable path to prosperity and security, while encouraging more authoritarian approaches to governance.

Countries in every region of the world have been captured by authoritarian rulers in recent years. In 2021 alone,

A GROWING DEMOCRACY GAP: 16 YEARS OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 16 years.



Nicaragua’s incumbent president won a new term in a tightly orchestrated election after his security forces arrested opposition candidates and deregistered civil society organizations. Sudan’s generals seized power once again, reversing democratic progress made after the 2019 ouster of former dictator Omar al-Bashir. And as the United States abruptly withdrew its military from Afghanistan, the elected government in Kabul collapsed and gave way to the Taliban, returning the country to a system that is diametrically opposed to democracy, pluralism, and equality.

At the same time, democracies are being harmed from within by illiberal forces, including unscrupulous politicians willing to corrupt and shatter the very institutions that brought them to power. This was arguably most visible last year in the [United States](#), where rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6 as part of an organized attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election. But freely elected leaders from Brazil to India have also taken or threatened a variety of antidemocratic actions, and the resulting breakdown in shared values among democracies has led to a weakening of these values on the international stage.

It is now impossible to ignore the damage to democracy’s foundations and reputation. The regimes of China, Russia, and other authoritarian countries have gained enormous power in the international system, and freer countries have seen their established norms challenged and fractured. The current state of global freedom should raise alarm among all who value their own rights and those of their fellow human beings. To reverse the decline, democratic governments need to strengthen domestic laws and institutions while taking bold, coordinated action to support the struggle for democracy around the world. In less free countries, democrats must unite to resist the encroachment of unchecked power and work toward expanding freedom for all individuals. Only global solidarity among democracy’s defenders can successfully counter the combined aggression of its adversaries.

Popular demand for democracy remains strong. From Sudan to Myanmar, people continue to risk their lives in the pursuit of freedom in their countries. Many others undertake dangerous journeys in order to live freely elsewhere. Democratic governments and societies must harness and support this common desire for fundamental rights and build a world in which it is ultimately fulfilled.

What is democracy?

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

Moreover, it has contributed to a misperception that all democracy requires is the regular performance of elections. Democracy means more than just majority rule, however. In its ideal form, it is a governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights. It is a network of mutually reinforcing structures in which those exercising power are subject to checks both within and outside the state, for example, from independent courts, an independent press, and civil society. It requires an openness to alternations in power, with rival candidates or parties competing fairly to govern for the good of the public as a whole, not just themselves or those who voted for them. It creates a level playing field so that all people, no matter the circumstances of their birth or background, can enjoy the universal human rights to which they are entitled and participate in politics and governance.

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

The promotion of autocratic norms

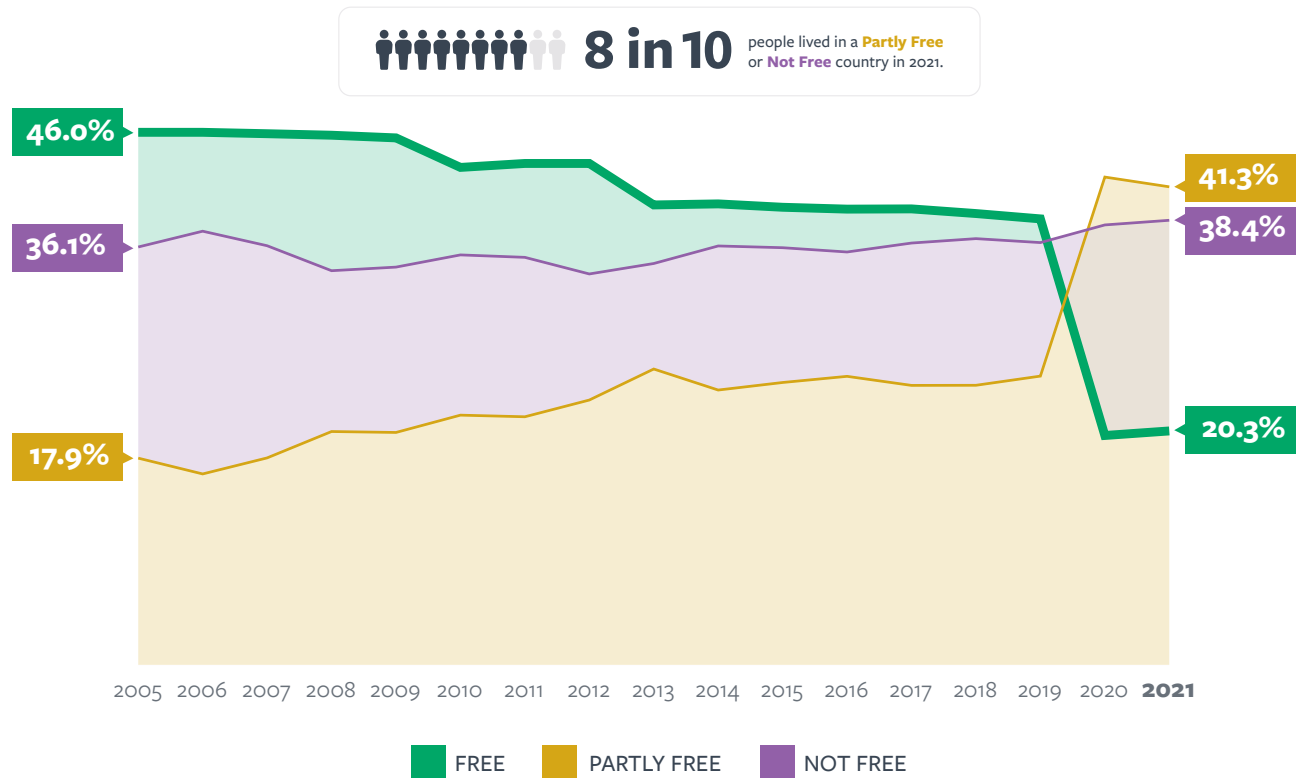
Autocrats have created a more favorable international environment for themselves over the past decade and a half, empowered by their own political and economic might as well as waning pressure from democracies. The alternative order is not based on a unifying ideology or personal affinity among leaders. It is not designed to serve the best interests of populations, or to enable people to improve their own lives. Instead it is grounded in autocrats’ shared interest in minimizing checks on their abuses and maintaining their grip on power. A world governed by this order would in reality be one of disorder, replete with armed conflict, lawless violence, corruption, and economic volatility. Such global instability and insecurity would have a significant cost in human lives.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays a leading role in promoting autocratic norms. Citing its self-serving interpretation of state sovereignty, the party strives to carve out space for incumbent governments to act as they choose without oversight or consequences. It offers an alternative to democracies as a source of international support and investment, helping would-be autocrats to entrench themselves in office, adopt aspects of the CCP governance model, and enrich their regimes while ignoring principles like transparency and fair competition. At the same time, the CCP has used its vast economic clout and even military threats to suppress international criticism of its own violations of democratic principles and human rights, for instance by punishing governments and other foreign entities that criticize its demolition of civil liberties in Hong Kong or question its expansive territorial claims.

In 2021, the CCP further extended the scope of speech it would not tolerate, employing economic and technological leverage to pressure governments, international institutions, and the private sector to echo its preferred narratives. Although new evidence indicated that party leader Xi Jinping and other top officials had a hand in planning and implementing widespread crimes against humanity and acts of genocide against ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, many foreign actors, including some democracies, toed the CCP line. A Marriott hotel in the Czech Republic declined to host a November 2021 World Uyghur Congress gathering, arguing that it preferred to observe “political neutrality.” New Zealand’s Parliament refrained from identifying Beijing’s actions in Xinjiang as a genocide after the trade minister voiced concerns that such language would hinder economic relations with China. Such threats are credible given Beijing’s

LIVING IN A LESS FREE WORLD

The share of the world's population living in Free environments has fallen as authoritarian practices proliferate.



past reprisals against foreign companies and nations, including the imposition of tariffs on Australian exports after Canberra called for an independent investigation into the origin of COVID-19.

Dropping the pretense of competitive elections

Elections, even when critically flawed, have long given authoritarian leaders a veneer of legitimacy, both at home and abroad. As international norms shift in the direction of autocracy, however, these exercises in democratic theater have become increasingly farcical.

In the run-up to Russia's September 2021 parliamentary elections, the regime of President Vladimir Putin dispelled the illusion of competition by imprisoning opposition leader Aleksey Navalny and tarring his movement as "extremist," which prevented any candidates who were even loosely associated with it from running for office. The balloting itself

was marred by irregularities and restrictions on independent observers, and technology firms were forced to remove a Navalny-backed mobile app meant to inform opposition voters about the strongest candidates in their area. A law on "foreign agents" was also expanded ahead of the elections, restricting the activities of independent media as well as individuals who were critical of the regime.

The November 2021 presidential election in Nicaragua was similarly uncompetitive. President Daniel Ortega's authoritarian government refused to implement electoral reforms recommended by the Organization for American States, including measures that would have made the Supreme Electoral Council more independent, established more transparency in the voter-registration and vote-counting processes, and allowed independent and credible international electoral observers to monitor the polls. Instead, during the preceding year, the government passed laws designed to target the opposition, including a "foreign agents" law inspired by the Russian legislation. The regime



An officer of the Nicaraguan National Police stands guard at a polling station during preparations for the 2021 presidential election. (Image credit: Oswaldo Rivas/AFP via Getty Images)

also canceled the registration of nearly 50 organizations, effectively quashing independent civil society, and arrested at least seven potential opposition candidates on charges including treason.

The December 2021 Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong underscored Beijing's success in dismantling the territory's semidemocratic institutions. Like Putin and Ortega, the CCP and its allies in the Hong Kong government laid the groundwork for a tightly controlled process, enacting an electoral "reform" that sharply diminished direct suffrage and allowed authorities to exclude candidates based on political criteria, arresting and detaining opposition leaders under the draconian National Security Law, and forcing independent media outlets to shut down. It therefore surprised no one when pro-Beijing candidates dominated the new legislature, despite a long history of robust voter support for prodemocracy candidates.

A proliferation of coups and power grabs

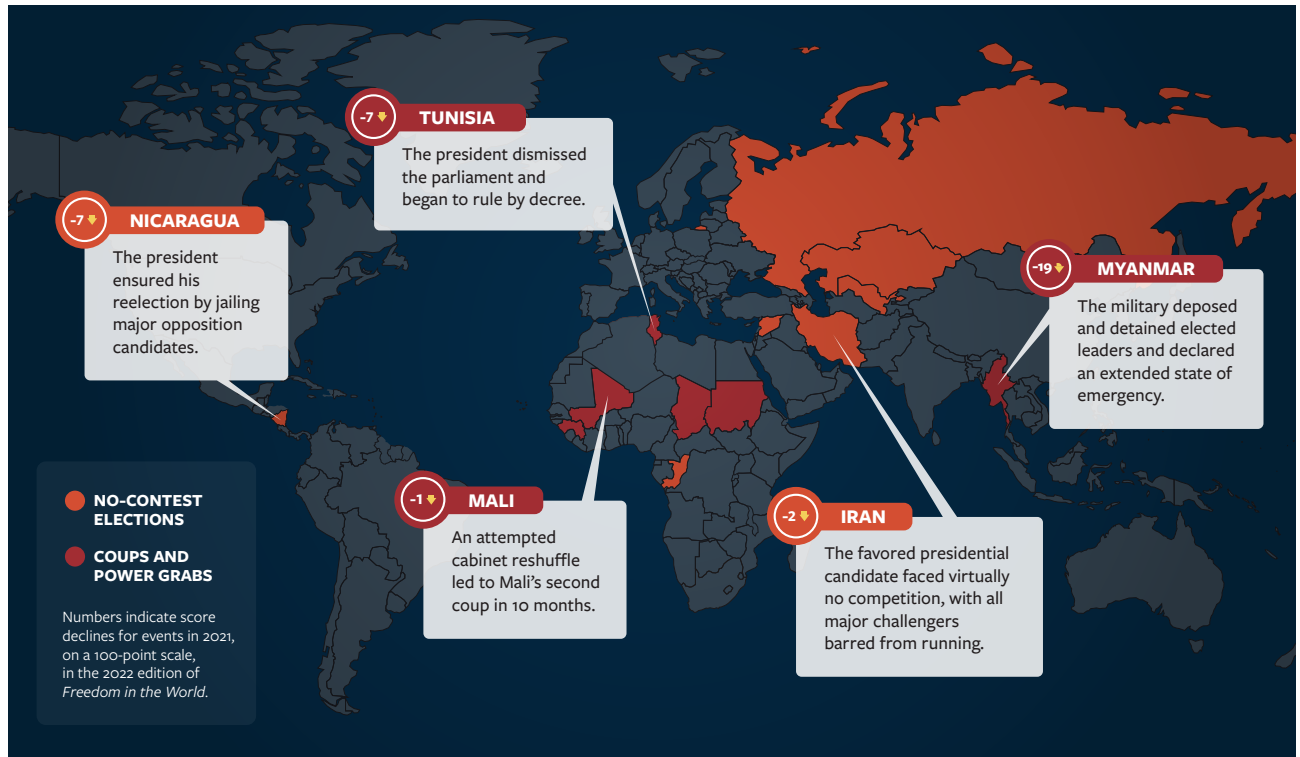
In another sign that international deterrents against antidemocratic behavior are losing force, coups were more common in 2021 than in any of the previous 10 years. The first took place in February in Myanmar, just before a new parliament was due to be sworn in following flawed yet credible November 2020 elections in which the military's preferred party was soundly defeated. The military, which had

continued to play a significant role in politics under the 2008 constitution it drafted, declared that fraud had rendered the elections invalid, and installed commander in chief Min Aung Hlaing as acting president. An initial one-year state of emergency has since been extended by two additional years. Civilian political leaders have been arrested en masse, over a thousand people have been killed as security forces crack down on prodemocracy protests, and thousands of others have been thrown in jail and tortured. The military authorities imposed curfews, repeatedly shut down the internet, raided universities, and searched for human rights defenders and prodemocracy activists to arrest. As a result of these developments, Myanmar experienced the world's largest contraction in freedom last year.

In Sudan, weeks before the transitional government was scheduled to come under full civilian control after a 2019 coup, the military seized power in October 2021 and declared a state of emergency. Though civilian prime minister Abdalla Hamdok was later reinstated, the military retained control over the government and suggested that elections would not be held until 2023. Massive protests against the coup and the terms of Hamdok's reinstatement have continued, and a violent response by security forces has killed scores of people. Under pressure from political groups and ordinary citizens who saw his participation as a surrender to the military, Hamdok resigned in early January, leaving the government in the control of the armed forces.

BREAKING DEMOCRATIC NORMS

Incumbent leaders and generals carried out illegitimate elections, power grabs, and coups with little fear of international repercussions in 2021.



West Africa, until recently a region characterized by democratic gains, suffered further setbacks in 2021. The leaders of a September coup in Guinea claimed to be upholding democratic principles, as they deposed President Alpha Condé after he amended the constitution to run for a third term the previous year. But with Guineans left under the rule of entirely unelected officials, political rights declined, and the country dropped from Partly Free to Not Free status. Mali experienced its second military coup in less than a year in May 2021, after the transitional president and prime minister attempted to form a new government that excluded key military officers. Meanwhile in Chad, already an authoritarian state, the military intervened after the April 2021 death of longtime president Idriss Déby Itno and installed his son as the new leader.

Some power grabs during the year were carried out by incumbent civilian leaders rather than the military. In 2014, Tunisia had become the only country to emerge from the Arab Spring with a Free designation, casting off its dictatorship and building a promising democracy. Yet it

plunged to Partly Free status in 2021 after President Kaïs Saïed, spurred by protests against the faltering economy and surging coronavirus cases, unilaterally dismissed the prime minister and indefinitely suspended the parliament in July in order to rule by decree. Turning his back on democratic norms, Saïed further expanded his executive authority in September, including by disregarding certain parts of the constitution. Although greater international support might have bolstered the efforts of the Tunisian people to secure their freedoms in the years since 2014, the world's democracies largely ignored the warning signs and failed to make the country a priority as it descended into crisis.

The rot within democracies

As authoritarians continue to extend their reach, often facing little more than rhetorical denunciations from governments that declare their support for human rights, there is increasing evidence of homegrown illiberal streaks within democracies. Undemocratic leaders and their supporters

in democratic environments have worked to reshape or manipulate political systems, in part by playing on voters' fears of change in their way of life and by highlighting the very real failures of their predecessors. They have promoted the idea that, once in power, their responsibility is only to their own demographic or partisan base, disregarding other interests and segments of society and warping the institutions in their care so as to prolong their rule. Along the way, the democratic principles of pluralism, equality, and accountability—as well as basic stewardship and public service—have been lost, endangering the rights and well-being of all residents.

In a curious contrast to authoritarian regimes' attempts to impose a façade of electoral credibility, leaders who fear losing power in a democratic system have taken to sowing distrust in elections. The assault on the US Capitol was the culmination of a months-long campaign by outgoing president Donald Trump to cast Joe Biden's victory as illegitimate and fraudulent. Although Trump allies have spread false and conflicting theories that the attackers were acting spontaneously or were deliberately provoked by Trump's enemies, investigators have revealed a well-organized effort to block the certification of election results that involved dozens of state and local officials from the Republican Party and was promoted by the then president himself. Though the insurrection was ultimately unsuccessful and a peaceful

transfer of power took place, the same forces continue to exert significant influence on the US political system. Many of the prominent Republicans who had initially condemned the events of January 6 went silent or aligned their remarks with Trump's over the subsequent weeks, while those who refused to display loyalty to the former leader faced political marginalization, severe intraparty pressure, and outright threats of violence.

Trump and his supporters have continued to push the message that fraud tipped the balance toward Biden in the 2020 election, despite multiple recounts and consistent court rulings against all claims of widespread fraud. Far from a good-faith effort to uncover abuse, the stolen-election lie is undermining public confidence in the US electoral system ahead of the 2022 midterm and 2024 general elections, which are expected to be close contests for control of the legislative and executive branches. The trend is especially dangerous in the US context, where state legislatures, particularly those dominated by Republican leaders, have considerable leeway to declare that irregularities took place in the voting process.

In fact, by December 2021, 17 states had passed legislation that threatened the integrity of elections and election administration, and hundreds of additional such bills were introduced across 24 states. Intimidation or violence by nonstate actors, including Trump supporters, poses



Supporters of outgoing president Donald Trump break into the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in a bid to halt certification of the 2020 presidential election results. (Image credit: Brent Stirton/Getty Images)

another risk to the forthcoming elections. Already, election administrators have resigned in unprecedented numbers amid a rise in threats and harassment.

As Brazil prepares for its October 2022 general elections, President Jair Bolsonaro has echoed Trump by preemptively claiming that the vote will be fraudulent. Having pinned his allegations on a groundless assertion that the electronic voting system is unreliable, Bolsonaro pushed for a constitutional amendment, ultimately rejected, that would have provided printed ballot receipts. Experts noted that the measure would have given credence to unsubstantiated claims of fraud and could actually increase the potential for voter intimidation and vote buying. Bolsonaro also alleged electoral fraud years ago, while still on the margins of Brazilian politics. Today such claims have become normalized.

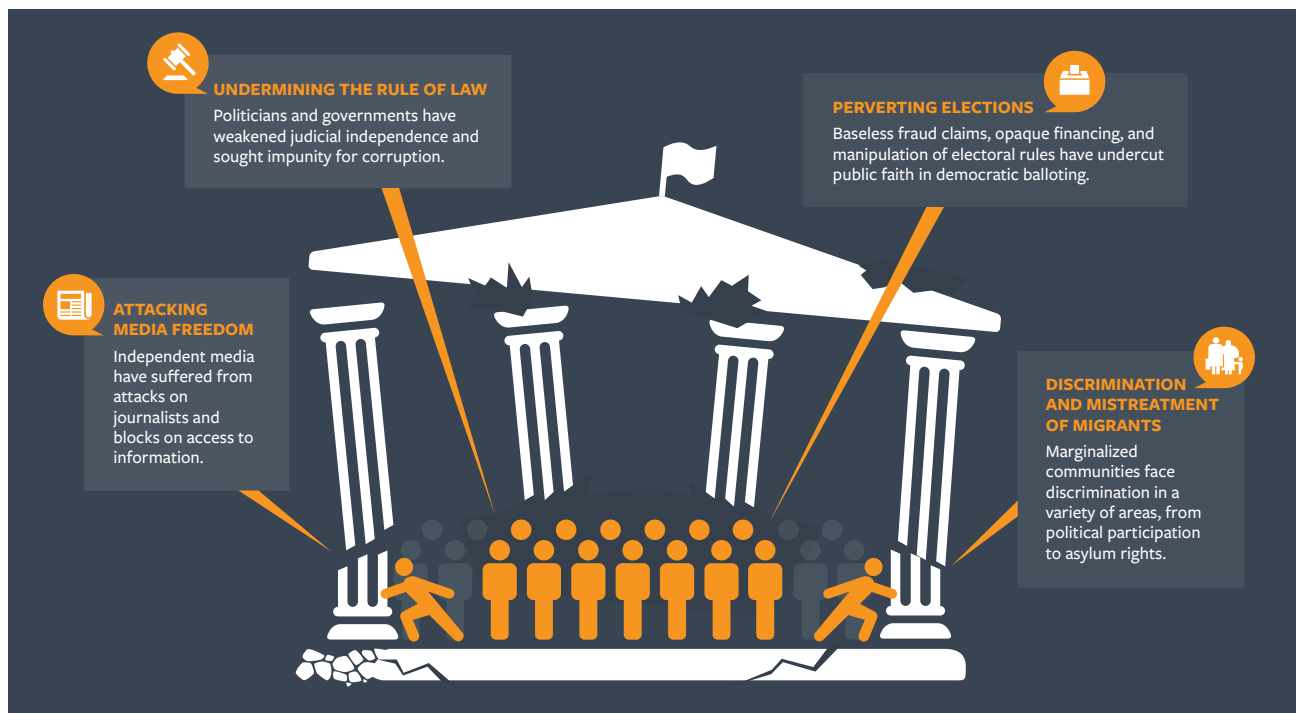
Elsewhere in the Americas, El Salvador's decline has accelerated since President Nayib Bukele took office in 2019. After his allies won a legislative supermajority in 2021, Bukele's government has systematically undermined democratic institutions intended to check executive power. Authorities

have abused anticorruption mechanisms to arrest former officials without credible evidence, and the government has attempted to dismantle public oversight systems. Bukele used his control over the legislature to replace magistrates from the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and nearly 200 other judges across the country. The altered court then overturned a constitutional ban on presidential reelection, allowing Bukele to run in future contests. The government's proposed foreign agents law, which could severely constrain civil society, is similar to the new law in increasingly autocratic Nicaragua.

Democracies in other parts of the world also continue to decline under the influence of freely elected leaders who have embraced illiberal politics. India, which has suffered a series of setbacks to political rights and civil liberties since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reelection in 2019, showed no signs of reversing course, as notable opposition figures faced arrest and surveillance. Since taking power in 2015, Poland's Law and Justice party has undermined the rule of law by packing the country's top courts with loyalists who reliably uphold its policies and decisions. In October and November 2021,

CHALLENGES WITHIN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRACIES

Over the past 16 years, internal forces have damaged the pillars of freedom in existing democracies.



THE UNITED STATES AND ITS PEERS

The United States has fallen below its traditional peers on key democratic indicators, including executive elections, freedom from improper political influence, and equal treatment of minority groups.



the Polish constitutional court threatened to further subvert international and regional legal standards by ruling that it can ignore European Union (EU) legislation and judgments.

Authoritarian powers have taken careful note of fractures in and among democracies and moved to widen them whenever possible. During 2021, the regime in Belarus facilitated the passage of thousands of migrants—the vast majority of them from Iraq—into Minsk and then to the borders of EU countries that had given shelter to exiled Belarusian opposition figures. The mass arrivals led to militarized responses, illegal pushbacks, and violations of asylum procedures by the governments of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania. Thousands of migrants became stranded in the border area in harsh weather conditions, contributing to a number of deaths. The Polish government took measures to legalize its pushbacks, in violation of both EU and international law. At the end of the year, the European Commission proposed new rules that would allow longer processing times for asylum applications, which could lead to prolonged detention and other rights violations. In short, the pressure applied by Minsk encouraged democracies to act in contradiction with their values, opening them

to charges of hypocrisy and driving a wedge between critics and defenders of the response. Other regimes on Europe’s periphery, including those of Morocco and Turkey, have used similar tactics to extract concessions and break democratic solidarity in the EU. But their efforts would have been futile if not for existing weaknesses in the democracies themselves.

Antidemocratic alliances

Authoritarian leaders are no longer isolated holdouts in a democratizing world. Instead they are actively collaborating with one another to spread new forms of repression and rebuff democratic pressure. While many democracies have continued to respond to sham elections and coups with measures like sanctions and the withholding of aid, the impact has been diluted by autocratic alliances.

In some cases the authoritarian assistance is largely economic. For example, the governments of Russia, China, and Turkey have provided trade and investment to the Venezuelan regime, offsetting sanctions imposed by democracies for its rigged elections and crackdowns on the

opposition. But in other instances the support is much more direct: During the 2020 protests against fraudulent elections in Belarus, the Kremlin dispatched Russian propagandists to take the place of striking Belarusian journalists, and offered its security forces to bolster the Belarusian authorities' violent dispersal of demonstrations. Election observers from Russia had already deemed the vote credible, despite the jailing of opposition candidates and severe censorship campaigns against independent media. Meanwhile, allies like the Cuban government defended the Belarusian regime at the UN Human Rights Council, where 68 percent of current members are Partly Free or Not Free countries.

Similarly, despite the egregious violence associated with the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, Beijing prevented the UN Security Council from issuing a stronger condemnation of the power grab, and Moscow has sought to strengthen economic ties with the junta. The coup leaders in Sudan have also been able to rely on their autocratic friends for diplomatic and other support, with Chinese and Russian envoys working to water down the response at the United Nations.

In addition to pushing back against international pressure, authoritarian governments have cooperated when using transnational repression to silence their own exiled dissidents through tools like detention, rendition, Interpol abuse, coercion by proxy, and digital surveillance. While threats or physical attacks against dissidents living in the United States

and Europe have received the most attention, the majority of transnational repression cases involve collaboration between the host and origin states. Security agencies often work together to detain and render targeted activists, and courts and migration agencies fulfill requests to extradite or expel them. For instance, there is evidence that the Kyrgyzstani government assisted Turkish intelligence services in the May 2021 kidnapping of Orhan İnandı, which delivered him to Turkey to face terrorism charges. İnandı had founded a school network in Kyrgyzstan that was aligned with the Gülen movement, which Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan blames for a 2016 coup attempt.

Other types of collaboration between authoritarians can put entire ethnic groups at risk. Turkey was once a haven for China's persecuted Uyghur population, whose language and culture are akin to those of the Turkish people. But Erdoğan, faced with an ailing economy and estrangement from Turkey's traditional democratic allies, has increasingly shifted his stance to meet Beijing's demands. Turkish authorities have made it harder for Uyghurs to obtain and keep permanent residence permits, and several hundred of them have been detained in deportation centers.

Antidemocratic figures within more democratic countries have begun to engage in international cooperation as well. Eduardo Bolsonaro, the son of Brazil's president, is a member of a far-right nationalist group founded by Steve Bannon, an



Members of Guinean coup leader Colonel Mamady Doumbouya's special forces arrive ahead of a meeting with representatives of the Economic Community of West African States. (Image credit: John Wessels/AFP via Getty Images)



The staff of *Etilaat Roz*, a well-known Afghan newspaper, reacts as their founder Zaki Daryabi discusses the future of the newsroom under Taliban rule. (Image credit: Marcus Yam/*Los Angeles Times*)

adviser to former US president Trump. Far-right US television personality Tucker Carlson spent a week in Hungary in 2021, warmly introducing his millions of American viewers to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s xenophobic propaganda, contempt for democratic principles, and rejection of international human rights standards. Meanwhile, Orbán has lent support to multiple European counterparts who share his views, shielding them from possible EU sanctions. The beneficiaries include Milorad Dodik, a Serb nationalist leader in Bosnia and Herzegovina who has suppressed domestic dissent and pushed for the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska to secede from the multiethnic Bosnian state.

Failure in Afghanistan

The rapid US military withdrawal from Afghanistan—negotiated between the Taliban and the Trump administration without the involvement of the Afghan government, and completed by the Biden administration in 2021—dealt a powerful blow to international confidence in the ability of democracies to protect their partners and help foster free societies in difficult terrain.

The 20-year US engagement in Afghanistan started as a joint effort by the United States and its allies to destroy the safe haven that the Taliban had provided for the organizers of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Over the years,

Washington both pursued its narrowly defined security interests in the country and committed billions of dollars and significant effort to supporting local civil society and the development of a democratic Afghan state. While many Afghans experienced real change and felt hope for a better future, the Afghan government and the United States consistently failed to address worsening corruption and governance problems. Finally, the ill-planned withdrawal triggered a rapid collapse of the institutions that had been built and a complete takeover by the Taliban.

The debacle has renewed false impressions within existing democracies that supporting democracy abroad is a doomed enterprise, that it involves imposing “Western” ideals on unwilling populations, that it requires the open-ended use of military force, or that it is a disingenuous pretext for the use of military force. For those still struggling for freedom in repressive environments, the US withdrawal may be seen as a warning that their democratic partners could abandon them at any moment.

Meanwhile, thousands of Afghan people have rushed to flee the country since the Taliban eliminated representative rule and nullified the constitutional rights of women and ethnic and religious minority groups. Many ethnic Hazara communities have been evicted from their land, and Taliban forces have hunted down, abducted, or executed scores of

police and intelligence officers from the former government. Human rights defenders and independent journalists have faced persecution as their hard-won achievements are rapidly reversed. The United States and most other established democracies have compounded their earlier failures by being slow or reluctant to assist those seeking refuge, many of whom remain stuck in Afghanistan or in nearby countries where they lack basic rights protections.

Cause for hope

Even in a year dominated by disturbing setbacks to democracy, people around the world demonstrated its continued appeal and capacity for renewal.

Ecuador’s democracy was trampled for a decade by former president Rafael Correa, who stepped aside for handpicked successor Lenín Moreno in 2017 on the assumption that he would retain control through the ruling party. But Moreno struck out on his own and reformed parts of the system, supporting a new judicial appointment process that helped weed out partisan judges, reducing state control over the

media, and pardoning human rights activists so that they could continue their work. Ecuador has consequently seen a steady expansion of freedom over the past five years, moving from Partly Free to Free this year after credible general elections resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to an opposition presidential candidate. These improvements have persisted despite Correa’s continued efforts to exert influence from outside government.

In Chile, already one of the better-performing democracies in the Americas, the political system responded to massive protests in 2019 by authorizing the election of an inclusive constitutional convention that will now work to replace the 1980 constitution—originally inherited from the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet—and address deep socioeconomic disparities. In Montenegro, an opposition coalition came to power in late 2020, ending three decades of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists. The new government imposed fewer obstacles to political competition and gave the public broadcaster more independence, and its narrow parliamentary majority allowed the legislature to provide greater oversight of the executive branch.

GLOBAL RESISTANCE TO AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Despite significant constraints, people all over the world are resisting autocracy and pushing for democratic change.

CUBA
Citizens joined large antigovernment protests in July 2021, despite a ferocious crackdown by authorities.

TUNISIA
Thousands of Tunisians have taken to the streets to protest against President Kais Saied’s unilateral power grab.

SUDAN
Activists organized mass protests after the military dissolved a transitional government and ousted civilian leaders.

BELARUS
Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has continued her activism even after being forced into exile.

MYANMAR
A widespread civil disobedience movement against the military coup has persisted in the face of violent reprisals.

HONG KONG
The Hong Kong Journalists Association is still fighting for press freedom amid tightening restrictions and the closure of independent outlets.



Indigenous scholar and activist Elisa Loncón speaks after being elected as president of Chile's Constitutional Convention, which was tasked with drafting a new Chilean constitution. (Image credit: Javier Torres/AFP via Getty Images)

People in Côte d'Ivoire have proven their desire to steer their nation toward full democracy since the end of an armed conflict in 2011. While the country experienced a vast expansion of freedom over the past 10 years, its democratic momentum faltered in 2020, as President Alassane Ouattara circumvented constitutional term limits and secured a third term in voting that was marred by candidate disqualifications, an opposition boycott, and widespread political violence. But parliamentary elections in March 2021 featured significant improvements, with several opposition candidates freely registering and participating. The elections were less affected by violence, and Ivorians had more freedom to express themselves and participate in public assemblies.

In Myanmar, despite the military's well-earned reputation for brutal violence, the February 2021 coup immediately sparked widespread resistance across the country. By the end of the year, protests were continuing even in the face of live ammunition and systematic reprisals, and a civil disobedience movement—including a general strike—had brought the economy and public services almost to a standstill, with participation by health workers, civil servants, educators, bank workers, and many more. Civilians have also boycotted military-affiliated products and services, from the national lottery to the electrical power utility. In December, people across the country engaged in a silent strike against military rule, closing down shops and staying off the streets. The

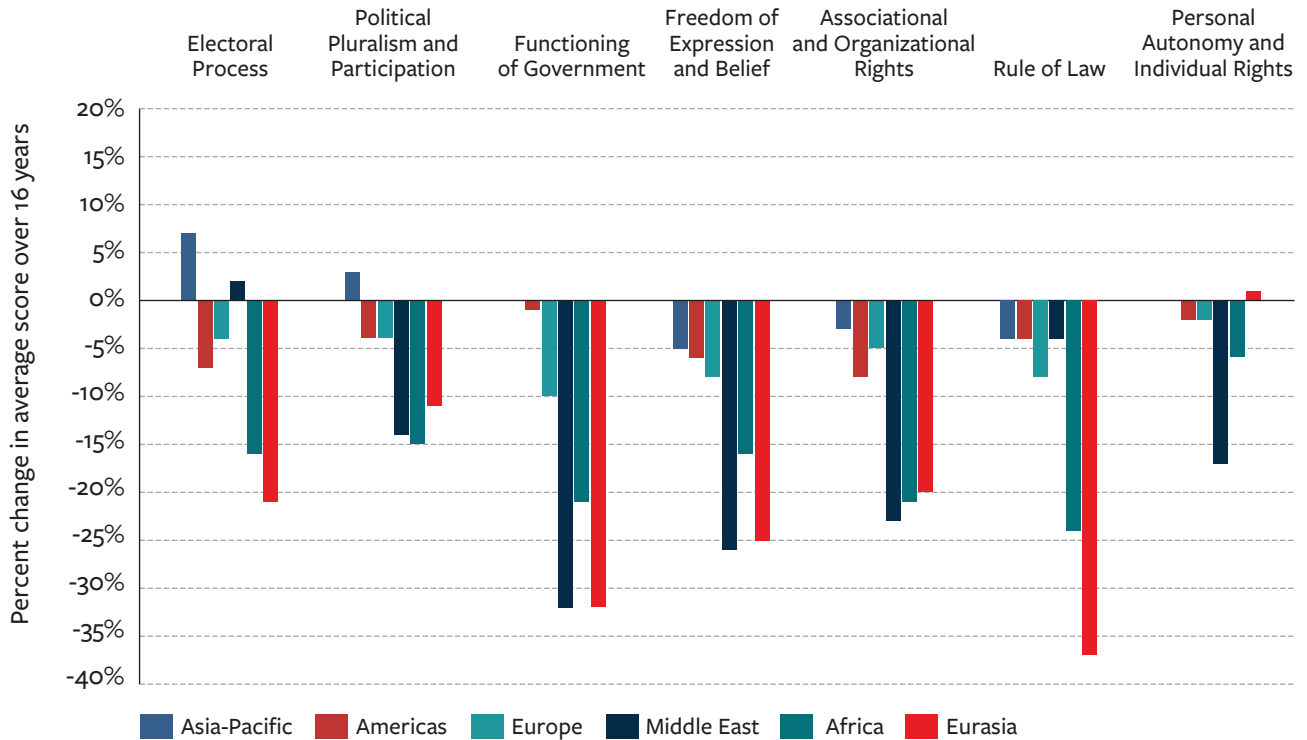
resistance to the military regime has denied it legitimacy and crippled its ability to function as a government, reflecting both the people's commitment to democracy and the power it gives them to shape events.

Pushback against CCP influence is gaining traction. During 2021, democratic governments and private actors devoted greater attention to the moral, human rights, and national security implications of integration with a regime in China that has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad over the past decade. Lithuania was the first country to announce a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, setting the stage for other countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia to take a stand against CCP abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere. Separately, sacrificing significant revenue to defend human rights principles, the Women's Tennis Association suspended all tournaments in China after player Peng Shuai was forced to recant her allegations of sexual assault by a high-ranking CCP official. And in a variety of open societies, media outlets have been cutting ties with Chinese state media services, regulators have scrutinized rule violations by such services, and scholars have spoken out against pressure to self-censor on China-related topics.

The migration and refugee crisis that has so preoccupied many democracies is an outgrowth of the authoritarian

DECLINES ACROSS THE BOARD

The 16 years of decline have affected all regions and *Freedom in the World* subcategories.



expansion of the past 16 years. But in another sense it is an emphatic endorsement of democracy as the preferred system of government, as millions of people flee repressive regimes or antidemocratic militants and seek to live in free societies. The rate of migration out of Hong Kong spiked following the Beijing-backed authorities' crackdown on prodemocracy protests. Tens of thousands of people have fled Nicaragua since 2018 demonstrations were brutally suppressed, as have millions of Venezuelans suffering under the regime of Nicolás Maduro. Rather than attempting to deter migrants and refugees with daunting border infrastructure and harsh asylum systems, governments in democratic destination countries should recognize their shared interest in the struggle for freedom.

Building a more democratic world

The displacement of global democratic norms by authoritarian powers and other antidemocratic actors can still be reversed. But success will require a bold, sustained response that establishes support for democracy and

countering authoritarianism at the heart of each democracy's foreign policy, national security strategy, and domestic reform agenda. It must also entail the participation of both governments and an engaged and active citizenry. Rather than longing for a bygone era of expanding freedom, democratic leaders need to confront the problems caused by their past mistakes and address weaknesses in the international system that authoritarians have been able to exploit.

Effective democracy support should not be subordinated to a free country's short-term economic, military, or geopolitical interests, all of which would actually be best served by a long-term rollback of authoritarian practices. Nor can democracy be imposed by forces outside a given country. International assistance and solidarity are crucial to countering the tactical advantages and many forms of collaboration enjoyed by autocrats. At the same time, it is local and diasporic human rights defenders, grassroots civil society organizations, and empowered electorates that must chart the course and ultimately determine their own country's future.

In the drive to restore democratic values and human rights standards to their proper place in the international system, President Biden’s Summit for Democracy—held in December 2021 with 110 invited governments, to be followed by a year of action—represents a promising first step. Those governments must now go beyond rhetorical commitments and seek civil society input on implementation.

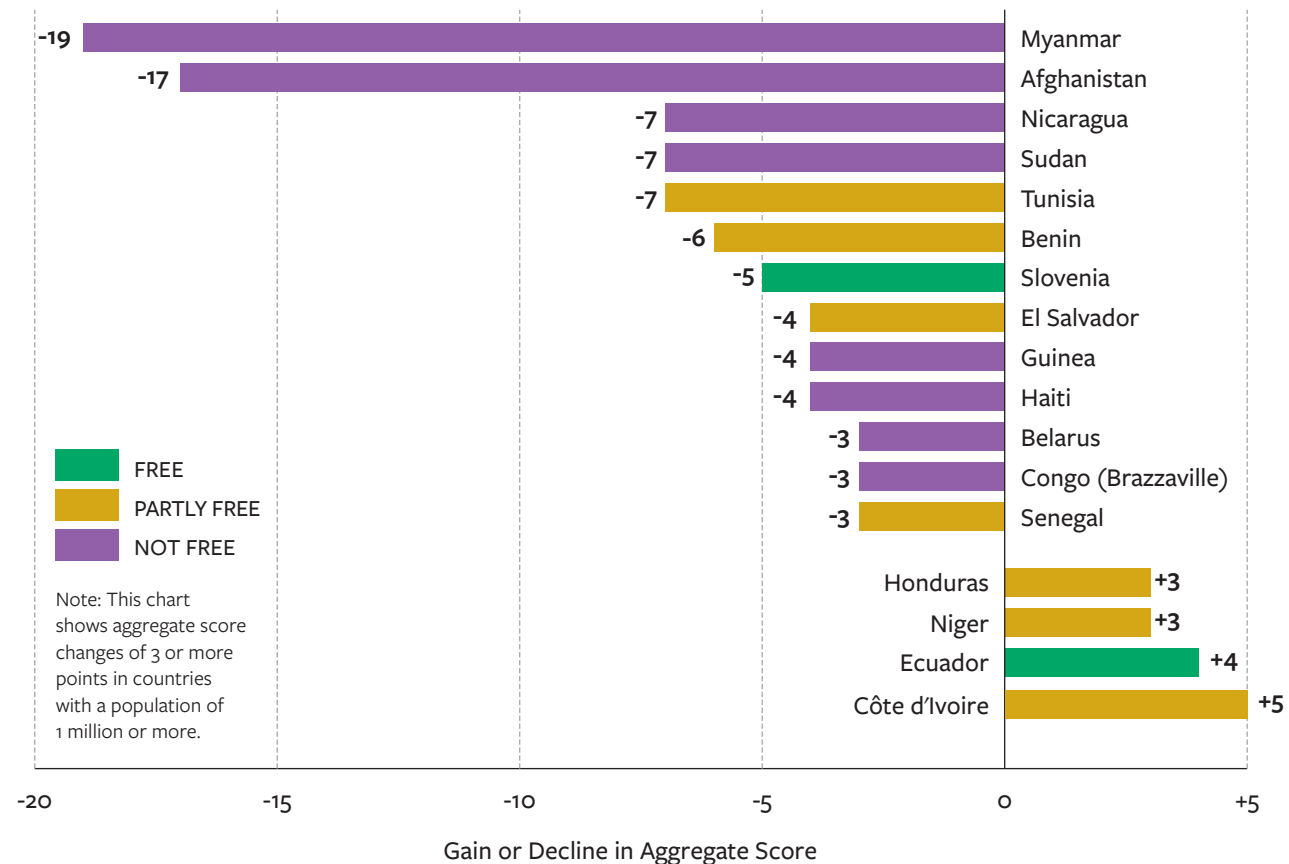
Developing a set of coordinated international policies grounded in democratic principles, while strengthening their own domestic governance systems, will ultimately make all participating countries safer, more prosperous, and more just. Democratic nations share interests in fair trade and security, and since they are more likely to adhere to agreements and norms, they make more reliable partners in both fields. Their institutional and popular support for accountability and the rule of law also make them more predictable and rewarding environments for

public and private investment. No democracy is perfect, but they all benefit from the basic ability to adapt to changing circumstances, make policy corrections, and bring in fresh leadership—with minimal disruption to the system as a whole.

Despite the clear arguments in favor of democracy, the past 16 years have shown in stark terms that neither the prevalence of democratic ideas around the world nor the certainty of global progress toward democratic governance can be taken for granted. Autocrats remain determined to keep and expand their power, and they will continue to make gains so long as democracy’s proponents let them. It is time for everyone who understands the stakes to rebuild and improve upon the international norms that democracies long championed, and push the reprehensible practices of authoritarians back to the margins of human experience where they belong.

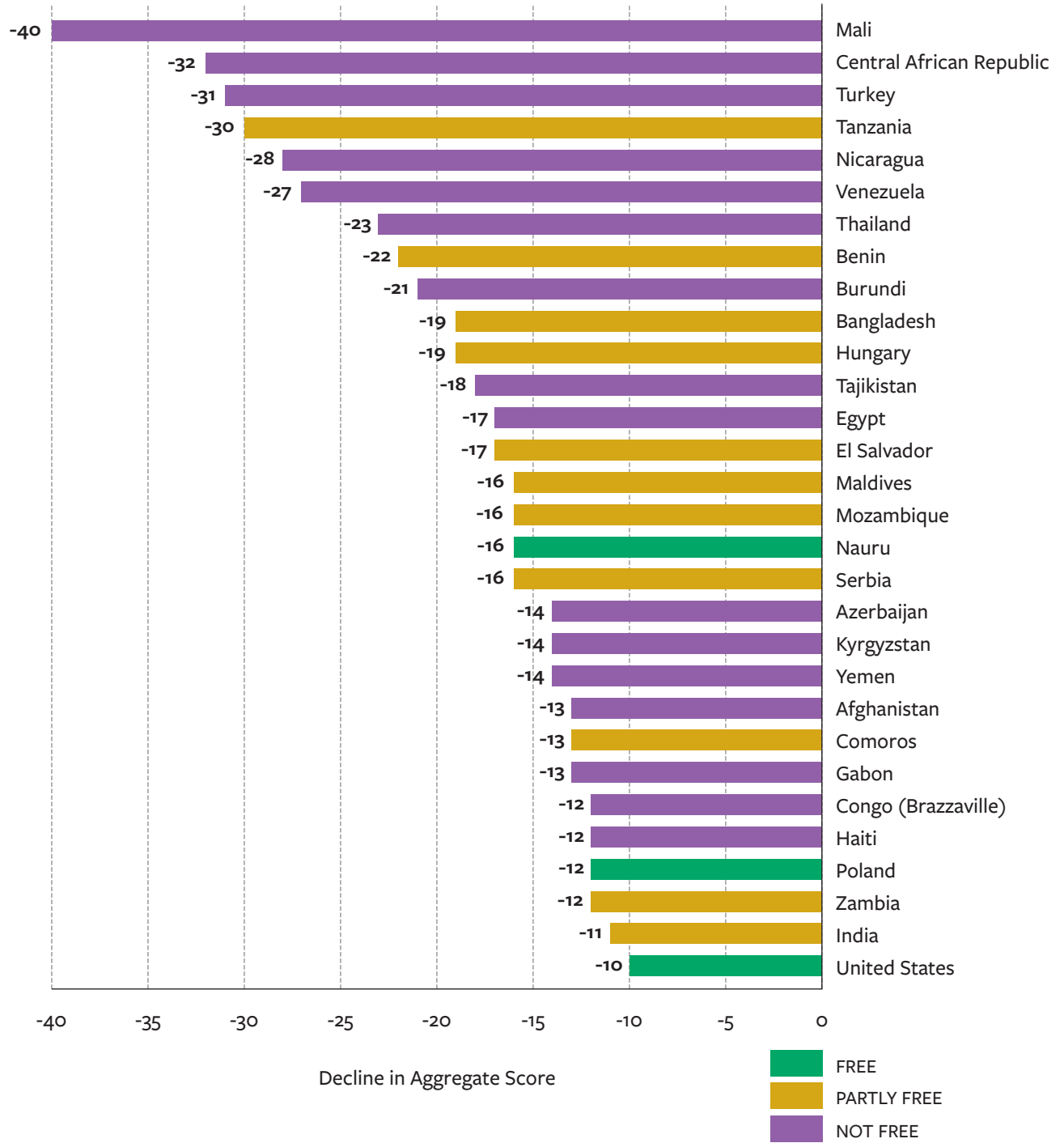
LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2021

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



LARGEST 10-YEAR DECLINES

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



IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY, EMPOWERING CITIZENS: ECUADOR'S FUNDACIÓN CIUDADANÍA Y DESARROLLO

In a year when 60 countries suffered democratic declines and 25 made gains, Ecuador beat the odds: it was one of just two nations that not only made progress, but also ascended from Partly Free to Free status in *Freedom in the World* 2022. Mauricio Alarcón Salvador, executive director of the Ecuadorian prodemocracy organization Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo (Citizenship and Development Foundation, or FCD), is determined to keep it that way.

Since 2009, Mauricio and his colleagues at FCD have fought to expose corruption in the Ecuadorian government. They believe that greater visibility into the state's workings and the impact of voting would allay public skepticism and increase voter turnout, ultimately creating a freer and fairer country for all.

Although Ecuador has been considered a democratic republic since the 1980s, its people have weathered political volatility, ethnic discrimination, and economic inequality. More recently, as president from 2007 to 2017, Rafael Correa oversaw attacks on judicial independence, press freedom, and other civil liberties.

Civic activism is no casual pastime in Latin America, which was recently named the most dangerous region of the world for human rights defenders. But when incumbent president Lenín Moreno—who had eased Correa's restrictions since 2017 despite having served as his vice president—announced that he would not be seeking reelection in 2021, Mauricio knew that FCD could not miss the opportunity to push Ecuador even further toward a more stable and inclusive democracy.

The stakes could hardly have been higher in 2021. One leading candidate, Andrés Arauz, was allied with Correa, while the second, longtime opposition figure Guillermo Lasso, represented another step in the transition away from Correa's repressive legacy. In an interview with Freedom House, Mauricio called the election a choice between “authoritarianism and restriction of rights, and the alternative in favor of democracy and the rule of law.”

Knowing this could be the best opportunity for a long time to shift the tides of history and make a lasting impact on their country, FCD launched an all-out campaign to help Ecuadorians understand the choice in front of them, turn out young voters, and bring together young activists and community leaders to create policy proposals for



A May 2021 FCD event on the challenges facing the new government (Image credit: FCD)

candidates. During the vote itself, FCD published easy-to-understand explanations of election rules, making the process more accessible.

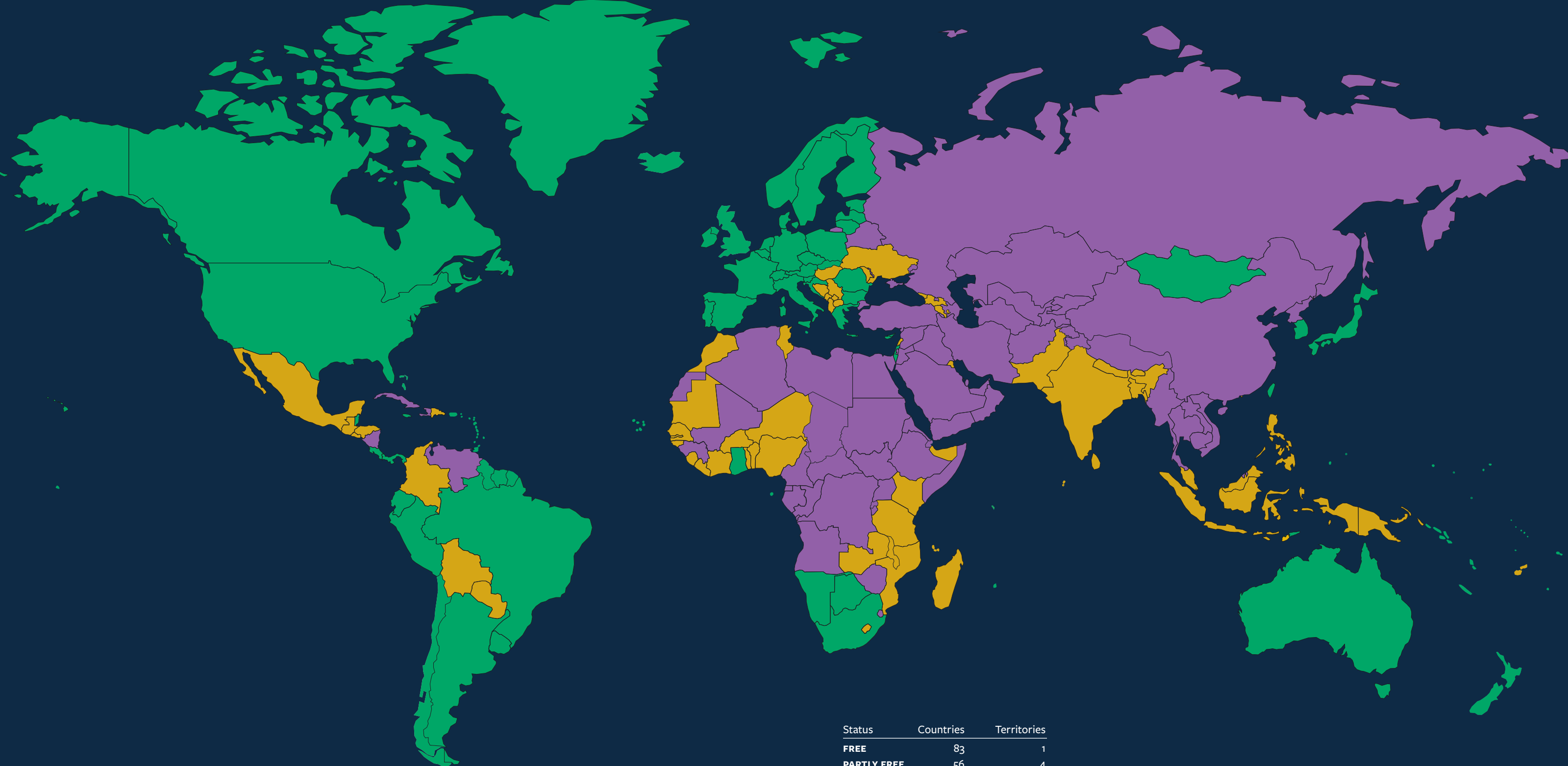
Separately, on the national stage, a coalition of political adversaries banded together to support Lasso, who went on to secure the presidency with 52.36 percent of the final vote. But while democracy won the day in Ecuador, the story is far from over.

Corruption and weak rule of law are the two most significant long-term challenges facing Ecuador's democracy, Mauricio told Freedom House, and the activists at FCD are more determined and motivated than ever to continue the struggle. They have worked alongside Transparency International toward the implementation of government-wide integrity and transparency regulations, trained officials to uphold democratic standards, and empowered citizens by teaching them how to thwart corrupt authorities' attempts at antidemocratic chicanery.

Since its inception, FCD has striven to build trust between citizens and their government, explicitly aiming to lay a foundation for future generations of democracy activists and engaged voters in Ecuador. Its spirit of cooperation and solidarity is vital to human rights efforts around the world—particularly as authoritarians increasingly support one another.

As Mauricio put it, “The most important thing is that we never lose sight of the importance of empathy, of supporting our colleagues, of teaming up and joining forces to face problems together.”

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022



■ FREE
 ■ PARTLY FREE
 ■ NOT FREE

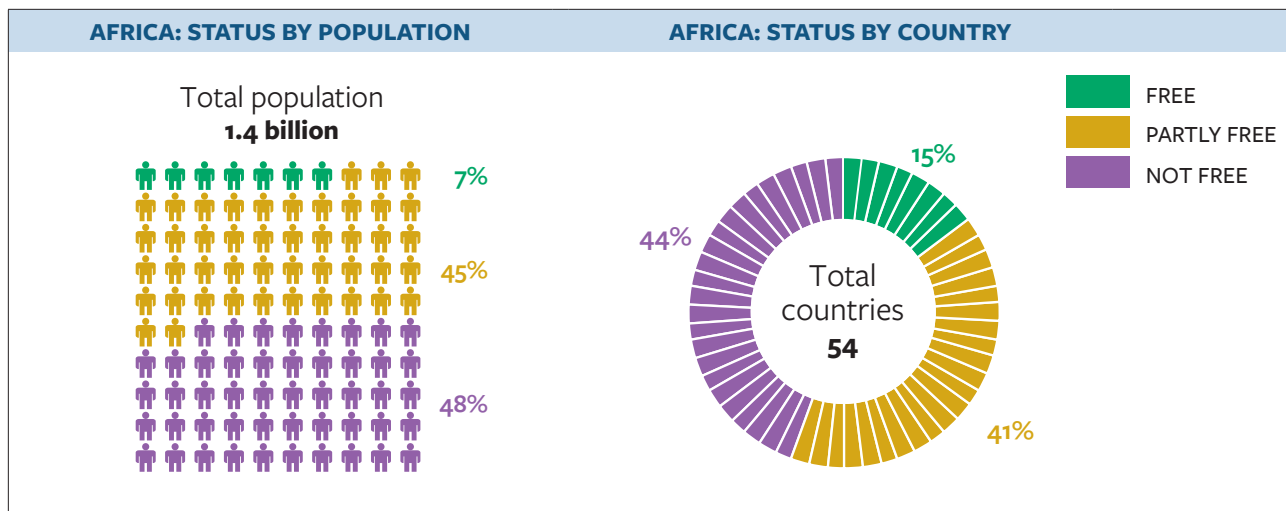
Status	Countries	Territories
FREE	83	1
PARTLY FREE	56	4
NOT FREE	56	10
Total	195	15

Freedom in the World 2022 assessed 210 countries and territories around the globe.

Regional Trends

AFRICA:

Citizens mobilize for change amid coups, crackdowns on dissent



Political crises and power grabs further compromised the struggle for democratic progress in Africa, most notably through the resurgence in military coups that affected Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan. An attempted coup in Niger nearly sabotaged that country's first-ever democratic transfer of power, which ultimately took place after the alleged perpetrators were arrested.

In a number of other countries, opposition figures faced increased obstacles as governments deployed a slew of new "antiterrorist" measures that effectively suppressed dissent. In Ethiopia, a state of emergency granted broad powers to the security forces, allowing the arbitrary detention of anyone suspected of cooperating with terrorist groups. Members of the ethnic Tigrayan minority, whose home region is at the center of the country's ongoing civil conflict, were often targeted. Democracy in Benin continued to decline as opposition presidential contenders Joel Aivo and Reckya Madougou were sentenced to lengthy prison terms on charges of financing terrorism. Such politicized prosecutions and other legal tactics were used to prevent a total of 17 out of 20 candidates from running in the country's presidential election. In Tanzania, where Vice President Samia Suluhu

Hassan rose to the presidency after years of crackdowns on the media and civil society under her late predecessor, hopes for reform were dashed as opposition leader Freeman Mbowe and several of his allies were detained and charged with conspiracy to commit terrorism.

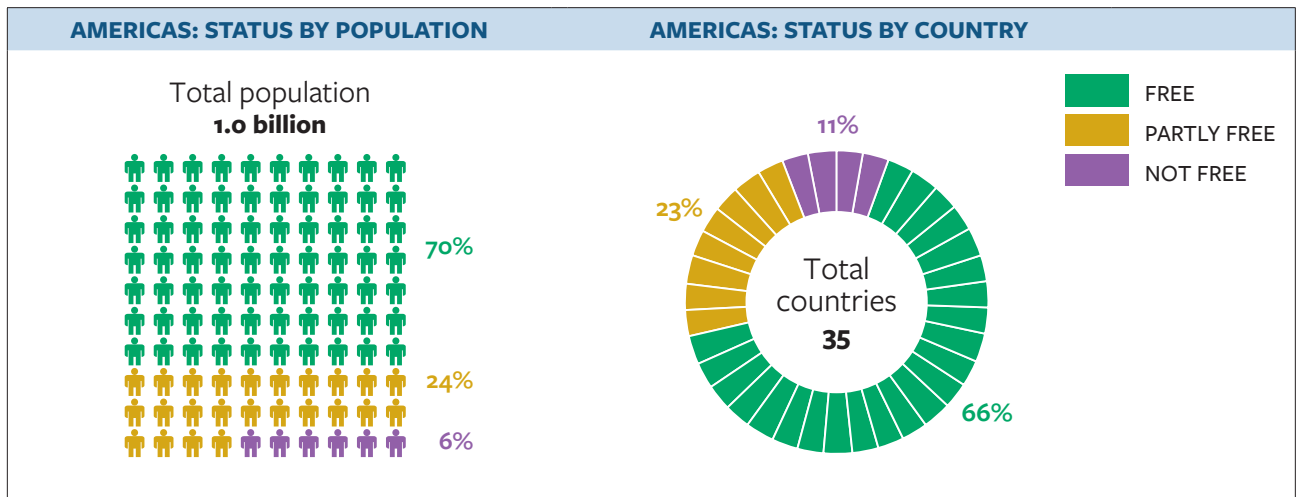
Similar charges of terrorism and "incitement" were used to undermine press freedom across North Africa, with multiple Algerian and Egyptian journalists detained for their reporting. In Senegal, a new antiterrorism law broadly defined "disturbing public order" as a form of terrorism, impeding freedom of assembly for ordinary citizens. The space for critical speech significantly diminished during the year due to restrictions on the internet and social media. At least 10 African countries faced internet shutdowns or social media blocks in 2021, including in Uganda ahead of its general elections, in parts of Ethiopia where the conflict has reportedly led to severe human rights abuses, and in Eswatini and Sudan, which experienced large prodemocracy protests.

Despite these headwinds, citizens across Africa repeatedly seized on elections as an opportunity for democratic change. The territory of Somaliland held long-delayed parliamentary

and local elections that were deemed relatively free and fair, resulting in a peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to an opposition coalition. In Côte d'Ivoire, the parliamentary elections represented a marked improvement over the 2020 presidential contest, with greater opposition participation and less violence. South African voters supported more opposition candidates in recent municipal

elections, registering their discontent with corruption and poor economic performance. And Zambians shocked the continent by turning out in huge numbers to vault opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema to the presidency. In doing so they overcame major barriers intended to benefit the ruling party, including social media blackouts, assembly restrictions attributed to COVID-19, and violence by security forces.

AMERICAS: As some cast ballots for new leaders, others vote with their feet



Elections in the Americas served as an inflection point, with some countries adopting electoral reforms that enabled changes in leadership, and others suffering as incumbents sought to entrench themselves in office. In many cases, residents of states where democracy was lacking chose to migrate abroad in search of better conditions.

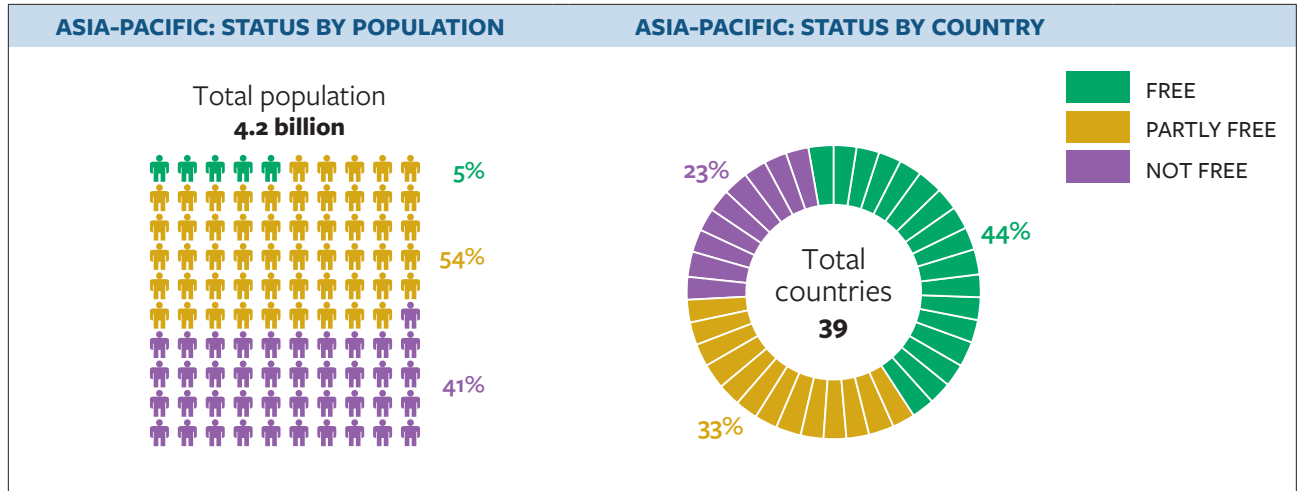
A 2019 special election in Honduras increased the participation of opposition parties in election management, and the so-called Project Identify Yourself improved voter registration systems. In 2021, these reforms plus a large voter turnout resulted in the defeat of President Juan Orlando Hernández, who had been implicated in corruption and drug-trafficking scandals. Ecuador also strengthened its electoral framework in the years leading up to the 2021 election, passing reforms that allowed minority parties to gain seats in the legislature and applying recommendations from the Organization of American States. The well-

organized contest contributed to the country's status change from Partly Free to Free.

Meanwhile, authoritarian leader Daniel Ortega secured a new term in Nicaragua's presidential election by overseeing the arbitrary arrests of opposition candidates, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro continued to prioritize his grip on power over the population's socioeconomic well-being, and Cuban security forces violently repressed protests calling for democratic freedoms. Unsurprisingly, all three countries generated large numbers of migrants and political exiles during the year, as did Haiti, where President Jovenel Moïse's assassination underscored long-standing problems including a broken electoral system, corruption, and organized crime. These migrants have reported facing discrimination and other abuses during their journeys and in destination countries, but they continue to leave as governance in their home countries deteriorates.

ASIA-PACIFIC:

The walls close in on political opposition and free speech

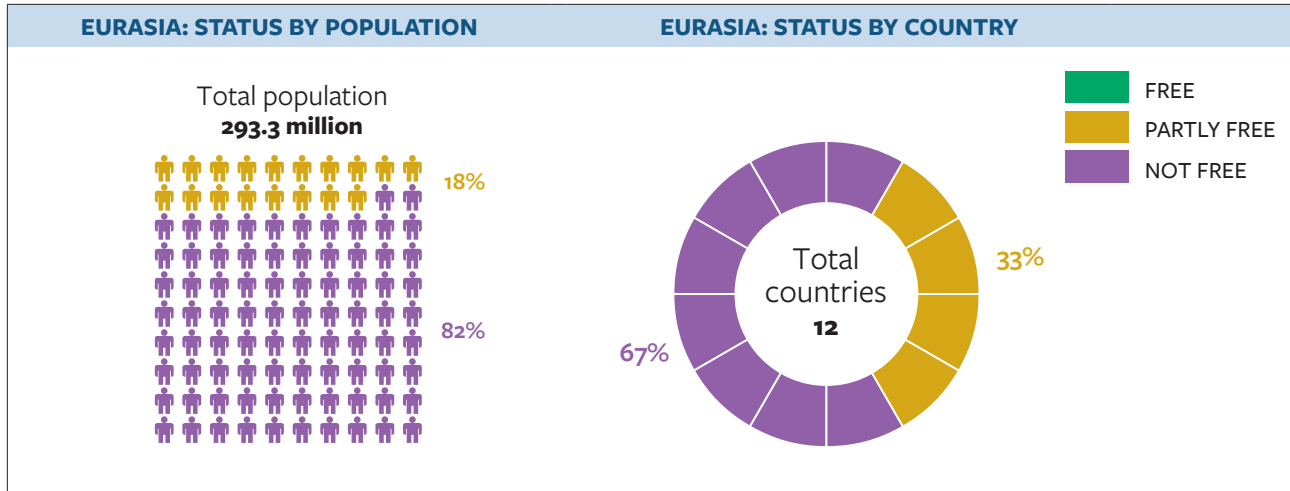


Political rights and civil liberties declined across the region as authoritarian forces moved to consolidate their power. The trend was most dramatic in Afghanistan and Myanmar, where elected civilian leaders were forced from office by the Taliban and the military, respectively.

The space for opposition forces to operate narrowed in many other settings. In Hong Kong, prominent prodemocracy politicians were arrested at the beginning of the year for participating in primary elections designed to unify the democratic opposition, then remained behind bars during the tightly controlled Legislative Council balloting in December. India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party also tried to limit the opposition's ability to compete through various methods, including by pursuing selective corruption investigations. A small but notable exception in the Asia-Pacific region was Samoa, where an opposition party won enough seats to form a government for the first time in four decades, and the courts compelled the ruling party to accept defeat.

Crackdowns on political dissent in Asia also affected journalists and civil society movements, particularly in countries whose democratic institutions were already under attack. Singaporean authorities forced one of the city-state's few remaining independent news outlets to shut down by suspending its license. In Thailand, where a prodemocracy protest movement grew more active in the middle of the year, authorities issued a broadly worded regulation to expand their ability to prosecute individuals for distributing news deemed to incite fear in the public. In China, one of the world's most restrictive media environments, journalists faced heightened scrutiny and rigorous political indoctrination when attempting to renew their press licenses, and even individuals who engaged in solitary forms of protest were punished with prison sentences.

EURASIA: *Democracy stalls in the Kremlin’s shadow*



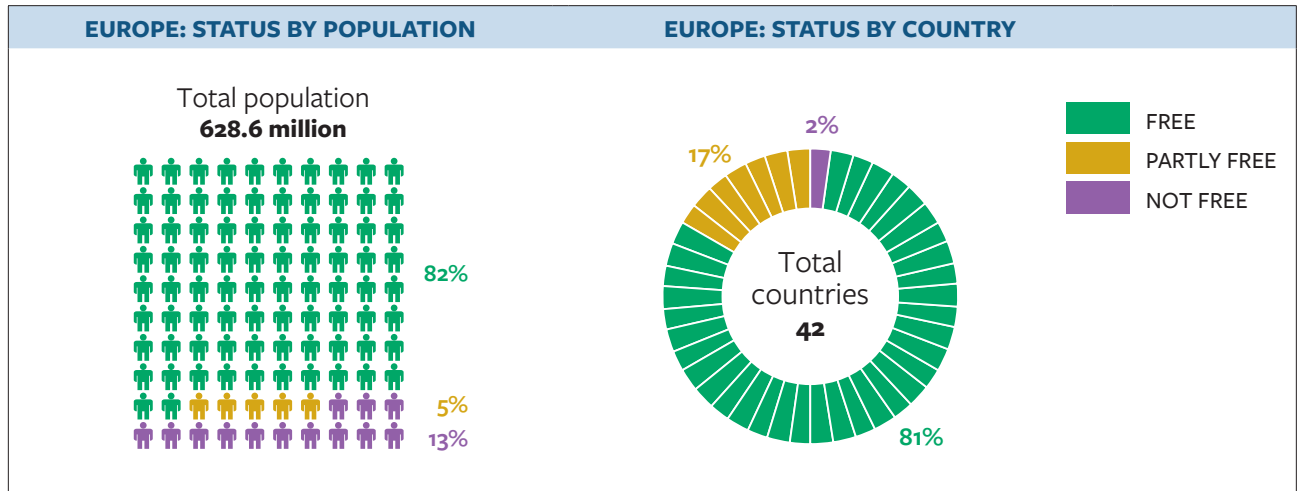
Democratic forces struggled in 2021 as Vladimir Putin’s regime in Russia exerted its authoritarian influence throughout Eurasia. Within its borders, the Russian government used expanded “foreign agent” laws to sideline human rights groups and activists, culminating in an order to close the widely respected organization Memorial. The regime placed its neighbors—and much of the world—on alert at year’s end by amassing troops near Ukraine’s eastern border. Meanwhile, despite improvements in freedom of assembly, domestic politics in Ukraine were bogged down by stalled efforts to uproot corruption and the controversial prosecution of former president Petro Poroshenko.

From Kyrgyzstan to Belarus, incumbent leaders turned to the Kremlin as a model for authoritarian laws and tactics. Kyrgyzstan’s government enacted legislation to impose onerous restrictions on nongovernmental organizations that receive funding from abroad. The country’s parliamentary elections were also marred by accusations of fraud and inadequate adjudication of disputes, exacerbating a rapid

deterioration in political rights. In Belarus, authoritarian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka sought greater integration with Russia and oversaw the liquidation of more than 200 civil society organizations as he attempted to extinguish political opposition and independent civic activism.

Elsewhere in the region, incremental progress was offset by democratic erosion or dismal repression. Armenia, still reeling in the aftermath of its 2020 war with Azerbaijan, approved reforms to the electoral code that will improve transparency and fairness. The political system appeared to stabilize somewhat after snap parliamentary elections, though criminal cases against local opposition figures late in the year raised concerns that the country’s democracy remained on shaky ground. Freedom in Georgia, one of the top-performing countries in Eurasia, suffered as journalists, LGBT+ people, and opposition supporters faced growing intimidation and violence. In Turkmenistan, the autocratic government continued to completely deny the presence of COVID-19 in the country—part of a broader lack of transparency in Eurasian governments’ pandemic responses.

EUROPE: *Open societies struggle to ward off illiberal pressure*



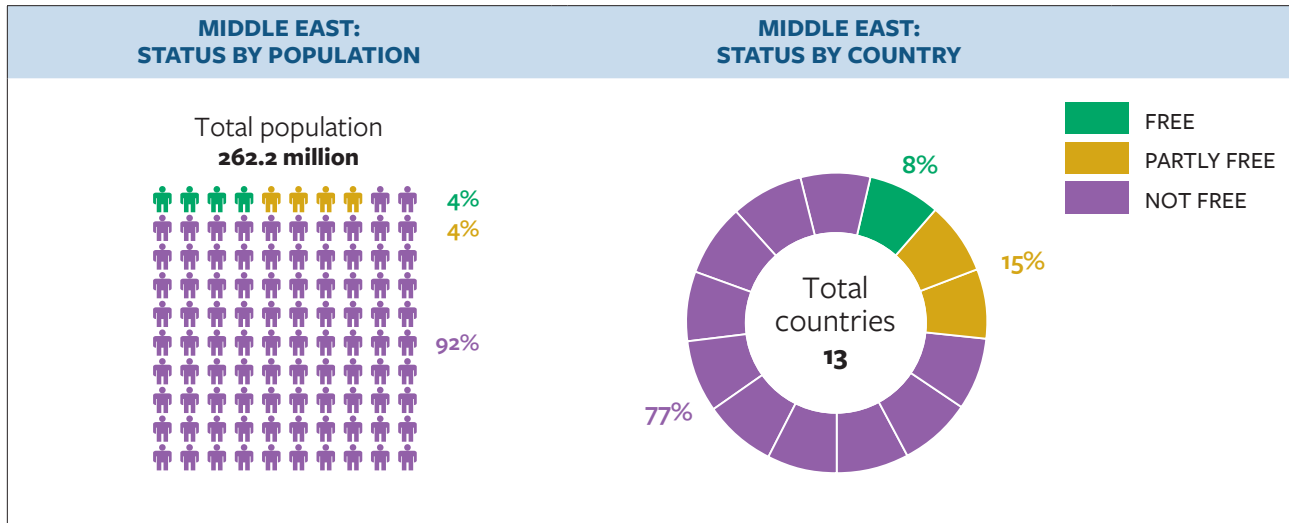
Although Europe remained the best-performing region in *Freedom in the World 2022*, established democracies endured a deepening crisis of faith amid a rise in illiberal practices across the European Union (EU).

In Slovenia, the government withheld funding from the independent Slovenian Press Agency and targeted the financing of nongovernmental organizations as part of a broader effort to silence its critics. In Hungary, the parliament dealt a blow to the rights of LGBT+ people by adopting legislation that bans the portrayal or promotion of homosexuality to minors in media content and schools. The law, reminiscent of similar measures in Russia, was swiftly condemned by the European Parliament and many EU member states. The Polish government continued its assault on judicial independence, in part by defying an order from the European Court of Justice to disband a flawed

new disciplinary chamber in Poland's Supreme Court. The Polish constitutional court's ruling against the primacy of EU law, meanwhile, set the stage for further clashes with the European Commission.

Outside the EU, there were some examples of uneasy progress, as with the improvements under Montenegro's fragile new coalition government. On balance, however, antidemocratic forces appeared to have the upper hand. In Turkey, which once again ranked as the least free country in the region, authorities responded violently to a student protest movement centered on Boğaziçi University and separate demonstrations by advocates of equal rights for women and LGBT+ people. Ankara's undue political influence in Northern Cyprus continued to grow, and the functioning of the territory's parliament was disrupted by opposition boycotts.

MIDDLE EAST: Authoritarians prevail a decade after the Arab Spring



The 10-year anniversary of the Arab Spring uprisings passed quietly in 2021, with democratic progress largely stalled across an almost uniformly authoritarian Middle East.

A number of highly repressive states held elections that were neither free nor fair. Iran’s presidential election featured record-low turnout as voters rejected a tightly managed process in which all significant challengers to the regime-backed candidate were disqualified by the unelected Guardian Council. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad won reelection with a purported 95 percent of the vote in balloting that also lacked any meaningful competition. While Iraq’s parliamentary elections were genuinely competitive and had fewer irregularities than in the past, due in part to the presence of independent observers, there were still reports of vote buying, intimidation, and media suppression. Legislative elections were held for the first time in Qatar, but the contest was highly circumscribed by the emir’s government, and thousands of Qataris were excluded from voting under restrictive eligibility rules.

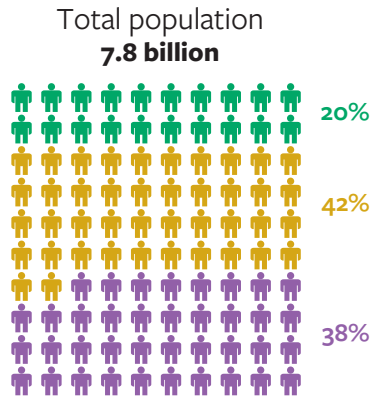
Already limited space for civic activism continued to shrink in the region. In the occupied West Bank, Israeli authorities designated six Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organizations. Months earlier, protests that began in East

Jerusalem in response to the displacement of Palestinian residents spread to Israeli cities and towns and touched off discriminatory police violence, vigilantism, and intercommunal strife. Though protests are infrequent in the repressive Persian Gulf monarchies, peaceful protesters in Bahrain staged a sit-in at a prison to highlight inhumane treatment and lack of medical care for detainees, and security personnel used excessive force to disperse the gathering. More positively, when Oman experienced rare demonstrations against poor economic conditions, the reaction from authorities was mild compared with past crackdowns.

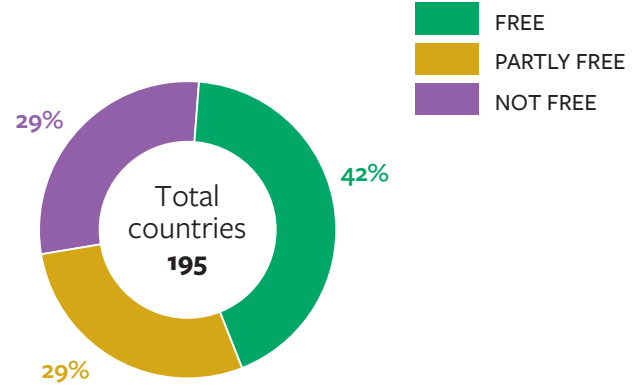
Economic exploitation of migrant workers and refugees continued to drag down human rights standards in the Middle East. The economic crisis in Lebanon has led to an increase in forced child labor, particularly among the Syrian refugee population, and a similar trend has been ongoing in neighboring Jordan. Exploitation is especially problematic in countries with *kafala* (sponsorship) systems that give employers undue control over migrant workers, and some governments have taken incremental steps to reform these laws. In 2021, Saudi Arabia began allowing foreign workers to leave the country without approval from their sponsors, but government approval is still required, and key categories of workers were excluded from the change.

GLOBAL DATA

GLOBAL: STATUS BY POPULATION



GLOBAL: STATUS BY COUNTRY



Freedom in the World 2022 Status Changes

Ecuador



Ecuador's status improved from Partly Free to Free because the year's presidential and legislative elections did not suffer from the types of abuses seen in previous contests, such as the misuse of public resources, and resulted in an orderly transfer of power between rival parties.

Guinea



Guinea's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because military commanders seized power in a coup, removing President Alpha Condé and dissolving the legislature.

Haiti



Haiti's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, an ongoing breakdown in the electoral system and other state institutions, and the corrosive effects of organized crime and violence on civic life.

Peru



Peru's status improved from Partly Free to Free because the successful election of a new president and Congress served to ease, at least temporarily, a pattern of institutional clashes between the executive and legislative branches that had disrupted governance for a number of years.

Tunisia



Tunisia's status declined from Free to Partly Free because President Kaïs Saïed unilaterally dismissed and replaced the elected government, indefinitely suspended the parliament, and imposed harsh restrictions on civil liberties to suppress opposition to his actions.

Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries featured important developments in 2021 that affected their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny in 2022.



Chile: Elections for a constitutional convention and the presidency proceeded with few problems and high levels of legitimacy, bucking a trend of polarization and gridlock that has thwarted reforms in other democracies in recent years.



Iran: Hard-line candidate Ebrahim Raisi won the presidency after the unelected Guardian Council disqualified all of his major opponents, and record-low turnout signaled voters' frustration with the tightly controlled process.



Iraq: Iranian political influence dwindled as pro-Iran parties with links to militia groups experienced defeats in parliamentary elections that featured fewer irregularities than past contests.



Myanmar: The military seized power in a coup to prevent the sitting of a newly elected parliament after its favored party was defeated, then used lethal violence to suppress a determined prodemocracy protest movement.



Nicaragua: President Daniel Ortega ensured his own reelection by escalating his government's attacks on civil society and overseeing the arrest of several opposition candidates.



Russia: President Vladimir Putin's regime expanded its crackdown on political opponents and civil society organizations, thwarting any genuine competition in the September parliamentary elections.



Slovenia: The country suffered a significant decline in civil liberties as Prime Minister Janez Janša's populist government increased its hostility toward civil society groups and the media and continued to undermine independent institutions and the rule of law.



Sudan: A military coup blocked the country's transition to full civilian rule and democratic elections, leading the "March of Millions" movement to demand change in defiance of bloody crackdowns.



Thailand: As youth-led protests calling for constitutional reform continued, the government, headed by leaders of the most recent military coup, ramped up prosecutions of demonstrators for violating lèse-majesté laws.



Zambia: Highly motivated voters turned out to ensure victory for opposition presidential candidate Hakainde Hichilema, overcoming obstacles that included social media shutdowns, restrictions on movement, and political violence.

Worst of the Worst

Of the 56 countries designated as Not Free, the following 16 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

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

Policy Recommendations

NURTURING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

For Democracies

Turn the initial momentum of the Summit for Democracy into concrete multilateral action to strengthen democracy and confront expanding authoritarianism. Reinvigorating democracy and achieving a global order grounded in fundamental rights will require a united front among democratic nations. Coordinated multilateral action by democracies is particularly important as authoritarian leaders extend alternative sources of international support and investment, and resort to bullying tactics like imposing tariffs in retaliation for criticism of human rights abuses. In December 2021, the Summit for Democracy focused the world's attention on the importance of, and challenges to, the promise of democracy. But if the summit is to be a true success, participating nations will need to move beyond rhetoric and undertake sustained, multilateral initiatives to strengthen democracy, in part by rethinking traditional approaches and exchanging best practices to creatively address modern challenges and opportunities.

Prioritize democracy-strengthening programs in foreign assistance and provide enhanced support when countries and territories face critical junctures. Where political institutions are weakened and governments struggle to respond to citizens' needs, efforts to support civil society are at a greater risk of failure. When disbursing aid, democracies should select democracy support priorities with an emphasis on long-term, locally driven, and evidence-based solutions, since this type of effort has proven effective. In particular, democracies should provide civil society and citizen-led social movements with technical assistance and training on issues like coalition and constituency building, advocacy, organizational development, and physical and digital security. Connecting activists across borders so that they can share strategies, tools, and approaches should also be prioritized. It is critical to support initiatives that help ensure the legitimacy of elections, including monitoring missions, voter registration and education drives, and media training. Aid should be increased for countries and territories at critical junctures. These include countries that have experienced recent expansions in freedom, such as Ecuador and Montenegro, as well as places where democratic progress is threatened, such as Tunisia, or where democracy is under considerable pressure, as in Benin. Funding should help democratically inclined leaders and local civil society organizations deliver tangible expansions of political rights and civil liberties.

Support civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy. Peaceful protest movements calling for reform can drive long-term democratic change, but they face more daunting odds without international support. Democratic governments should provide vocal, public support for grassroots prodemocracy movements, and respond to any violent crackdown by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance, and public condemnation. Democracies should also be ready to welcome democracy and human rights defenders and civic activists who come under threat or attack for their work or who are in immediate danger. The United States Agency for International Development's new "Powered for the People" initiative was established to "empower citizen movements—especially peaceful mass movements striving for democratic objectives." If successful, this initiative could serve as one model that other democracies could follow.

Support free and independent media, and protect access to information. Providing the public with access to quality, on-the-ground reporting and fact-based information about current events is one of the best ways to combat authoritarian power. But independent media are increasingly at risk from hostile regimes as well as from a lack of sufficient, sustained funding. As a result, citizens are losing independent sources of information that are critical for political engagement and

the exercise of basic rights. To address this decline, democracies should scale up efforts to support independent media—including public-interest journalism and exile media—through financial assistance and innovative financing models, technical support, skills training, and mentoring. They should also expand protections for journalists who face physical attacks and harassment, including by supporting the creation of emergency visas for those at risk. Initiatives announced at the Summit for Democracy offer promising opportunities in this area. Laws in threatened countries should protect the free flow of information, grant journalists access to elected officials, allow the public to place freedom of information requests, and guard against state monopolization of media outlets. Governments and internet service providers should make every effort to support and maintain reliable access to the internet.

- In the United States, the proposed bipartisan Global Press Freedom Act (S.204) would prioritize the promotion of press freedom worldwide by creating an ambassador-at-large position to coordinate US foreign policy engagement on global press freedom issues. To ensure the continued editorial independence of the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which operates the United States’ five publicly funded foreign-service media organizations, Congress should enact legislative changes recommended by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to clarify and strengthen the “firewall rule,” which protects against political interference in news reporting.
- In the European Union (EU), the adoption of the Media Freedom Act is an opportunity to address political influence on the media, as well as foreign interference and challenges to media pluralism. European governments should work to combat the methods of media capture that were pioneered in Hungary and are starting to take root in neighboring countries. The European Commission’s rule-of-law reports should include an assessment of independence at state-owned media in each member state to enable early detection of media capture efforts; these public outlets are often the first to be co-opted when an illiberal government comes to power. The EU should promote an anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) directive that would give journalists and media groups the ability to request rapid dismissal of these types of lawsuits in member states, and provide financial support to media groups facing them.

For the Private Sector

Adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and conduct periodic human rights impact assessments, with a commitment to doing no harm. Companies should commit to respecting the rights of their customers and employees, and to addressing any adverse impact that their operations, products, or services might have on human rights. International companies should not seek to operate in countries where they know they will be forced to violate international human rights principles. Where companies do operate, they should conduct periodic assessments to fully understand how their products and actions might affect rights like freedom from economic exploitation. When a product is found to have been used for human rights violations, companies should suspend sales to the perpetrating party and develop an immediate action plan to mitigate harm and prevent further abuse. Consideration should be given not just to business operation and supply-chain issues, but also to the impacts of sponsorships and advertisements, such as sponsorships of sporting events hosted by regimes known to engage in human rights abuses, like those in Azerbaijan, China, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, or advertisements on state-run television channels in repressive countries like Belarus.

Evaluate potential partners’ adherence to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Companies should refrain from partnering or establishing subcontracts with entities that do not adhere to these principles. Companies can also abstain from forming partnerships with companies that are wholly or partially owned by states known to violate human rights.

Engage in continuous dialogue with civil society organizations to understand the practical effects of company policies and products. Companies should seek out local expertise on the political and cultural context in markets where they have a presence, or where their products are widely used. These consultations with civil society groups should inform the companies’ approach to investment, operations, and other activities.

COUNTERING THREATS TO GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

For Democracies

Guard against and combat transnational repression. As Freedom House [has documented](#), human rights activists, dissidents, and their families face the threat of transnational repression—tactics of violence and intimidation used by authoritarians to silence dissent among exiles and diasporas around the world. An estimated 3.5 million people are at risk of physical or digital transnational repression. Even individuals living in the relative safety of democratic countries may become victims of surveillance, harassment, intimidation, and assault instigated by authoritarian regimes in their countries of origin. Democratic governments should work together to constrain the ability of such states to commit acts of transnational repression, increase accountability by imposing multilateral sanctions on perpetrators, and restrict security assistance for states that engage in these practices. Officials who are likely to come into contact with perpetrators or victims of transnational repression should be trained to recognize and address it. Democracies should ensure that international organizations such as Interpol and other established channels of cooperation and information sharing are not being misused by authoritarians to target political opponents and activists abroad. Special scrutiny should be given to extradition requests issued by states that are known to engage in human rights abuses or transnational repression. Democracies should update and modernize their laws to close loopholes and ensure that they have the tools necessary to address the modern threat of transnational repression. Detailed recommendations are available [here](#).

Utilize targeted sanctions as part of a comprehensive strategy of accountability for human rights abusers and corrupt officials. Such sanctions are not a standalone solution, but they remain a powerful mechanism for deterring harmful behavior. Democracies should devise comprehensive strategies for deploying targeted sanctions in concert with their full suite of foreign policy tools in order to ensure accountability for international human rights abuses and acts of corruption. When possible, democracies should coordinate their efforts and jointly impose sanctions on perpetrators for maximum impact, as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the EU have done in recent cases. Democratic nations that do not yet have laws allowing for targeted sanctions for human rights abuses and acts of corruption should enact them, and those with laws on the books should ensure that they are fully resourced and enforced. The US Congress should reauthorize the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (22 USC 2656 note), which allows for visa bans and asset freezes on individuals and entities engaged in human rights abuses and corruption. Reauthorization should eliminate the December 23, 2022, sunset and codify Executive Order 13818, which enables the United States to impose sanctions for “serious human rights abuses.” This term encompasses a greater number of abuses than the more restrictive threshold of “gross violations of human rights,” the standard included in the Global Magnitsky Act in its original form. The US Congress should also pass the REVEAL Act (S.2392/H.R.4557), which would allow the US government to make public the names of individuals whose visas are banned under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). Current law requires that names of those blocked under the INA be kept private. The US Congress and executive branch should work together to ensure robust funding for the enforcement of sanctions. The US Department of the Treasury, Department of State, and Department of Justice all collect information about suspected perpetrators of abuses who are eligible for sanctions. Unfortunately, the number of potential sanctions cases to be vetted by the US government far exceeds current capacity. Congress has provided funding for sanctions implementation and enforcement, but funding for additional staff would help reduce the backlog of cases that have yet to be vetted.

Make the fight against kleptocracy and international corruption a key priority. Corruption—and its weaponization by antidemocratic forces—harms effective governance, undermines economic growth, weakens the rule of law, and corrodes public trust. This urgent threat to democracy has rightly received intensified international attention. In 2021, the Biden administration named the fight against corruption as a core US national security interest and featured it as a key theme of the Summit for Democracy; the United Nations launched a new anticorruption initiative called the Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities; and the US Congress, European Parliament, and British Parliament teamed up to launch the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance against Kleptocracy. This promising international momentum should be focused on meaningful, concrete action that constrains the ability of corrupt individuals to evade sanctions and law enforcement

by hiding stolen assets. The Group of 20, which oversees the work of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), should charge the FATF with developing a new set of expert-created anticorruption standards, rigorously assessing whether participating states have adopted the recommended standards, and, importantly, determining whether they are being effectively implemented. In the United States, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network should identify and eliminate any loopholes in the implementation of the Corporate Transparency Act (CTA). The CTA, which became law in 2020, makes it more difficult for corrupt actors to hide stolen funds behind anonymous shell corporations. Congress should also pass the CROOK Act (S.158/H.R.402), which would establish an action fund to offer financial assistance to foreign countries during historic windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms, and the Combating Global Corruption Act (S.14/H.R.4322), which would require the US government to assess the extent of corruption around the world and produce a tiered list of countries. US foreign assistance directed at the lowest-tiered countries would be packaged with specific risk assessments and anticorruption mechanisms, such as provisions to recover funds that are misused.

Curtail assistance to nations whose leaders evade term limits. Over the past two decades, dozens of leaders around the world—in Russia, China, Nicaragua, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Uganda, Cameroon, and elsewhere—have sought to evade term limits and extend their hold on power. US law blocks funding “to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’état or decree” until the secretary of state “can certify that a democratically elected government has taken office.” This law [should be amended](#) to include violations of or changes to term limits that allow incumbent leaders to extend their time in office. When leaders change the term limit rules for themselves, this should trigger an automatic across-the-board review of all assistance to the country, and elements of assistance that benefit the chief executive and the upper echelons of government should be suspended. The State Department should lead the review, identifying nonhumanitarian assistance that may be important to the leader, such as access to preferential trade arrangements, investment in infrastructure, or sales of arms and other forms of military cooperation. Senior policymakers should then decide on an appropriate combination of benefits to suspend. The secretary of state should publicly announce this policy so that it can serve as a deterrent. Other democracies should condition foreign assistance in a similar fashion.

Scrutinize the export of technologies and other products that could be used to violate human rights. A booming commercial market for surveillance and censorship technologies has given governments more capacity than ever before to flout the rule of law, monitor private communications at their discretion, and restrict access to essential resources. Violations of human rights occur more frequently in countries with weak rule of law and poor protections for basic freedoms. When considering the export of technological and other products that could be used to violate human rights, governments should carefully study deals with countries that are rated as Partly Free or Not Free by any of Freedom House’s publications. The United States, Australia, Denmark, and Norway, supported by Canada, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, recently announced the Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative, intended to “help stem the tide of authoritarian government misuse of technology and promote a positive vision for technologies anchored by democratic values.” The United States also recently updated its licensing policy to restrict the export of items if there is “a risk that the items will be used to violate or abuse human rights,” and the EU tightened export controls for dual-use products and cybersurveillance technologies. When implementing these new initiatives and policies, government officials should consult research by Freedom House and other human rights organizations to determine whether there is a risk that the exported items could enable human rights abuses.

Address declines in internet freedom and protect a free and open internet. Freedom House has documented [11 consecutive years](#) of decline in internet freedom. Reversing the antidemocratic transformation of today’s internet will require a focused, coordinated effort by governments, civil society, and technology companies. To shore up internet freedom, governments should reform domestic surveillance practices so that they adhere to the [International Principles on the Application of Human Rights to Communications Surveillance](#) and protect robust encryption. Governments should enact strong data privacy laws that comprehensively safeguard people’s information while preventing greater internet fragmentation and disproportionate restrictions on cross-border data flows. Democracies should also incorporate internet freedom priorities into democracy, rights, and governance assistance programs, including by investing in network-building among civil society actors and increasing technological investment in third countries that are designed to promote an open,

interoperable, and secure internet. Governments should reject internet shutdowns and refrain from banning social media and messaging platforms, particularly during elections, protests, and periods of unrest. Authorities can address legitimate human rights or other risks posed by social media and messaging platforms through existing, democratic mechanisms—including regulatory action, security audits, parliamentary scrutiny, and legislation passed in consultation with civil society and affected stakeholders—rather than resorting to national security orders and other emergency measures. Laws seeking to regulate online content should be grounded in human rights principles and ensure transparency and democratic oversight. Detailed recommendations on protecting internet freedom domestically are available [here](#).

For the Private Sector

Companies should speak out against human rights abuses in countries where they operate, and fiercely defend the rights of employees and other affected stakeholders. The private sector holds tremendous leverage with governments around the world and [has a responsibility](#) to exercise this leverage to protect human rights. These efforts should include incorporating human rights due diligence into core business programs and across the company's value chain; speaking out against abuses when they occur by exerting influence on business partners, government officials, industry associations, and multistakeholder initiatives; defending the rights of employees to condemn and demonstrate against abuses in their private capacity; and enabling remedies for stakeholders who are affected by abuses to which the company is linked or has contributed. Companies should establish strong human rights governance mechanisms, furnished with their own budgets and embedded across the business, that liaise directly with the company's senior leadership and are subject to board oversight.

Resist government orders to shut down internet connectivity, ban digital services, or hand over user data without proper democratic safeguards. Service providers should use all available legal channels to challenge such requests from state agencies, whether they are official or informal. If companies cannot resist censorship demands in full, they should ensure that any restrictions or disruptions are as limited as possible in duration, geographic scope, and type of content affected. Companies should also thoroughly document government demands internally and take steps to notify users as to why connectivity or content may be restricted or personal data may be provided to state officials, especially in countries where government actions lack transparency, independent oversight, and other democratic safeguards.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY AT HOME

For Democracies

Work at the local level to strengthen democracy. State and local government bodies are often the most direct connection people have to democratic governance. These institutions' ability or inability to serve public needs will impact people's views on the merits of democracy as a form of governance. As backsliding continues in once-established democracies, greater attention should be given to strengthening democracy at the state, provincial, territorial, and local levels. State and local governments have an especially important role to play in ensuring strong transparency, ethics, and anticorruption controls and the protection of fundamental freedoms, and they are often best placed to address barriers to democratic participation such as social exclusion and poverty. Domestically focused civil society organizations and groups focused on international democracy should work together to develop ideas for strengthening local governance in democracies, in part by exchanging best practices and applying lessons learned from their respective areas of work. Democratic governments should take up these ideas and consult with domestically focused civil society groups to identify and address institutional deficiencies with honesty and clarity.

Cultivate public support for democratic principles by investing in civic education. Fostering a strong public understanding of democratic principles, especially among young people, empowers citizens to defend freedom domestically and support foreign policies that protect democratic rights and values abroad. As democracies struggle, and authoritarian rulers promote the narrative that democracy is unable to deliver on its promises, it is essential that those living in free countries understand and are able to articulate how effective democratic governance protects rights and freedoms. In the United States, new legislation could require each state to develop basic content and benchmarks of achievement for civic education, including instruction on the fundamental tenets of US democracy. In the absence of new legislation, the US Department of Education should, to the extent possible, make funding available to states for civic education that focuses on democratic principles.

Protect free and fair elections. Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of any democracy, and independent and transparent electoral processes are necessary to foster a competitive electoral environment and citizens' trust in election integrity. It is essential that citizens be able to exercise their right to vote with relative ease. Special attention should be given to addressing discriminatory barriers to voting. In some countries members of certain racial or ethnic groups have difficulty obtaining the documentation they need to vote or face other undue obstacles to voting. Governments, in consultation with civil society, should identify and remedy barriers to access. In the United States, people of color have faced a long history of barriers to voting. New laws on election security in the United States should not impose financial, logistical, or bureaucratic burdens that effectively perpetuate or exacerbate these barriers, and federal legislation should establish new criteria for determining which states and political subdivisions with a history of racially discriminatory voting rules must obtain federal clearance before implementing changes to electoral laws. Globally, democratic governments, civil society, and technology companies should work together to ensure that elections are protected from cyberattacks and politicized efforts to undermine or overturn elections. Paper ballots, which ensure that votes have a verifiable paper trail, and independent audits with detailed audit trails, which ensure results are accurate, should be used, and independent election monitors should be present. Technology companies and media outlets should take extra precautions not to exacerbate misinformation that undermines credible electoral systems. Ahead of significant elections and referendums in countries around the world, social media companies and other content providers should create specialized teams that anticipate digital interference, engage with in-country civil society organizations that can provide expertise on the political and cultural contexts in which companies work, and devise strategies to prevent interference tactics and mitigate their effects. Companies should proactively communicate about new policies they put in place ahead of elections and ensure transparency and consistency in their application.

Improve laws that guard against improper influence over government officials. Laws that guard against corruption and require transparency regarding officials' personal finances and campaign donations, rigorous standards for the disclosure of conflicts of interest, and the establishment of a clear code of conduct for engagement with foreign officials can all help insulate democratic governments from attempts to subvert them. In the United States, helpful improvements could include the adoption of legislation to enforce the principles of the constitution's foreign and domestic emoluments clauses, the closure of loopholes in existing rules on lobbying and foreign-agent registration, and updates to financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.

Freedom in the World Methodology

Freedom in the World 2022 evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2021. 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>.

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Only global solidarity
among democracy's
defenders can
successfully counter
the combined
aggression of its
adversaries.

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

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