

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

Democracy under Siege



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

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

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Freedom House is solely responsible for the report's content.

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This edition of *Freedom in the World* is dedicated to Arch Puddington, a lifelong champion of democracy who retired in 2020 after serving for 26 years as a mainstay of Freedom House's research and analysis division.

This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2021 edition of *Freedom in the World*. The complete analysis including narrative reports on all countries and territories can be found on our website at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

## ON THE COVER

Muslim women demonstrate against India's discriminatory new citizenship law in Bangalore in January 2020. Image credit: MANJUNATH KIRAN/AFP via Getty Images

# Democracy under Siege

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By Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz

**A**s a lethal pandemic, economic and physical insecurity, and violent conflict ravaged the world in 2020, democracy's defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favor of tyranny. Incumbent leaders increasingly used force to crush opponents and settle scores, sometimes in the name of public health, while beleaguered activists—lacking effective international support—faced heavy jail sentences, torture, or murder in many settings.

These withering blows marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006. The long democratic recession is deepening.

The impact of the long-term democratic decline has become increasingly global in nature, broad enough to be felt by those living under the cruelest dictatorships, as well as by citizens of long-standing democracies. Nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced deterioration last year. The ongoing decline has given rise to claims of democracy's inherent inferiority. Proponents of this idea include official Chinese and Russian commentators seeking to strengthen their international influence while escaping accountability for abuses, as well as antidemocratic actors within democratic states who see an opportunity to

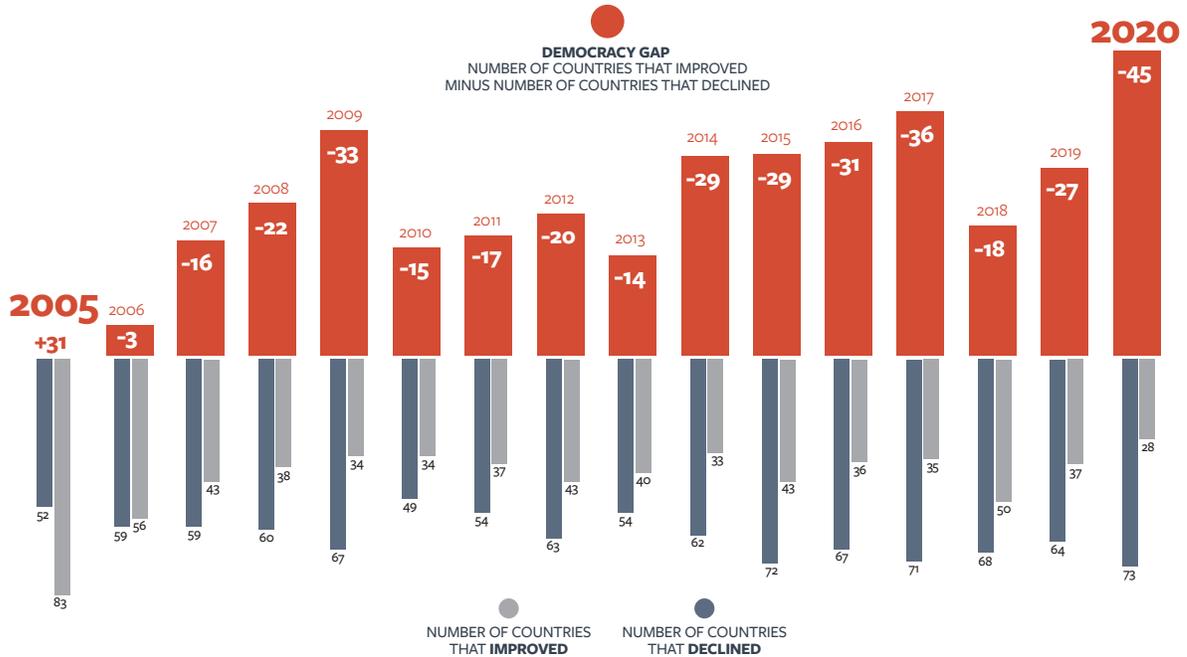
consolidate power. They are both cheering the breakdown of democracy and exacerbating it, pitting themselves against the brave groups and individuals who have set out to reverse the damage.

The malign influence of the regime in China, the world's most populous dictatorship, was especially profound in 2020. Beijing ramped up its global disinformation and censorship campaign to counter the fallout from its cover-up of the initial coronavirus outbreak, which severely hampered a rapid global response in the pandemic's early days. Its efforts also featured increased meddling in the domestic political discourse of foreign democracies, transnational extensions of rights abuses common in mainland China, and the demolition of Hong Kong's liberties and legal autonomy. Meanwhile, the Chinese regime has gained clout in multilateral institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, which the United States abandoned in 2018, as Beijing pushed a vision of so-called noninterference that allows abuses of democratic principles and human rights standards to go unpunished while the formation of autocratic alliances is promoted.

As COVID-19 spread during the year, governments across the democratic spectrum repeatedly resorted to excessive surveillance, discriminatory restrictions on freedoms like movement and assembly, and arbitrary or violent enforcement of such restrictions by police and nonstate actors.

## A GROWING DEMOCRACY GAP: 15 YEARS OF DECLINE

Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 15 years.



Waves of false and misleading information, generated deliberately by political leaders in some cases, flooded many countries' communication systems, obscuring reliable data and jeopardizing lives. While most countries with stronger democratic institutions ensured that any restrictions on liberty were necessary and proportionate to the threat posed by the virus, a number of their peers pursued clumsy or ill-informed strategies, and dictators from Venezuela to Cambodia exploited the crisis to quash opposition and fortify their power.

The expansion of authoritarian rule, combined with the fading and inconsistent presence of major democracies on the international stage, has had tangible effects on human life and security, including the frequent resort to military force to resolve political disputes. As long-standing conflicts churned on in places like Libya and Yemen, the leaders of Ethiopia and Azerbaijan launched wars last year in the regions of Tigray and Nagorno-Karabakh, respectively, drawing on support from authoritarian neighbors Eritrea and Turkey and destabilizing surrounding areas. Repercussions from the fighting shattered hopes for tentative reform movements in both Armenia, which

clashed with the Azerbaijani regime over Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ethiopia.

India, the world's most populous democracy, dropped from Free to Partly Free status in *Freedom in the World 2021*. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and its state-level allies continued to crack down on critics during the year, and their response to COVID-19 included a ham-fisted lockdown that resulted in the dangerous and unplanned displacement of millions of internal migrant workers. The ruling Hindu nationalist movement also encouraged the scapegoating of Muslims, who were disproportionately blamed for the spread of the virus and faced attacks by vigilante mobs. Rather than serving as a champion of democratic practice and a counterweight to authoritarian influence from countries such as China, Modi and his party are tragically driving India itself toward authoritarianism.

The parlous state of US democracy was conspicuous in the early days of 2021 as an insurrectionist mob, egged on by the words of outgoing president Donald Trump and his refusal to admit defeat in the November election, stormed

the Capitol building and temporarily disrupted Congress's final certification of the vote. This capped a year in which the administration attempted to undermine accountability for malfeasance, including by dismissing inspectors general responsible for rooting out financial and other misconduct in government; amplified false allegations of electoral fraud that fed mistrust among much of the US population; and condoned disproportionate violence by police in response to massive protests calling for an end to systemic racial injustice. But the outburst of political violence at the symbolic heart of US democracy, incited by the president himself, threw the country into even greater crisis. Notwithstanding the inauguration of a new president in keeping with the law and the constitution, the United States will need to work vigorously to strengthen its institutional safeguards, restore its civic norms, and uphold the promise of its core principles for all segments of society if it is to protect its venerable democracy and regain global credibility.

The [widespread protest movements of 2019](#), which had signaled the popular desire for good governance the world over, often collided with increased repression in 2020. While successful protests in countries such as Chile and Sudan led to democratic improvements, there were many more examples in which demonstrators succumbed to crackdowns, with oppressive regimes benefiting from a distracted and

divided international community. Nearly two dozen countries and territories that experienced major protests in 2019 suffered a net decline in freedom the following year.

Although *Freedom in the World's* better-performing countries had been in retreat for several years, in 2020 it was struggling democracies and authoritarian states that accounted for more of the global decline. The proportion of Not Free countries is now the highest it has been in the past 15 years. On average, the scores of these countries have declined by about 15 percent during the same period. At the same time, the number of countries worldwide earning a net score improvement for 2020 was the lowest since 2005, suggesting that the prospects for a change in the global downward trend are more challenging than ever. With India's decline to Partly Free, less than 20 percent of the world's population now lives in a Free country, the smallest proportion since 1995. As repression intensifies in already unfree environments, greater damage is done to their institutions and societies, making it increasingly difficult to fulfill public demands for freedom and prosperity under any future government.

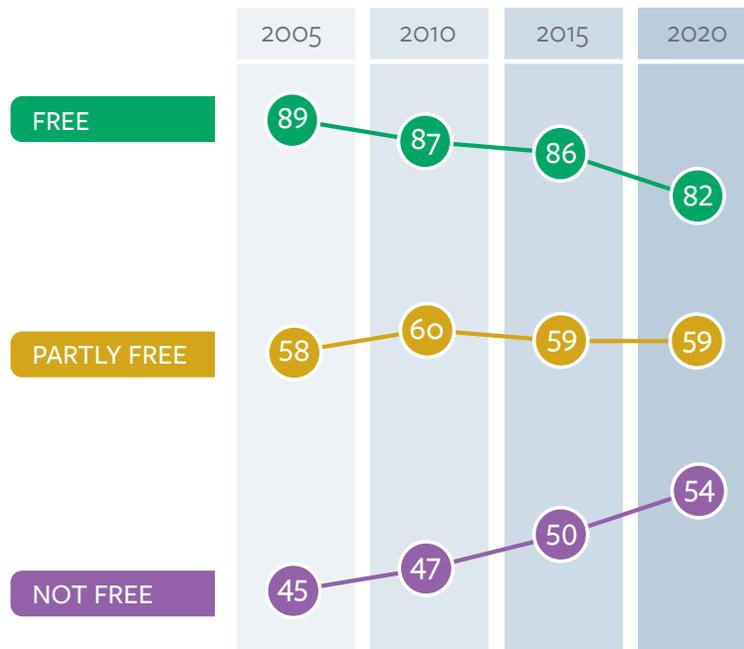
The enemies of freedom have pushed the false narrative that democracy is in decline because it is incapable of addressing people's needs. In fact, democracy is in decline because its



A soldier in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia walks by a bank as it reopens in December 2020, a month after an armed conflict erupted in the region. Image credit: EDUARDO SOTERAS/AFP via Getty Images

## A SHIFTING INTERNATIONAL BALANCE

In 2020, the number of Free countries in the world reached its lowest level since the beginning of a 15-year period of global democratic decline, while the number of Not Free countries reached its highest level.



most prominent exemplars are not doing enough to protect it. Global leadership and solidarity from democratic states are urgently needed. Governments that understand the value of democracy, including the new administration in Washington, have a responsibility to band together to deliver on its benefits, counter its adversaries, and support its defenders. They must also put their own houses in order to shore up their credibility and fortify their institutions against politicians and other actors who are willing to trample democratic principles in the pursuit of power. If free societies fail to take these basic steps, the world will become ever more hostile to the values they hold dear, and no country will be safe from the destructive effects of dictatorship.

### The shifting international balance

Over the past year, oppressive and often violent authoritarian forces tipped the international order in their favor time and again, exploiting both the advantages of nondemocratic systems and the weaknesses in ailing democracies. In a variety of environments, flickers of hope were extinguished,

contributing to a new global status quo in which acts of repression went unpunished and democracy’s advocates were increasingly isolated.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), faced with the danger that its authoritarian system would be blamed for covering up and thus exacerbating the COVID-19 pandemic, worked hard to convert the risk into an opportunity to exert influence. It provided medical supplies to countries that were hit hard by the virus, but it often portrayed sales as donations and orchestrated propaganda events with economically dependent recipient governments. Beijing sometimes sought to shift blame to the very countries it claimed to be helping, as when Chinese state media suggested that the coronavirus had actually originated in Italy. Throughout the year, the CCP touted its own authoritarian methods for controlling the contagion, comparing them favorably with democracies like the United States while studiously ignoring the countries that succeeded without resorting to major abuses, most notably Taiwan. This type of spin has the potential to convince many people that China’s censorship and repression are a

recipe for effective governance rather than blunt tools for entrenching political power.

Beyond the pandemic, Beijing's export of antidemocratic tactics, financial coercion, and physical intimidation have led to an erosion of democratic institutions and human rights protections in numerous countries. The campaign has been supplemented by the regime's moves to promote its agenda at the United Nations, in diplomatic channels, and through worldwide propaganda that aims to systematically alter global norms. Other authoritarian states have joined China in these efforts, even as key democracies abandoned allies and their own values in foreign policy matters. As a result, the mechanisms that democracies have long used to hold governments accountable for violations of human rights standards and international law are being weakened and subverted, and even the world's most egregious violations, such as the large-scale forced sterilization of Uighur women, are not met with a well-coordinated response or punishment.

In this climate of impunity, the CCP has run roughshod over Hong Kong's democratic institutions and international legal agreements. The territory has suffered a massive decline in freedom since 2013, with an especially steep drop since mass prodemocracy demonstrations were suppressed in 2019 and Beijing tightened its grip in 2020. The central government's imposition of the National Security Law in June erased almost overnight many of Hong Kong's remaining liberties, bringing it into closer alignment with the system on the mainland. The Hong Kong government itself escalated its use of the law early in 2021 when more than 50 prodemocracy activists and politicians were arrested, essentially for holding a primary and attempting to win legislative elections that were ultimately postponed by a year; they face penalties of up to life in prison. In November the Beijing and Hong Kong governments had colluded to expel four prodemocracy members from the existing Legislative Council, prompting the remaining 15 to resign in protest. These developments reflect a dramatic increase in the cost of opposing the CCP in Hong Kong, and the narrowing of possibilities for turning back the authoritarian tide.

The use of military force by authoritarian states, another symptom of the global decay of democratic norms, was on display in Nagorno-Karabakh last year. New fighting erupted in September when the Azerbaijani regime, with decisive support from Turkey, launched an offensive to settle a territorial dispute that years of diplomacy with Armenia had failed to resolve. At least 6,500 combatants and hundreds of civilians were killed, and tens of thousands of people were

newly displaced. Meaningful international engagement was absent, and the war only stopped when Moscow imposed a peacekeeping plan on the two sides, fixing in place the Azerbaijani military's territorial gains but leaving many other questions unanswered.

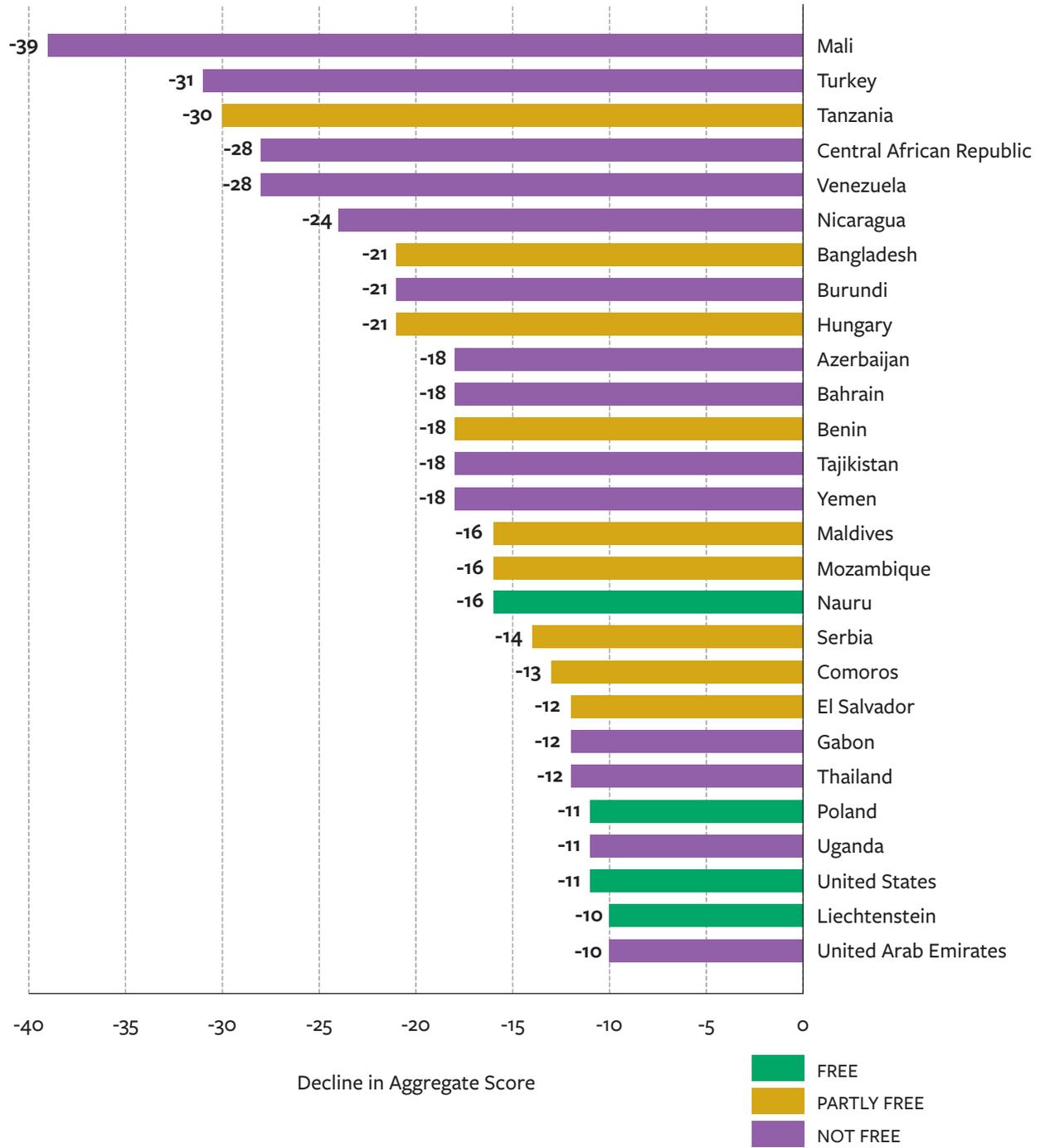
The fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh has had spillover effects for democracy. In addition to strengthening the rule of Azerbaijan's authoritarian president, Ilham Aliyev, the conflict threatens to destabilize the government in Armenia. A rare bright spot in a region replete with deeply entrenched authoritarian leaders, Armenia has experienced tentative gains in freedom since mass antigovernment protests erupted in 2018 and citizens voted in a more reform-minded government. But Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's capitulation in the war sparked a violent reaction among some opponents, who stormed the parliament in November and physically attacked the speaker. Such disorder threatens the country's hard-won progress, and could set off a chain of events that draws Armenia closer to the autocratic tendencies of its neighbors.

Ethiopia had also made democratic progress in recent years, as new prime minister Abiy Ahmed lifted restrictions on opposition media and political groups and released imprisoned journalists and political figures. However, persistent ethnic and political tensions remained. In July 2020, a popular ethnic Oromo singer was killed, leading to large protests in the Oromia Region that were marred by attacks on non-Oromo populations, a violent response by security forces, and the arrest of thousands of people, including many opposition figures. The country's fragile gains were further imperiled after the ruling party in the Tigray Region held elections in September against the will of the federal authorities and labeled Abiy's government illegitimate. Tigrayan forces later attacked a military base, leading to an overwhelming response from federal forces and allied ethnic militias that displaced tens of thousands of people and led to untold civilian casualties. In a dark sign for the country's democratic prospects, the government enlisted military support from the autocratic regime of neighboring Eritrea, and national elections that were postponed due to the pandemic will now either take place in the shadow of civil conflict or be pushed back even further.

In Venezuela, which has experienced a dizzying 40-point score decline over the last 15 years, some hope arose in 2019 when opposition National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó appeared to present a serious challenge to the

## LARGEST 10-YEAR DECLINES

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





A demonstrator holds the Venezuelan flag in front of a line of police officers during a protest in Caracas against the government of Nicolás Maduro in March 2020. Image credit: Jonathan Lanza/NurPhoto via Getty Images

rule of dictator Nicolás Maduro. The opposition named Guaidó as interim president under the constitution, citing the illegitimacy of the presidential election that kept Maduro in power, and many democratic governments recognized his status. In 2020, however, as opponents of the regime continued to face extrajudicial execution, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detention, Maduro regained the upper hand. Tightly controlled National Assembly elections went forward despite an opposition boycott, creating a new body with a ruling party majority. The old opposition-led legislature hung on in a weakened state, extending its own term as its electoral legitimacy ebbed away.

Belarus emerged as another fleeting bright spot in August, when citizens unexpectedly rose up to dispute the fraudulent results of a deeply flawed election. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's repressive rule had previously been taken for granted, but for a few weeks the protests appeared to put him on the defensive as citizens awakened to their democratic potential despite brutal crackdowns, mass arrests, and torture. By the start of 2021, however, despite ongoing resistance, Lukashenka remained in power, and protests, more limited in scale, continued to be met with detentions. Political rights and civil liberties have become even more restricted than before, and democracy remains a distant aspiration.

In fact, Belarus was far from the only place where the promise of increased freedom raised by mass protests eventually curdled into heightened repression. Of the 39 countries and territories where Freedom House noted major protests in 2019, 23 experienced a score decline for 2020—a significantly higher share than countries with declines represented in the world at large. In settings as varied as Algeria, Guinea, and India, regimes that protests had taken by surprise in 2019 regained their footing, arresting and prosecuting demonstrators, passing newly restrictive laws, and in some cases resorting to brutal crackdowns, for which they faced few international repercussions.

The fall of India from the upper ranks of free nations could have a particularly damaging impact on global democratic standards. Political rights and civil liberties in the country have deteriorated since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, with increased pressure on human rights organizations, rising intimidation of academics and journalists, and a spate of bigoted attacks, including lynchings, aimed at Muslims. The decline only accelerated after Modi's reelection in 2019. Last year, the government intensified its crackdown on protesters opposed to a discriminatory citizenship law and arrested dozens of journalists who aired criticism of the official pandemic response. Judicial independence has also come under strain; in one case, a judge was transferred immediately

## DASHED HOPES

Over the past year, embers of hope were extinguished in countries and territories that once seemed poised to make democratic gains.



after reprimanding the police for taking no action during riots in New Delhi that left over 50 people, mostly Muslims, dead. In December, Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, approved a law that prohibits forced religious conversion through interfaith marriage, which critics fear will effectively restrict interfaith marriage in general; authorities have already arrested a number of Muslim men for allegedly forcing Hindu women to convert to Islam. Amid the pandemic the government imposed an abrupt COVID-19 lockdown in the spring, which left millions of migrant workers in cities without work or basic resources. Many were forced to walk across the country to their home villages, facing various forms of mistreatment along the way. Under Modi, India appears to have abandoned its potential to serve as a global democratic leader, elevating narrow Hindu nationalist interests at the expense of its founding values of inclusion and equal rights for all.

To reverse the global shift toward authoritarian norms, democracy advocates working for freedom in their home

countries will need robust solidarity from like-minded allies abroad.

### The eclipse of US leadership

The final weeks of the Trump presidency featured unprecedented attacks on one of the world's most visible and influential democracies. After four years of condoning and indeed pardoning official malfeasance, ducking accountability for his own transgressions, and encouraging racist and right-wing extremists, the outgoing president openly strove to illegally overturn his loss at the polls, culminating in his incitement of an armed mob to disrupt Congress's certification of the results. Trump's actions went unchecked by most lawmakers from his own party, with a stunning silence that undermined basic democratic tenets. Only a serious and sustained reform effort can repair the damage done during the Trump era to the perception and reality of basic rights and freedoms in the United States.

The year leading up to the assault on the Capitol was fraught with other episodes that threw the country into the global spotlight in a new way. The politically distorted health recommendations, partisan infighting, shockingly high and racially disparate coronavirus death rates, and police violence against protesters advocating for racial justice over the summer all underscored the United States' systemic dysfunctions and made American democracy appear fundamentally unstable. Even before 2020, Trump had presided over an accelerating decline in US freedom scores, driven in part by corruption and conflicts of interest in the administration, resistance to transparency efforts, and harsh and haphazard policies on immigration and asylum that made the country an outlier among its Group of Seven peers.

But President Trump's attempt to overturn the will of the American voters was arguably the most destructive act of his time in office. His drumbeat of claims—without evidence—that the electoral system was ridden by fraud sowed doubt among a significant portion of the population, despite what election security officials eventually praised as the most secure vote in US history. Nationally elected officials from his party backed these claims, striking at the foundations of democracy and threatening the orderly transfer of power.

Though battered, many US institutions held strong during and after the election process. Lawsuits challenging the result in pivotal states were each thrown out in turn by independent courts. Judges appointed by presidents from both parties ruled impartially, including the three Supreme Court justices Trump himself had nominated, upholding the rule of law and confirming that there were no serious irregularities in the voting or counting processes. A diverse set of media outlets broadly confirmed the outcome of the election, and civil society groups investigated the fraud claims and provided evidence of a credible vote. Some Republicans spoke eloquently and forcefully in support of democratic principles, before and after the storming of the Capitol. Yet it may take years to appreciate and address the effects of the experience on Americans' ability to come together and collectively uphold a common set of civic values.

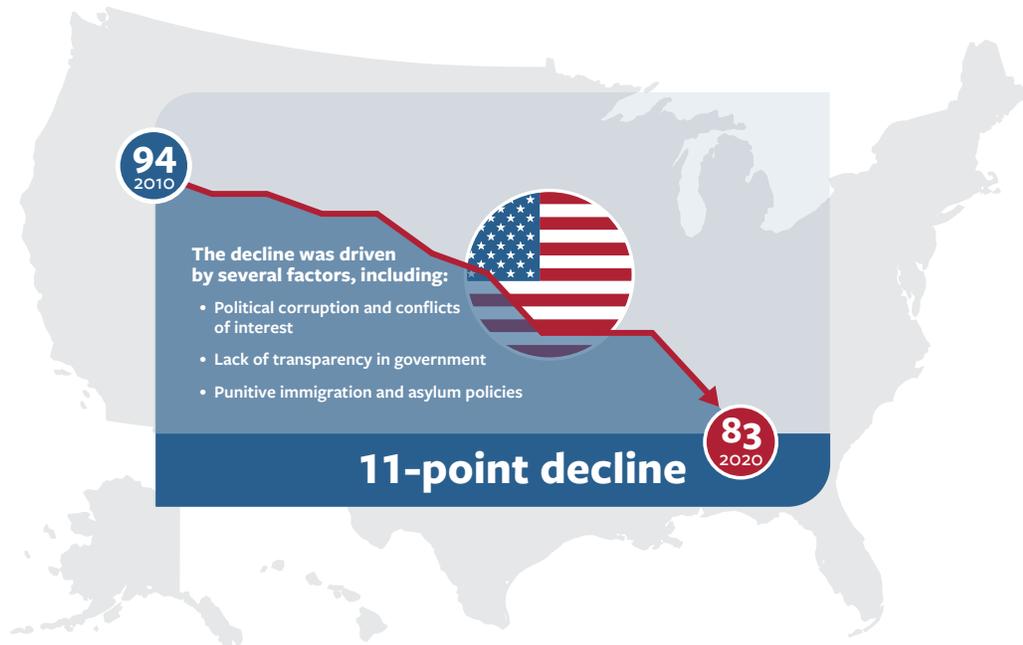
The exposure of US democracy's vulnerabilities has grave implications for the cause of global freedom. Rulers and propagandists in authoritarian states have always pointed to America's domestic flaws to deflect attention from their own abuses, but the events of the past year will give them ample new fodder for this tactic, and the evidence they cite will remain in the world's collective memory for a long time to come. After the Capitol riot, a spokesperson from the Russian foreign ministry stated, "The events in Washington



A protester carries a version of the Belarusian flag favored by the democratic opposition during a demonstration in Minsk against the fraudulent August 2020 presidential election. Image credit: Sergei Bobylev/TASS via Getty Images

## UNITED STATES IN DECLINE

Over the past 10 years, the United States' aggregate *Freedom in the World* score has declined by 11 points, placing it among the 25 countries that have suffered the largest declines in this period.



Note: The US received a score of 94 in the 2011 edition of *Freedom in the World*, covering the events of 2010. It received a score of 83 in the 2021 edition, covering 2020. All scores are on a scale of 0 to 100.

show that the US electoral process is archaic, does not meet modern standards, and is prone to violations.” Zimbabwe’s president said the incident “showed that the US has no moral right to punish another nation under the guise of upholding democracy.”

For most of the past 75 years, despite many mistakes, the United States has aspired to a foreign policy based on democratic principles and support for human rights. When adhered to, these guiding lights have enabled the United States to act as a leader on the global stage, pressuring offenders to reform, encouraging activists to continue their fight, and rallying partners to act in concert. After four years of neglect, contradiction, or outright abandonment under Trump, President Biden has indicated that his administration will return to that tradition. But to rebuild credibility in such an endeavor and garner the domestic support necessary to sustain it, the United States needs to improve its own democracy. It must strengthen institutions enough to survive another assault, protect the electoral system from foreign

and domestic interference, address the structural roots of extremism and polarization, and uphold the rights and freedoms of all people, not just a privileged few.

Everyone benefits when the United States serves as a positive model, and the country itself reaps ample returns from a more democratic world. Such a world generates more trade and fairer markets for US goods and services, as well as more reliable allies for collective defense. A global environment where freedom flourishes is more friendly, stable, and secure, with fewer military conflicts and less displacement of refugees and asylum seekers. It also serves as an effective check against authoritarian actors who are only too happy to fill the void.

### The long arm of COVID-19

Since it spread around the world in early 2020, COVID-19 has exacerbated the global decline in freedom. The outbreak exposed weaknesses across all the pillars of democracy, from

elections and the rule of law to egregiously disproportionate restrictions on freedoms of assembly and movement. Both democracies and dictatorships experienced successes and failures in their battle with the virus itself, though citizens in authoritarian states had fewer tools to resist and correct harmful policies. Ultimately, the changes precipitated by the pandemic left many societies—with varied regime types, income levels, and demographics—in worse political condition; with more pronounced racial, ethnic, and gender inequalities; and vulnerable to long-term effects.

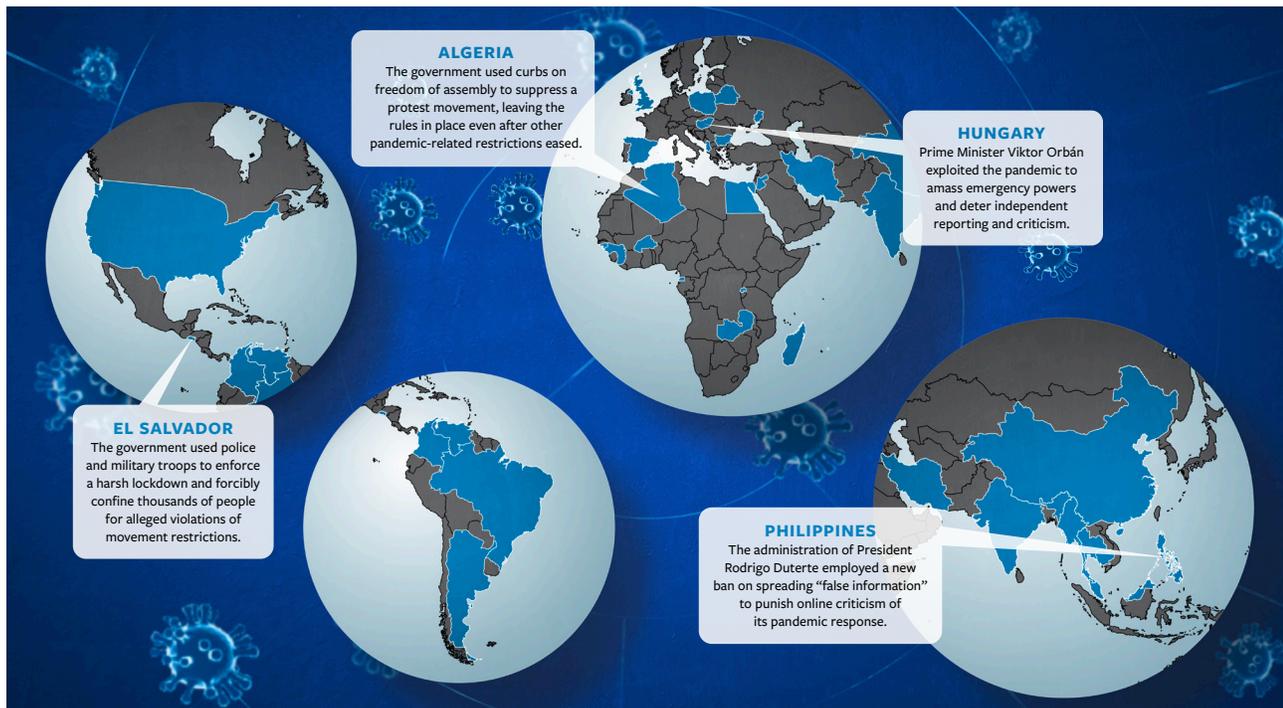
Transparency was one of the hardest-hit aspects of democratic governance. National and local officials in China assiduously obstructed information about the outbreak, including by carrying out mass arrests of internet users who shared related information. In December, citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was sentenced to four years in prison for her reporting from Wuhan, the initial epicenter. The Belarusian government actively downplayed the seriousness of the

pandemic to the public, refusing to take action, while the Iranian regime concealed the true toll of the virus on its people. Some highly repressive governments, including those of Turkmenistan and Nicaragua, simply ignored reality and denied the presence of the pathogen in their territory. More open political systems also experienced significant transparency problems. At the presidential level and in a number of states and localities, officials in the United States obscured data and actively sowed misinformation about the transmission and treatment of the coronavirus, leading to widespread confusion and the politicization of what should have been a public health matter. Similarly, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly downplayed the harms of COVID-19, promoted unproven treatments, criticized subnational governments' health measures, and sowed doubt about the utility of masks and vaccines.

Freedom of personal expression, which has experienced the largest declines of any democracy indicator since 2012, was

## THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

Many governments withheld or distorted crucial information, imposed excessive or abusive lockdown rules, or used COVID-19 as cover to consolidate power and suppress dissent. Some of these developments could have an impact on democracy that outlasts the pandemic itself.



The map highlights countries that suffered score declines related to the pandemic in *Freedom in the World 2021*.

further restrained during the health crisis. In the midst of a heavy-handed lockdown in the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte, the authorities stepped up harassment and arrests of social media users, including those who criticized the government's pandemic response. Cambodia's authoritarian prime minister, Hun Sen, presided over the arrests of numerous people for allegedly spreading false information linked to the virus and criticizing the state's performance. Governments around the world also deployed [intrusive surveillance tools](#) that were often of dubious value to public health and featured few safeguards against abuse.

But beyond their impact in 2020, official responses to COVID-19 have laid the groundwork for government excesses that could affect democracy for years to come. As with the response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the United States and many other countries dramatically expanded their surveillance activities and restricted due process rights in the name of national security, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a shift in norms and the adoption of problematic legislation that will be challenging to reverse after the virus has been contained.

In Hungary, for example, a series of emergency measures allowed the government to rule by decree despite the fact that coronavirus cases were negligible in the country until

the fall. Among other misuses of these new powers, the government withdrew financial assistance from municipalities led by opposition parties. The push for greater executive authority was in keeping with the gradual concentration of power that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been orchestrating over the past decade. An indicative move came in December, when the pliant parliament approved constitutional amendments that transferred public assets into the hands of institutions headed by ruling-party loyalists, reduced independent oversight of government spending, and pandered to the ruling party's base by effectively barring same-sex couples from adopting children.

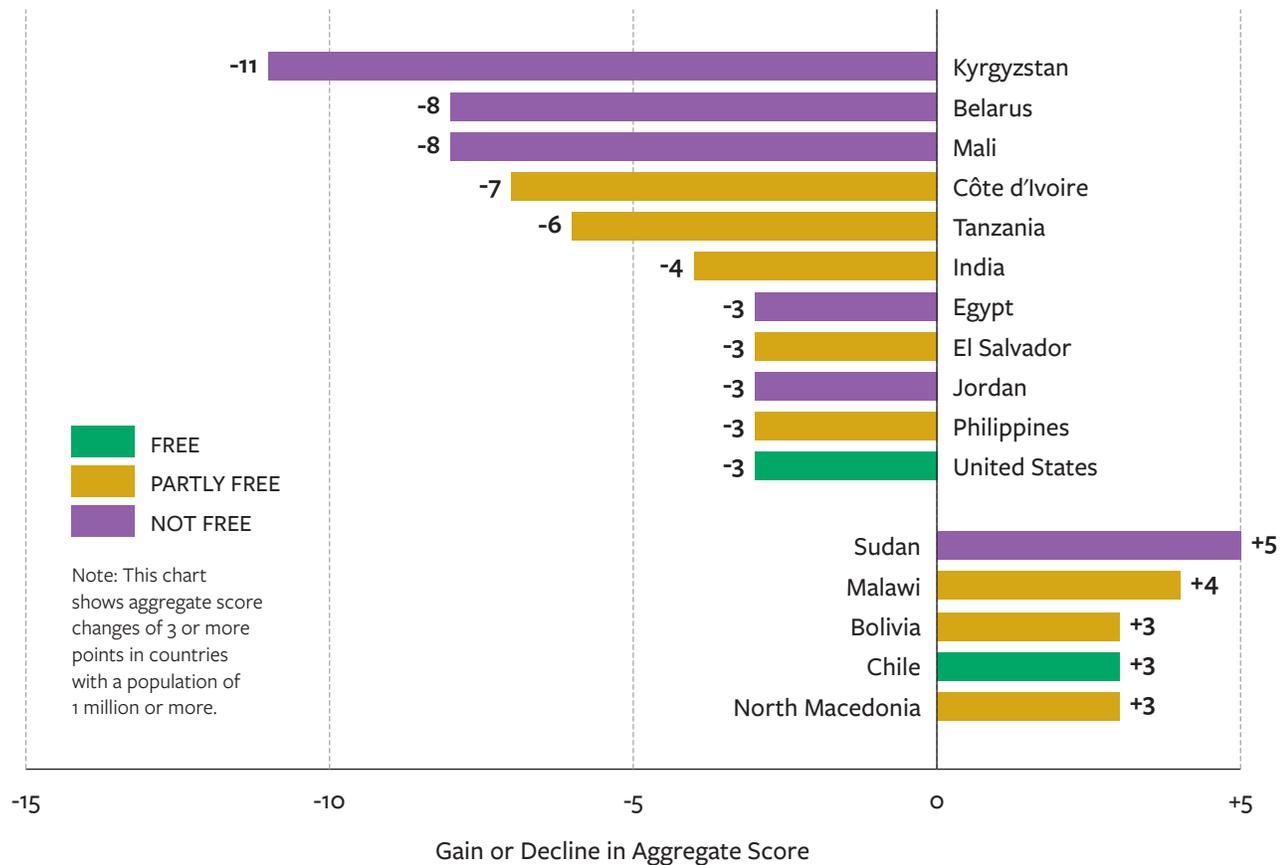
In Algeria, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who had recently taken office through a tightly controlled election after longtime authoritarian leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned under public pressure, banned all forms of mass gatherings in March. Even as other restrictions were eased in June, the prohibition on assembly remained in place, and authorities stepped up arrests of activists associated with the prodemocracy protest movement. Many of the arrests were based on April amendments to the penal code, which had been adopted under the cover of the COVID-19 response. The amended code increased prison sentences for defamation and criminalized the spread of false information, with higher penalties during a health or



Congressional aides arrive with ballot boxes during a joint session of the US Congress to certify the results of the presidential election in January 2021. Image credit: Tom Williams via Getty Images

## LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2020

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



other type of emergency—provisions that could continue to suppress critical speech in the future.

Indonesia turned to the military and other security forces as key players in its pandemic response. Multiple military figures were appointed to leading positions on the country’s COVID-19 task force, and the armed services provided essential support in developing emergency hospitals and securing medical supplies. In recent years, observers have raised concerns about the military’s growing influence over civilian governance, and its heavy involvement in the health crisis threatened to accelerate this trend. Meanwhile, restrictions on freedoms of expression and association have worsened over time, pushing the country’s scores deeper into the Partly Free range.

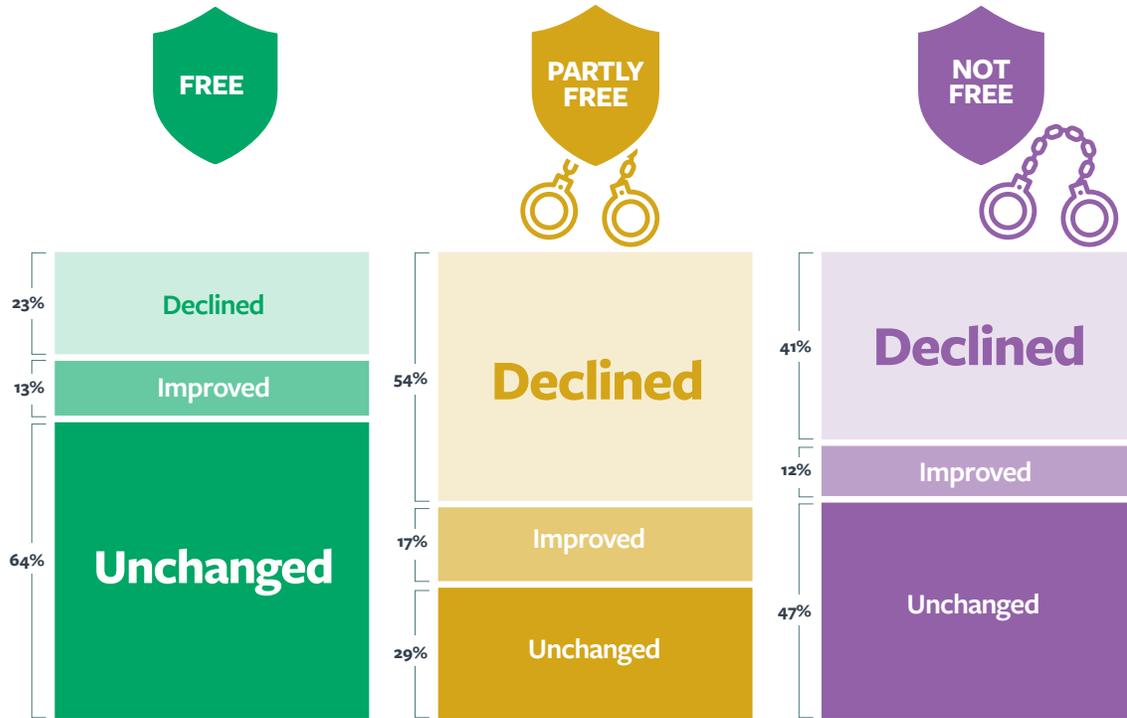
In Sri Lanka, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved the parliament in early March, intending to hold elections the following month. The pandemic delayed the vote,

however, giving Rajapaksa the opportunity to rule virtually unchecked and consolidate power through various ministerial appointments. After his party swept the August elections, the new parliament approved constitutional amendments that expanded presidential authority, including by allowing Rajapaksa to appoint electoral, police, human rights, and anticorruption commissions. The changes also permitted the chief executive to hold ministerial positions and dissolve the legislature after it has served just half of its term.

The public health crisis is causing a major economic crisis, as countries around the world fall into recession and millions of people are left unemployed. Marginalized populations are bearing the brunt of both the virus and its economic impact, which has exacerbated income inequality, among other disparities. In general, countries with wider income gaps have weaker protections for basic rights, suggesting that the economic fallout from the

## THE RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRACY

Democracies and dictatorships alike have been affected by a global decline in freedom over the past 15 years. But in 2020 most Free countries resisted further declines, while many Partly Free and Not Free countries could not.



The columns show the percentage of countries in each category that received a score decline, a score improvement, or no score change for events in 2020, according to *Freedom in the World 2021*.

pandemic could have harmful implications for democracy. The global financial crisis of 2008–09 was notably followed by political instability and a deepening of the democratic decline.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the only current global emergency that has the potential to hasten the erosion of democracy. The effects of climate change could have a similar long-term impact, with mass displacement fueling conflict and more nationalist, xenophobic, and racist policies. Numerous other, less predictable crises could also surface, including new health emergencies. Democracy’s advocates need to learn from the experience of 2020 and prepare for emergency responses that respect the political rights and civil liberties of all people, including the most marginalized.

### The resilience of democracy

A litany of setbacks and catastrophes for freedom dominated the news in 2020. But democracy is remarkably resilient, and has proven its ability to rebound from repeated blows.

A prime example can be found in Malawi, which made important gains during the year. The Malawian people have endured a low-performing democratic system that struggled to contain a succession of corrupt and heavy-handed leaders. Although mid-2019 national elections that handed victory to the incumbent president were initially deemed credible by local and international observers, the count was marred by evidence that Tipp-Ex correction fluid was used to alter vote tabulation sheets. The election commission declined to call for a new vote, but opposition candidates took the case to the constitutional court. The court resisted bribery

attempts and issued a landmark ruling in February 2020, ordering fresh elections. Opposition presidential candidate Lazarus Chakwera won the June rerun vote by a comfortable margin, proving that independent institutions can hold abuse of power in check. While Malawi is a country of 19 million people, the story of its election rerun has wider implications, as courts in other African states have asserted their independence in recent years, and the nullification of a flawed election—for only the second time in the continent’s history—will not go unnoticed.

Taiwan overcame another set of challenges in 2020, suppressing the coronavirus with remarkable effectiveness and without resorting to abusive methods, even as it continued to shrug off threats from an increasingly aggressive regime in China. Taiwan, like its neighbors, benefited from prior experience with SARS, but its handling of COVID-19 largely respected civil liberties. Early implementation of expert recommendations, the deployment of masks and other protective equipment, and efficient contact-tracing and testing efforts that prioritized transparency—combined with the country’s island geography—all helped to control the disease. Meanwhile, Beijing escalated its campaign to sway global opinion against Taiwan’s government and deny the success of its democracy, in part by successfully pressuring the World Health Organization to ignore early warnings of human-to-human transmission from Taiwan and to exclude

Taiwan from its World Health Assembly. Even before the virus struck, Taiwanese voters defied a multipronged, politicized disinformation campaign from China and overwhelmingly reelected incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen, who opposes moves toward unification with the mainland.

More broadly, democracy has demonstrated its adaptability under the unique constraints of a world afflicted by COVID-19. A number of successful elections were held across all regions and in countries at all income levels, including in Montenegro, and in Bolivia, yielding improvements. Judicial bodies in many settings, such as The Gambia, have held leaders to account for abuses of power, providing meaningful checks on the executive branch and contributing to slight global gains for judicial independence over the past four years. At the same time, journalists in even the most repressive environments like China sought to shed light on government transgressions, and ordinary people from Bulgaria to India to Brazil continued to express discontent on topics ranging from corruption and systemic inequality to the mishandling of the health crisis, letting their leaders know that the desire for democratic governance will not be easily quelled.

The Biden administration has pledged to make support for democracy a key part of US foreign policy, raising hopes for a more proactive American role in reversing the global



A man in Sri Lanka reads a newspaper with a headline on President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s decision to dissolve Parliament in March 2020. Image credit: LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI/AFP via Getty Images

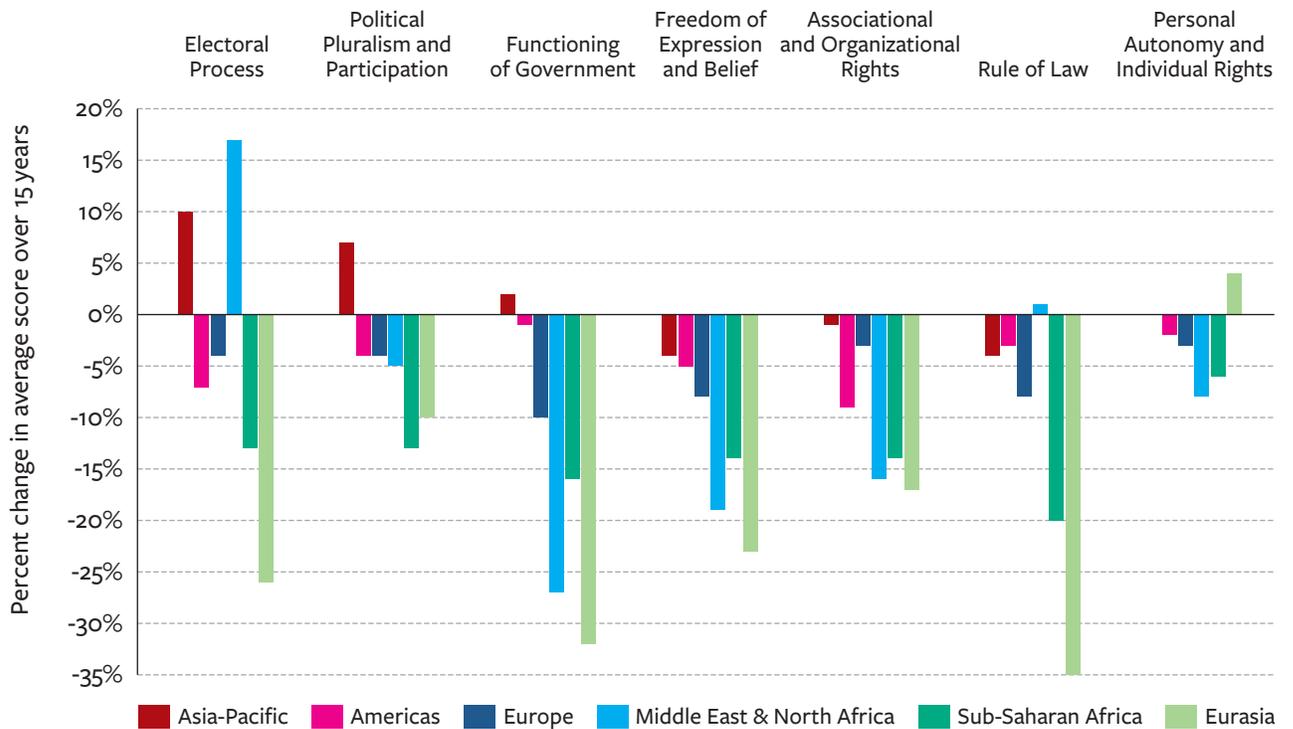
democratic decline. To fulfill this promise, the president will need to provide clear leadership, articulating his goals to the American public and to allies overseas. He must also make the United States credible in its efforts by implementing the reforms necessary to address considerable democratic deficits at home. Given many competing priorities, including the pandemic and its socioeconomic aftermath, President Biden will have to remain steadfast, keeping in mind that democracy

is a continuous project of renewal that ultimately ensures security and prosperity while upholding the fundamental rights of all people.

Democracy today is beleaguered but not defeated. Its enduring popularity in a more hostile world and its perseverance after a devastating year are signals of resilience that bode well for the future of freedom.

## DECLINES ACROSS THE BOARD

The 15 years of decline have affected all regions and *Freedom in the World* subcategories.



## From Blogger to Civil Society Leader: Ethiopia's Befekadu Hailu

In 2011, Befekadu Hailu started a [blog](#). Though now a cofounder of Ethiopia's Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), he didn't start writing with activism in mind; rather, Befekadu just wanted a place to share his thoughts about human rights and the prospect of democracy in Ethiopia.

In entries layered with Ethiopian history, poetry, and UN statistics, Befekadu called out mismanagement and oppression by authorities and detailed the lack of protection for Ethiopians' basic rights. In response, the authoritarian government promptly blocked the blog.

The act of censorship awakened Befekadu to the gravity of threats to human rights and democracy in Ethiopia. From that moment, his civic involvement grew. Authorities again took notice, at one point jailing him for 18 months on trumped-up terrorism and conspiracy charges, along with other members of the prodemocracy and human rights bloggers' collective known as Zone 9.

In 2018, following several years of antigovernment protests and leadership turnover, the ruling party announced that it would pursue democratic reforms, which included repealing a repressive law that for decades had stifled freedom of expression and assembly. The door opened for a more vibrant civil society in Ethiopia, and Befekadu's work evolved beyond individual and informal group activism. In 2019, he and his fellow organizers took their largest step yet toward, in his words, "institutionalized" advocacy by founding CARD, which elevates the needs and voices of local people as part of a rights-centered approach to advancing Ethiopian democracy.

The road to an open democratic society, however, is long and winding. In a recent conversation with Freedom House, Befekadu outlined what he believes are the three biggest threats to Ethiopia's burgeoning democracy—foundering institutions, coordinated disinformation, and a weak culture of civic engagement—and described the increasing toxicity of Ethiopian politics over the past year.

The government's more tolerant attitude has faded since the democratic reforms of 2018, Befekadu noted, pointing to the imprisonment of political opposition leaders and journalists critical of the government. More recently, a government-led incursion into the Tigray Region has displaced tens of



Rights activist Befekadu Hailu, cofounder of Ethiopia's Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD). Credit: Mahlet Teshome.

thousands of people, leading to untold civilian casualties, and has featured mass arrests and the detention of more journalists as they attempt to cover the conflict. These events have discouraged open activism not just at CARD, but among rights advocates across the country.

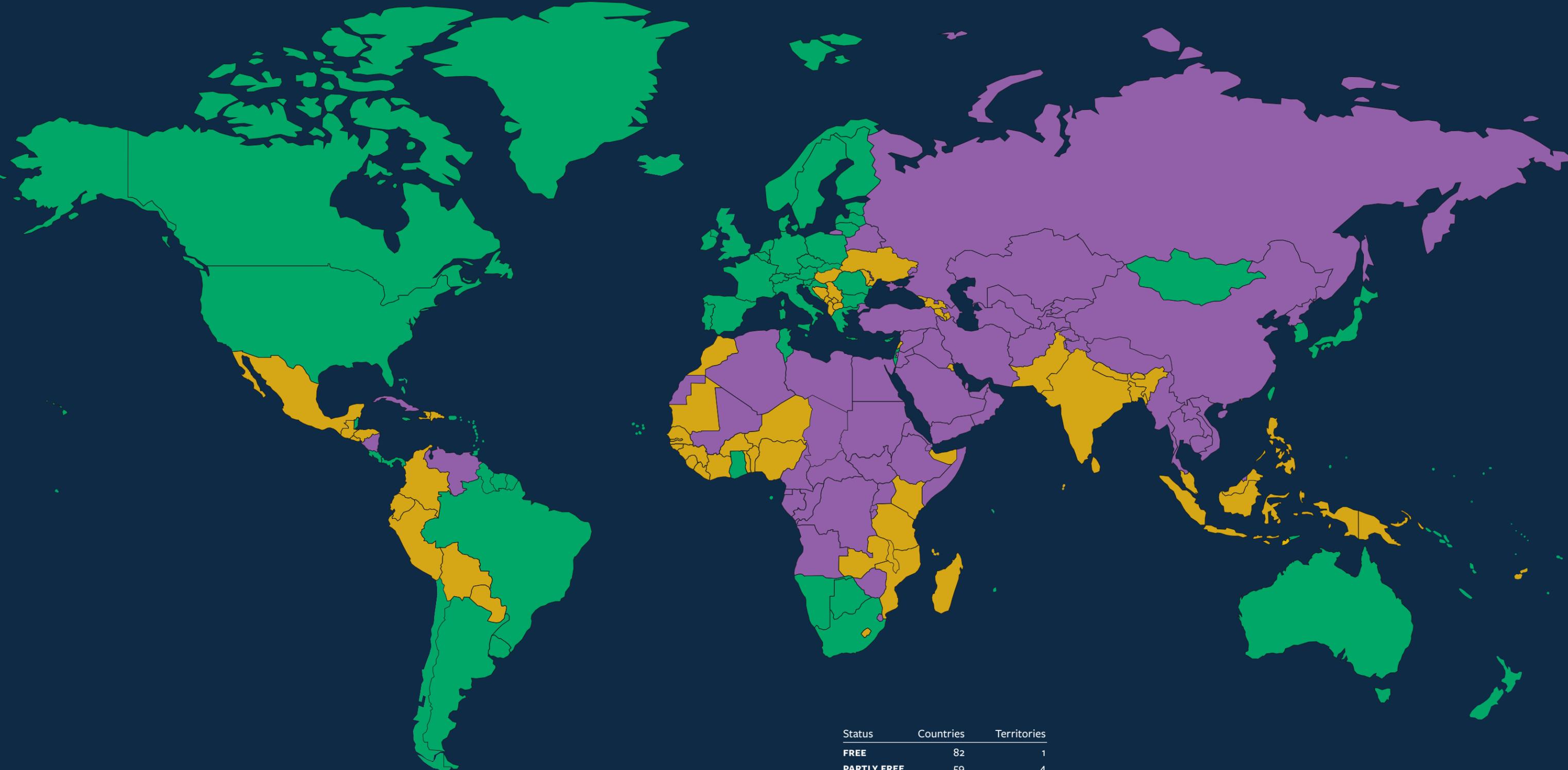
"The smear campaign and misinformation propaganda of both state and nonstate actors has forced us to censor our public advocacy," he said. To cope, CARD has shifted away from using social media and online tools in their work, preferring to engage face-to-face with young people, activists, and the media.

Despite the challenges, Befekadu is hopeful for the country's future, and CARD is hard at work teaching conflict-sensitive civic engagement strategies and combating misinformation and hate speech. They are also taking action to mitigate threats of violence ahead of Ethiopia's national elections in June, sharing concerns and early warning signs with the country's election board, human rights commission, and other stakeholders; conducting media literacy programs; running a voter education program; and taking part in an election observation mission.

"The motive for political participation has been fast increasing in the past half decade," said Befekadu. He is hopeful that young Ethiopians will demand further policy liberalization, but recognizes the role of civil society in providing tools so that engagement is civil and well-informed.

Freedom House is proud to be among those supporting Befekadu and CARD's ongoing drive to empower a new generation of rights defenders and advocates for Ethiopian democracy.

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021



■ FREE   
 ■ PARTLY FREE   
 ■ NOT FREE

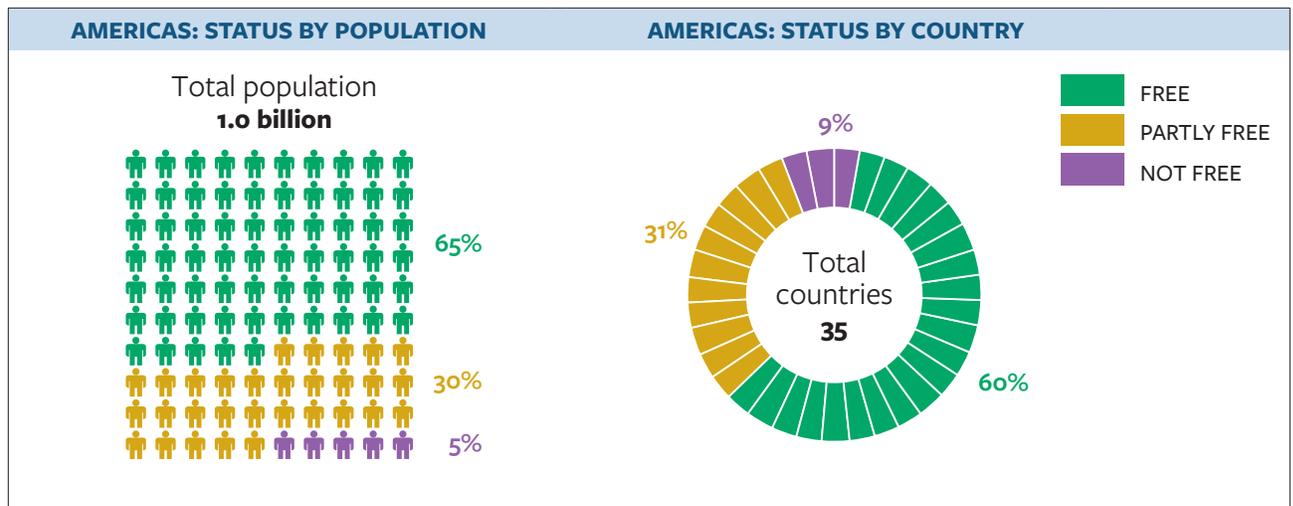
Status	Countries	Territories
<b>FREE</b>	82	1
<b>PARTLY FREE</b>	59	4
<b>NOT FREE</b>	54	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>15</b>

*Freedom in the World 2021* assessed 210 countries and territories around the globe.

# Regional Trends

## AMERICAS:

*Lockdown violence, free speech restrictions, and legislative tumult*



People in a number of countries in the Americas faced violence and other abuses in the enforcement of harsh COVID-19 lockdowns. Police and military units in El Salvador and Venezuela reportedly engaged in arbitrary detentions and torture, while paramilitary groups policed civilian movement in Venezuela and Colombia. Even in Argentina, where democratic institutions are stronger, reports emerged of police firing rubber bullets at alleged quarantine breakers. Separately, the president of Mexico downplayed the harms of the coronavirus, leaving citizens with less access to life-saving information and resources.

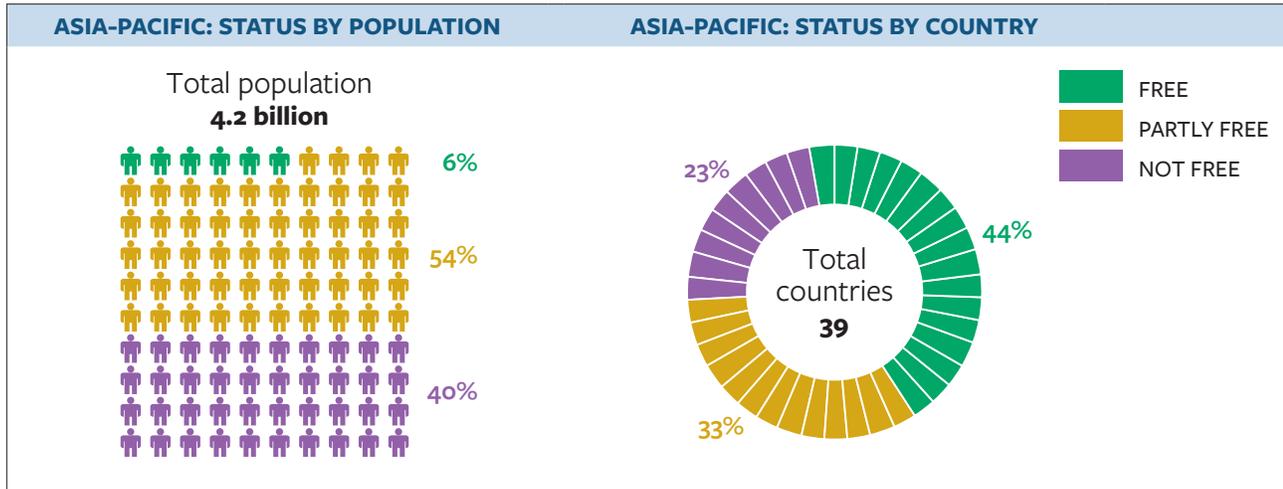
Freedom of expression suffered elsewhere in the region. Cuban authorities unleashed a wave of intimidation, arbitrary detentions, and illegal house arrests against independent journalists and a group of dissident artists with whom the government had at one point promised an open dialogue. A harsh new cybercrimes law in Nicaragua mandated prison sentences for spreading “false information” online.

Flawed voting and political dysfunction prompted concern in some settings. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele shocked the country by ordering troops into the parliament

in an attempt to secure extra funding for security forces. Guyana’s legislative elections were marred by media bias and interference with the tabulation that favored the incumbent government, though a recount ordered by the Supreme Court eventually confirmed an opposition victory. Peru was rocked by the Congress’s impeachment of one president on dubious grounds, followed a week later by the resignation of his replacement under intense public pressure. The chaotic events, which were seen as a blow to anticorruption efforts, resulted in a status decline from Free to Partly Free for Peru.

In a more positive development, Suriname emerged from the domineering rule of President Dési Bouterse after he was ousted in May elections, and the new government operated with greater transparency. Similarly, the presidential election in Bolivia was administered impartially, and the results were recognized by all competing parties, capping a period of serious political turmoil. And in Chile, following 2019 protests against inequality that featured property destruction and police violence, an overwhelming majority of voters approved the creation of a constitutional convention tasked with replacing the existing charter, which had originally been drafted under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

# ASIA-PACIFIC: Growing threats to expression and assembly

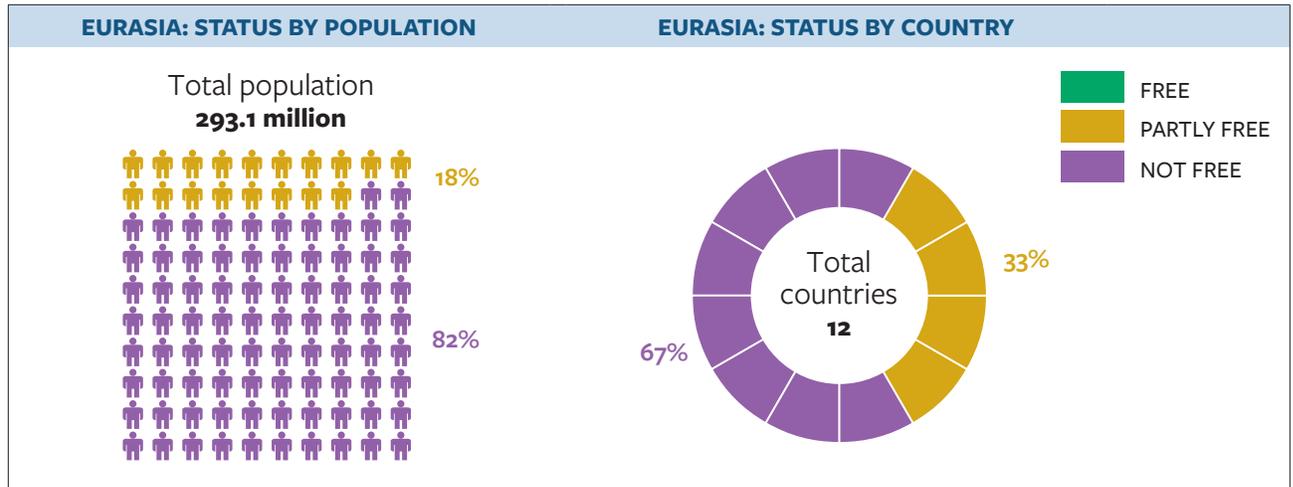


Cambodia’s one-party legislature adopted a new emergency law that effectively empowered the government to surveil and arrest anyone who expresses dissent. Students and academics in Indonesia were arrested and beaten by authorities seeking to discourage public criticism of the government on a variety of issues. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte’s government shuttered a major broadcaster, arrested social media users for critical posts during the pandemic, and adopted a vaguely worded new antiterrorism law that allowed people to be arbitrarily labeled as terrorists and detained without a warrant or charges, including for speech-related offenses.

Authorities in several countries restricted public assembly. Even before the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, students

and activists there experienced a uptick in detentions for their involvement in public protests during 2020, while an extended internet shutdown in Rakhine State made it difficult for people to organize online and gather in public. Increasing arrests and prosecutions in Singapore have left residents less able to protest without a permit, and demonstrations by migrant workers in the Maldives led to arrests and deportations. Protests in Thailand calling for democratic reforms were met with arrests and use of water cannons against demonstrators. The Thai military’s violent crackdown on dissent and the abolition of a popular opposition party reversed previous democratic progress, and as a result Thailand’s status changed from Partly Free to Not Free.

## EURASIA: Power grabs, stalled reforms, and armed conflict



Blatantly fraudulent parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan touched off protests that were quickly co-opted by criminal elements, and Sadyr Japarov—a nationalist politician serving time on a kidnapping conviction—seized power as both prime minister and president. At year’s end, Japarov had advanced a new draft constitution that could reshape Kyrgyzstan’s political system in the mold of its authoritarian neighbors. The country earned an 11-point score decline—the largest in *Freedom in the World 2021*—and its status declined to Not Free.

The second-largest decline in this year’s report occurred in Belarus, which lost eight points as security forces attempted to crush antigovernment demonstrations triggered by the fraudulent reelection of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The crackdown left a handful of protesters dead and hundreds at risk of torture in the country’s jails.

Other problematic elections took place across the region. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin was handed the right to stay in power through 2036 in a rigged referendum, with official results showing 78 percent approval. Comparatively free but flawed parliamentary elections in Georgia deepened that

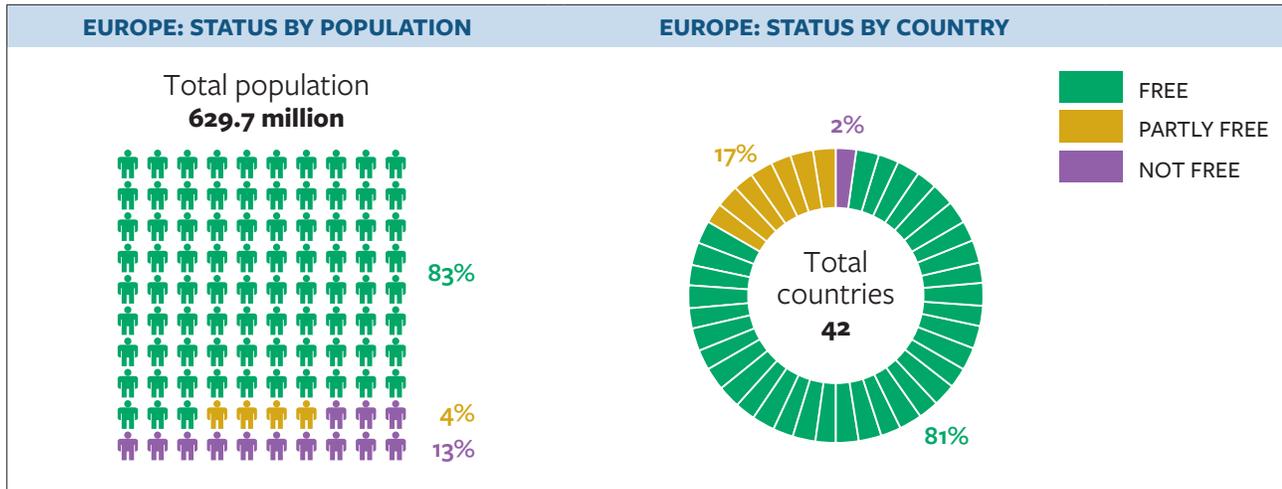
country’s political crisis, as the second round of voting was boycotted by the opposition.

In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s reform campaign faltered in the face of the pandemic and political corruption, culminating in a constitutional crisis. Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan made some headway in his reform drive, but the consensus behind his government was shattered by defeat in the autumn war with Azerbaijan.

That war brought death and despair to Nagorno-Karabakh, just months after the unrecognized territory held historically competitive elections. These gains evaporated amid the fighting, which claimed scores of civilian lives and led to an exodus of much of the ethnic Armenian population.

COVID-19 inflicted suffering everywhere, although the notoriously opaque government of Turkmenistan remained in denial, claiming implausibly that the country was free of the virus. Among the pandemic’s other effects on human rights across the region, separatist authorities closed down humanitarian corridors into the breakaway regions of Eastern Donbas in Ukraine and South Ossetia in Georgia.

## EUROPE: *Democracies wilt under the pandemic*



COVID-19 placed the democracies of Europe, the top-performing region in *Freedom in the World 2021*, under severe strain. Leaders confronted hard choices, postponing elections and locking down cities, and their decisions were implemented imperfectly: enforcement of restrictions on movement, for example, often discriminated against marginalized groups, including immigrants in France and Roma in Bulgaria. As they failed to contain the virus, many governments, including those of the United Kingdom and Spain, sought to limit public scrutiny of their decision-making processes, while inadequate labor protections in the Netherlands and elsewhere compounded the risk of illness for low-wage workers.

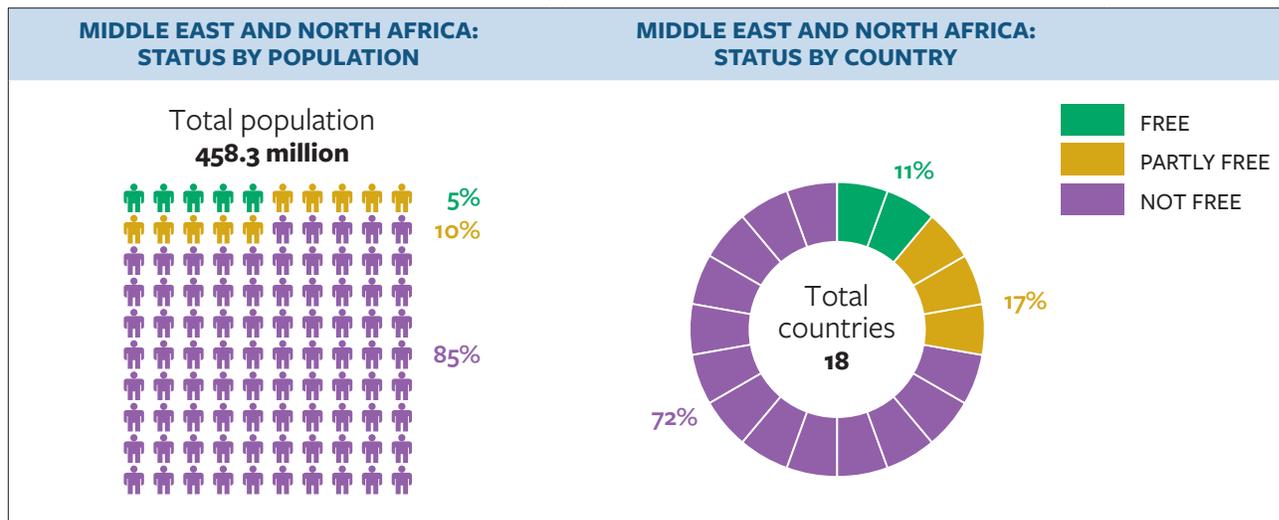
In countries where democratic institutions were already under attack, right-wing populists actively exploited the pandemic. Hungary’s parliament handed expansive emergency powers to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, ostensibly so the government could better respond to COVID-19. In Poland, the ruling party cited the health crisis as justification for an illegal, last-minute attempt to bypass the electoral commission and unilaterally arrange postal voting for the presidential election.

Though this failed and the election was held at a later date, it was marred by the misuse of state resources and criminal charges against LGBT+ activists.

The Western Balkans saw both setbacks and progress. Flawed parliamentary elections dealt a grievous blow to Serbia’s multiparty system. In Kosovo, the political old guard ousted Prime Minister Albin Kurti’s short-lived government and formed a new one, unconstitutionally. Conversely, Montenegro bucked a six-year string of score declines, as elections resulted in the first transfer of power to the opposition in the country’s independent history. North Macedonia’s reformist government was reelected, and its institutions have largely recovered from damage inflicted by the fugitive former prime minister, Nikola Gruevski.

To the southeast, Turkey’s government continued to clamp down on domestic dissent and intervened in the presidential vote of the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Along the Turkish-Greek border, migrants and refugees endured violent “pushbacks,” a phenomenon also seen on the Croatian-Bosnian border.

## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: COVID-19 crackdowns and unaccountable regimes



A number of governments in the Middle East and North Africa took advantage of the pandemic to tamp down protests. In Jordan, emergency laws enacted in response to the pandemic were among those used to detain thousands of teachers who participated in massive strikes and protests led by the Teachers' Syndicate, which was ultimately dissolved. In light of its blanket ban on protests and the closure of the union, as well as an electoral framework that gave significant advantages to progovernment forces during the year's elections, Jordan's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free.

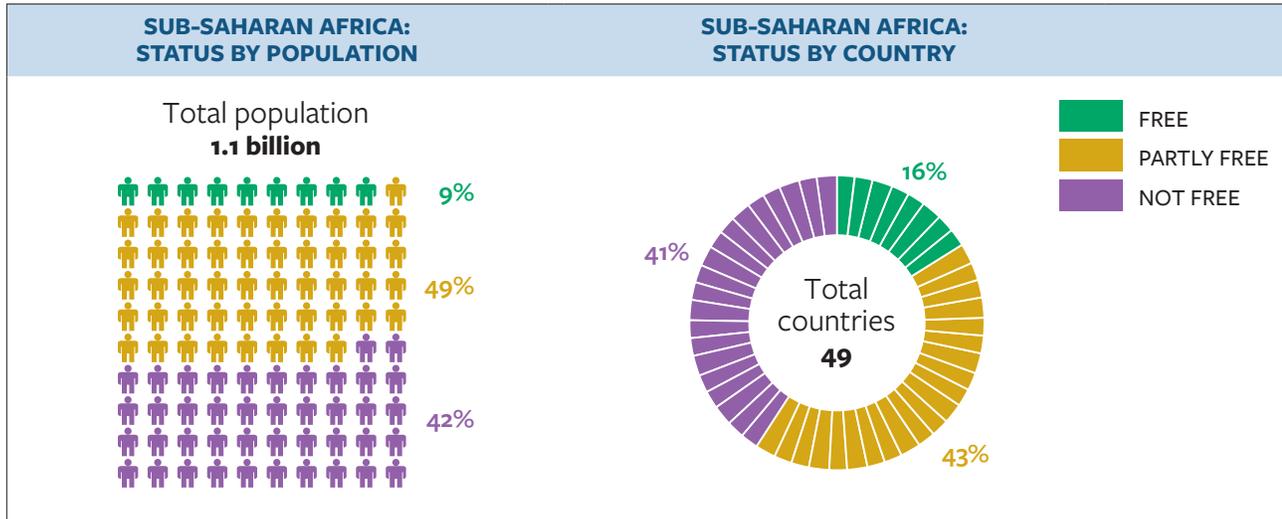
The Iranian regime was especially opaque in its response to COVID-19, using censorship and prosecutions to suppress independent reporting on the true extent of one of the region's largest early outbreaks. Similar tactics were employed to contain information about the previous year's bloody

crackdown on antigovernment protests and the security forces' accidental destruction of a civilian airliner in January.

Lack of state accountability was also linked to the loss of human life in Lebanon, where a series of government failures led to a tremendous chemical explosion in Beirut's port complex that killed scores of people, injured thousands, and inflicted massive structural damage across the city. An investigation into the blast encountered considerable resistance from incumbent political forces.

The steady collapse of freedom in Egypt continued for the eighth straight year, as the regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi stage-managed parliamentary elections and worked to silence the country's remaining independent journalists and civil society activists, including by harassing the Egypt-based families of dissidents living abroad.

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: *Isolated gains amid broader democratic backsliding*

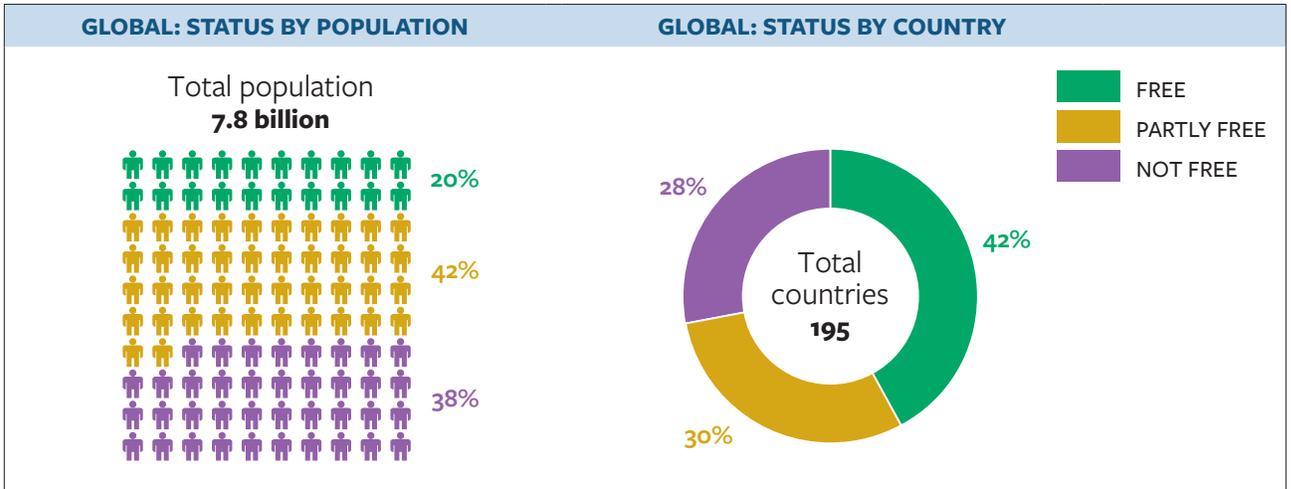


Important democratic progress was reported in Malawi, which held its successful rerun of the flawed 2019 elections, and Sudan, whose ongoing reforms improved academic freedom, banned female genital mutilation, and repealed a law restricting women’s travel abroad. Nevertheless, a larger number of countries registered declines due to new limits on freedom of movement as well as violent, fraudulent elections that extended incumbent presidents’ already lengthy tenures.

Elections in Tanzania and the Central African Republic, for example, were characterized by government repression and violence. The presidential election in Togo was marred by accusations of fraud, with only a small pool of observers allowed to monitor the flawed process that handed President Faure Gnassingbé his fourth term in office. Accusations of fraud and the use of COVID-19 restrictions to hinder voter registration cast doubt on the presidential election in Guinea, where the incumbent secured a third term after engineering a referendum to lift term limits. In Côte d’Ivoire, where President Alassane Ouattara also claimed a constitutionally dubious third term after a favorable court ruling on the matter, some citizens were excluded from the election

through the closure of polling stations, while others faced intimidation from the police, military, and ruling-party allies. Mali’s democratically elected leaders were overthrown in a military coup, and its status declined from Partly Free to Not Free as a result.

Forced displacement and restrictions on freedom of movement contributed to score declines in five countries, including Ethiopia, where the conflict in the Tigray Region forced tens of thousands of people from their homes. In Cameroon, conflict between the government and separatist groups also pushed people out of their communities, with the separatists enforcing their own movement restrictions and targeting students and teachers in Anglophone regions. Violence and forced displacement expanded in Mozambique, whose Cabo Delgado Province has been the site of a growing insurgency. Burkina Faso was also under attack by Islamist insurgents, and its population had to contend with abusive progovernment paramilitaries and disproportionate COVID-19 restrictions as well. Rwanda’s public health rules were aggressively implemented, with scores of people arrested and abused in custody.



## Freedom in the World 2021 Status Changes

### India

India's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters.

### Jordan

Jordan's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to harsh new restrictions on freedom of assembly, a crackdown on the teachers' union following a series of strikes and protests, and factors including a lack of adequate preparations that harmed the quality of parliamentary elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because the aftermath of deeply flawed parliamentary elections featured significant political violence and intimidation that culminated in the irregular seizure of power by a nationalist leader and convicted felon who had been freed from prison by supporters.

### Mali

Mali's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to legislative elections that were marred by political violence and a subsequent military coup that removed the country's elected civilian leadership.

### Peru

Peru's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to extended political clashes between the presidency and Congress since 2017 that have heavily disrupted governance and anticorruption efforts, strained the country's constitutional order, and resulted in an irregular succession of four presidents within three years.

### Seychelles

The Seychelles' status improved from Partly Free to Free because a strengthened electoral framework contributed to a more open and competitive presidential election, resulting in the country's first transfer of power to an opposition party.

### Thailand

Thailand's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the dissolution of a popular opposition party that had performed well in the 2019 elections, and the military-dominated government's crackdown on youth-led protests calling for democratic reforms.

### Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the authorities' intensifying persecution of opposition figures and civic activists.

## Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries—and one territory—featured important developments in 2020 that affected their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny in 2021.

 **Armenia:** Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's reformist government is in political jeopardy as the country grapples with the fallout from the war with Azerbaijan.

 **Côte d'Ivoire:** President Alassane Ouattara defied constitutional term limits and secured election to a third term in a process marred by candidate disqualifications, an opposition boycott, and widespread political violence.

 **El Salvador:** President Nayib Bukele has used security forces to strongarm the parliament and enforce brutal pandemic-related restrictions on movement.

 **Ethiopia:** The initially reformist government responded to political and ethnic unrest with mass arrests and a military offensive in the Tigray Region, leading to widespread and egregious human rights violations.

 **Hong Kong:** Beijing's imposition of a draconian National Security Law in 2020 has resulted in arrests of prodemocracy activists, increased self-censorship, and a weakening of due process safeguards.

 **Jordan:** Authorities disbanded a major teachers' union and enforced excessive restrictions on assembly during the pandemic, suppressing dissent and harming the quality of parliamentary elections.

 **Malawi:** A flawed 2019 election was annulled by the Constitutional Court, the rerun election was better managed, and the resulting government made progress in fighting corruption.

 **North Macedonia:** The recently reelected government of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has reversed years of democratic backsliding, but the country continues to be denied a chance to join the European Union.

 **Peru:** The dubious impeachment of one president was quickly followed by the resignation of his replacement, highlighting deep political dysfunction that has disrupted anticorruption efforts.

 **Sri Lanka:** A pandemic-related delay in elections allowed President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to rule without a legislature for five months, and once elected, the new parliament approved constitutional amendments to expand the president's authority.

### Worst of the Worst

Of the 54 countries designated as Not Free, the following 12 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

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

## Policy Recommendations

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### NURTURING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

#### For Democracies

**Support civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy.** Peaceful protest movements calling for reform can drive long-term democratic change, but face greater 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 human rights defenders who come under threat or attack for their work or who are in immediate danger.

**Support free and independent media, and protect access to information.** Providing the public with access to fact-based information about current events is one of the best ways to combat authoritarian power, and, during a pandemic, it is essential to combatting mis- and disinformation and protecting public health. As part of the [Democracy Under Lockdown](#) report, Freedom House surveyed democracy and human rights experts working in over 100 countries, asking how democratic governments can help support democracy and human rights during the pandemic. Providing the public with access to fact-based information was a top response. Support for media—including financial assistance, technical support, skills training, and mentoring—was another frequently identified need of survey respondents. In order to keep citizens informed, governments and internet service providers should also make every effort to support and maintain reliable access to the internet. In the United States, the proposed Universal Press Freedom Act 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. The US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which operates the United States' five publicly funded media organizations,

should ensure editorial independence at these organizations by restoring the “firewall rule.” This rule, which protected against political interference in news reporting by agency leadership, was repealed in December.

**Emphasize democracy-strengthening programs in foreign assistance.** People across the world have benefitted from government investment in strengthening democratic movements, systems, and institutions. Yet authoritarian regimes are becoming more sophisticated and innovative, and significant, consistent funding streams and creative approaches are still needed to counter them. When disbursing aid, democracies should select priorities based on recognition of what can realistically be achieved through external assistance, with emphasis on long-term, locally driven, and evidence-based solutions. 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 operating safely both physically and digitally. Connecting activists across borders so that they can share strategies, tools, and approaches should also be prioritized. Support for initiatives that help ensure the legitimacy of elections are critical, including monitoring missions, voter registration and education drives, and media training.

**Focus on countries and territories at critical junctures.** These include countries that have experienced recent expansions in freedom, such as Malawi and Sudan, as well as places where democratic progress is threatened, such as Ethiopia and Malaysia, or where democracy is under considerable pressure, as in Hong Kong. Policymakers from democratic nations should engage in high-level public diplomacy with these states and territories to signal international commitment to defending democracy. Officials should also speak out in support of the brave members of civil society fighting for democratic rights in their countries, and condemn restrictions or abuses against them. Funding should help democratically inclined leaders and local civil society organizations deliver tangible expansions of political rights and civil liberties.

**Invest in alliances with other democracies, and in multilateral institutions.** Confronting authoritarian and antidemocratic trends globally requires a united front among democratic nations, particularly as authoritarian leaders resort to bullying tactics like imposing tariffs in retaliation for criticism of human rights abuses.

Democracies should work together to promote their shared values and constrain autocratic powers by coordinating aid and public diplomacy efforts, including by bolstering initiatives that promote transparency and accountability in governance, and by issuing joint statements condemning human rights violations. Full engagement by democracies in multilateral institutions strengthens and improves the work of these bodies. Moreover, it helps prevent authoritarian rulers from exploiting these systems to their own ends, such as China's efforts to constrain Taiwan's participation in international forums; the growing use of governments reaching across national borders to target rights defenders and journalists, as recently examined in [Freedom House's special report on transnational repression](#); and joint efforts by undemocratic rulers to cut the number of human rights-related jobs within UN peacekeeping missions. Democracies should also hold each other accountable for living up to democratic ideals at home.

**Strengthen public support for democratic principles by investing in civic education.** Fostering a stronger public understanding of democratic principles, especially among young people, empowers citizens to defend freedom domestically and support foreign policy that protects democratic rights and values abroad. As democracies have struggled, 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.

## 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.

### **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

**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 are a powerful tool for deterring harmful behavior. Democracies should devise comprehensive strategies for deploying targeted sanctions in concert with their full suite of foreign policy tools to bring accountability for international human rights abuses and acts of corruption. When possible, democracies should coordinate their efforts to jointly impose sanctions on perpetrators for maximum impact, as the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom 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 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 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 eligible for sanction. Unfortunately, the number of potential sanctions cases to be vetted by the US government far exceeds current capacity. The US Congress has provided modest dedicated 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.**

The United States passed groundbreaking legislation in 2020 that ended the ability of corrupt actors to hide stolen funds behind anonymous shell corporations. This new law requires corporations to disclose the identity of their beneficial owners to the US Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), which may only make that information accessible to law enforcement agencies, and, in some cases, financial institutions. The United States should ensure this law is fully enforced, and nations still allowing anonymous shell corporations should pass similar laws. The US Congress should also pass the CROOK Act (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) 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, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Uganda, Cameroon, and elsewhere—have sought to evade term limits and extend their hold on power. Section 7008 of the annual State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bills (P.L. 116–260) 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 provision [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 that 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 goods that could potentially be used to violate human rights.**

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 rated by any of Freedom House's publications as Partly Free or Not Free. In the United States, the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [updated](#) its licensing policy in October 2020 to restrict the export of items if there is “a risk that the items will be used to violate or abuse human rights” (15 C.F.R. §742.7(b)). In applying this updated policy, 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. Other democracies should implement similar policies. The European Parliament and Council of Ministers reached an agreement in November of 2020 on updated export policies for dual use products and cybersurveillance technologies, which aims to better protect human rights. It should be formally endorsed without delay.

**Increase transparency requirements for foreign state-owned propaganda outlets operating in democratic states.** Outlets like Russia’s RT, China’s CGTN and Xinhua, and Venezuela’s teleSUR spread government-approved narratives without clearly disclosing to readers and viewers that they are government financed. Measures to improve transparency could include labeling and reporting requirements that reveal outlets’ ownership structures and other economic ties to repressive state actors, as well as foreign-government spending on the placement of paid advertorials (advertisements designed to resemble an independent, objective news article) in domestic outlets. In circumstances where such transparency has been enhanced in recent years, local media has been demonstrably less willing to run paid advertorials, and social media users have been less likely to engage with posts from such accounts.

**Strengthen laws that guard against foreign influence over government officials.** Legislative proposals requiring greater transparency for officials’ personal finances and campaign donations, more rigorous standards for the disclosure of conflicts of interest, and the establishment of a clear code of conduct for engagement with foreign officials can help insulate governments from foreign attempts to subvert democratic institutions. In the United States, this could include passing legislation to enforce the principles of the constitution’s foreign emoluments clause, closing loopholes in rules on reporting foreign influence by updating lobbying and foreign agent registration rules, and updating financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.

## 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 for good. 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 exercising leverage 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 remedy for impacted stakeholders when abuses occur that the company is linked

to or has contributed to. Companies should establish strong human rights governance, furnished with their own budgets and embedded across the business, that liaise directly with the company’s senior leadership and have board oversight.

## STRENGTHENING US DEMOCRACY

### **Reduce political polarization and extremism by establishing independent redistricting commissions.**

To maintain equal representation, states are legally and constitutionally required to redraw their congressional and state legislative districts every 10 years, accounting for population changes documented by the decennial census. In most states, the boundaries are set by state legislatures, leaving the process vulnerable to manipulation by the party that holds a legislative majority—a practice commonly known as partisan gerrymandering. The artificial creation of “safe” seats for a given party, where candidates can take extreme positions to win intraparty primary contests without fear of meaningful competition in the general elections, is a key driver of polarization and dysfunction in US politics. It can also create large gaps between a party’s share of the overall popular vote and its share of seats after elections, which leave voters feeling disenfranchised. Partisan gerrymandering is essentially an inversion of democracy, with politicians choosing their voters rather than voters choosing their representatives. Polling has shown that an overwhelming majority of Americans (more than 70 percent) support removing partisanship from the drawing of legislative boundaries. To address this problem, all 50 states should establish independent redistricting commissions, designing them carefully to ensure impartiality, inclusivity, and transparency.

### **Bolster confidence in election integrity by instituting nonpartisan observation for elections nationwide.**

The American public must have confidence that all ballots will be cast fairly and counted accurately according to the law. However, the current patchwork of election regulations does not provide a standard for impartial election observers, with some states leaving the matter entirely up to local election officials. Rules for nonpartisan election observers should be standardized and implemented nationwide. Nonpartisan observers should be employed to monitor the election process from start to finish, with an objective, data-driven approach. This will not only instill greater confidence in US elections, but also improve the process as observers provide feedback to administrators.

**Protect and improve voting access for all.** In a democracy, it is essential that citizens are able to exercise their right to vote with relative ease. States can facilitate the act of voting for all citizens by establishing same-day or universal automatic voter registration, allowing early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, extending voting hours and days, and placing special vote centers and traditional polling places in locations that meet the needs of the population. Electoral officials should be barred from changing polling hours and sites without adequate notice to voters. Special attention should be given to addressing

racially discriminatory barriers to voting. States that have not already done so should restore voting rights for citizens with past felony convictions, without imposing financial or bureaucratic hurdles; due to racial disparities in the criminal justice system, such restrictions disproportionately disenfranchise Black Americans in particular. In addition, 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.

## ***Freedom in the World Methodology***

*Freedom in the World 2021* evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2020. 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>.**

“

Democracy is  
remarkably resilient,  
and has proven its  
ability to rebound  
from repeated blows.

”



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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