

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy



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

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

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

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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2020 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

Hong Kong police use a water cannon on protesters. Editorial  
Credit: Isaac Yeung/Shutterstock.

# A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy

by Sarah Repucci

Democracy and pluralism are under assault. Dictators are toiling to stamp out the last vestiges of domestic dissent and spread their harmful influence to new corners of the world. At the same time, many freely elected leaders are dramatically narrowing their concerns to a blinkered interpretation of the national interest. In fact, such leaders—including the chief executives of the United States and India, the world’s two largest democracies—are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas.

As a result of these and other trends, Freedom House found that 2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The gap between setbacks and gains widened compared with 2018, as individuals in 64 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties while those in just 37 experienced improvements. The negative pattern affected all regime types, but the impact was most visible near the top and the bottom of the scale. More than half of the countries that were rated Free or Not Free in 2009 have suffered a net decline in the past decade.

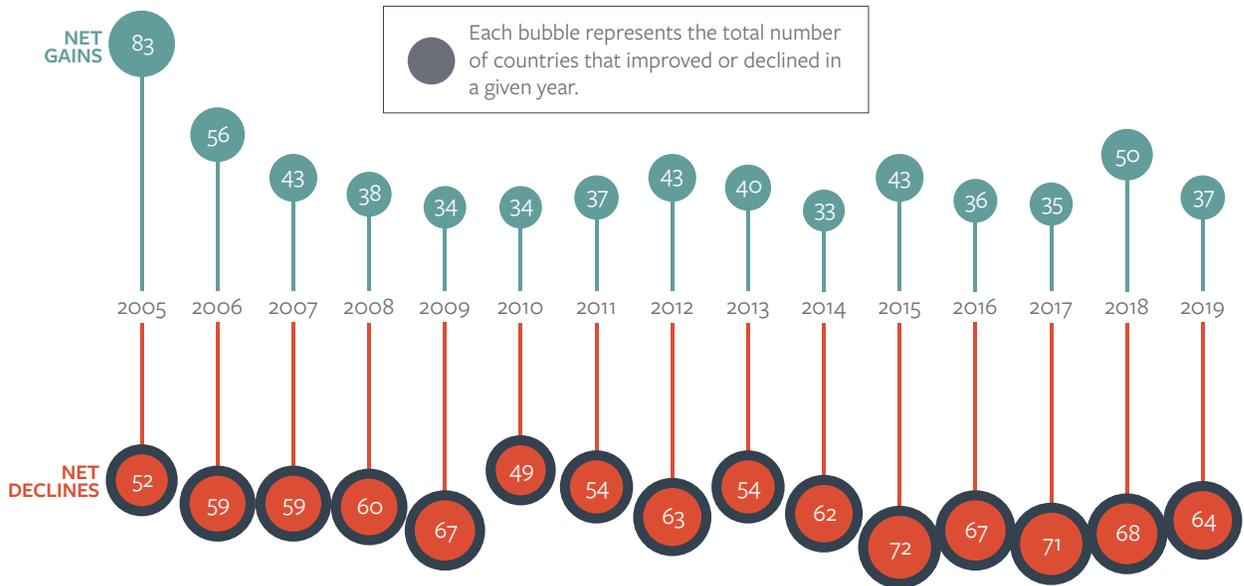
Ethnic, religious, and other minority groups have borne the brunt of government abuses in both democracies and authoritarian states. The Indian government has taken its Hindu nationalist agenda to a new level with a succession of policies that abrogate the rights of different segments of its Muslim

population, threatening the democratic future of a country long seen as a potential bulwark of freedom in Asia and the world. Attacks on the rights of immigrants continue in other democratic states, contributing to a permissive international environment for further violations. China pressed ahead with one of the world’s most extreme programs of ethnic and religious persecution, and increasingly applied techniques that were first tested on minorities to the general population, and even to foreign countries. The progression illustrated how violations of minority rights erode the institutional and conventional barriers that protect freedom for all individuals in a given society.

The unchecked brutality of autocratic regimes and the ethical decay of democratic powers are combining to make the world increasingly hostile to fresh demands for better governance. A striking number of new citizen protest movements have emerged over the past year, reflecting the inexhaustible and universal desire for fundamental rights. However, these movements have in many cases confronted deeply entrenched interests that are able to endure considerable pressure and are willing to use deadly force to maintain power. The protests of 2019 have so far failed to halt the overall slide in global freedom, and without greater support and solidarity from established democracies, they are more likely to succumb to authoritarian reprisals.

## 14 YEARS OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

Countries with net declines in their aggregate *Freedom in the World* score have outnumbered those with gains for the past 14 years.



### India's turn toward Hindu nationalism

Almost since the turn of the century, the United States and its allies have courted India as a potential strategic partner and democratic counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the Indian government's alarming departures from democratic norms under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could blur the values-based distinction between Beijing and New Delhi. While India continues to earn a Free rating and held successful elections last spring, the BJP has distanced itself from the country's founding commitment to pluralism and individual rights, without which democracy cannot long survive.

Several of India's neighbors have persecuted religious minorities for many years. But instead of stressing the contrast with its own traditions and seeking to propagate them abroad, India is moving toward the lower standards of its region. Just as Chinese officials vocally defended acts of state repression against Uighurs and other Muslim groups before international

audiences in 2019, Modi firmly rejected criticism of his Hindu nationalist policies, which included a series of new measures that affected India's Muslim populations from one end of the country to the other.

The first major step was the central government's unilateral annulment of the semiautonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. Federal authorities replaced the state's elected institutions with appointees and abruptly stripped residents of basic political rights. The sweeping reorganization, which opponents criticized as unconstitutional, was accompanied by a massive deployment of troops and arbitrary arrests of hundreds of Kashmiri leaders and activists. Restrictions on freedom of movement and a shutdown of mobile and internet service made ordinary activities a major challenge for residents. As a result, Indian Kashmir experienced one of the five largest single-year score declines of the past 10 years in *Freedom in the World*, and its freedom status dropped to Not Free.



A village council member walks to cast her vote on the outskirts of Srinagar, Indian Kashmir, on October 24, 2019. Kashmiri political parties largely boycotted the elections, in which council members voted for second-tier local leaders. Independent candidates won most of the posts. Credit: Mukhtar Khan/AP/Shutterstock

The government's second move came on August 31, when it published a new citizens' register in the northeastern state of Assam that left nearly two million residents without citizenship in any country. The deeply flawed process was widely understood as an effort to exclude Muslims, many of whom were descended from Bengalis who arrived in Assam during the colonial era. Those found to be undocumented immigrants were expected to be placed in detention camps. However, the Bengali population that was rendered stateless included a significant number of Hindus, necessitating a remedy that would please supporters of the ruling BJP.

That remedy was provided by the third major action of the year, the December passage of the Citizenship Amendment Law, which expedites citizenship for adherents of six non-Muslim religions from three neighboring Muslim-majority countries. In effect, India will grant Hindus and other non-Muslims special protection from persecution in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, but

Muslims—including those from vulnerable minority sects or from other neighboring states like China and Sri Lanka—will receive no such advantage. Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah has pledged to repeat the Assam citizens' register process nationwide, raising fears of a broader effort to render Indian Muslims stateless and ensure citizenship for non-Muslims.

These three actions have shaken the rule of law in India and threatened the secular and inclusive nature of its political system. They also caused the country to receive the largest score decline among the world's 25 largest democracies in *Freedom in the World 2020*. Tens of thousands of Indians from all religious backgrounds have taken to the streets to protest this jarring attack on their country's character, but they have faced police violence in return, and it remains to be seen whether such demonstrations will persuade the government to change course.

## ALARMING SETBACKS IN THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEMOCRACY

A series of actions by India's Hindu nationalist government in 2019 violated important democratic rights in India and Indian Kashmir.



\* Estimated population affected

<sup>1</sup>Population Mid-2019, Population Reference Bureau; <sup>2</sup>GDP (current US\$) (billions), World Bank, 2018



US president Donald Trump poses for a photo with Chinese president Xi Jinping during a meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan. Editorial Credit: Susan Walsh/AP/Shutterstock.

## Beijing's totalitarian atrocities and global ambitions

One of the year's most appalling examples of domestic repression—made more frightening by the absence of a coordinated international response—was the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing campaign of cultural annihilation in Xinjiang. Mass violations of the basic freedoms of millions of Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in the region, which were first brought to light in 2017, continued in 2019, with hundreds of thousands of people sentenced to prison or detained for forced indoctrination. The crackdown also included forced labor, the confinement of detained Muslims' children in state-run boarding schools, and draconian bans on ordinary religious expression.

Beijing claimed in December that the mass detentions had ended, but evidence from leaked government documents and victims' relatives contradicted the assertion. Even if it were

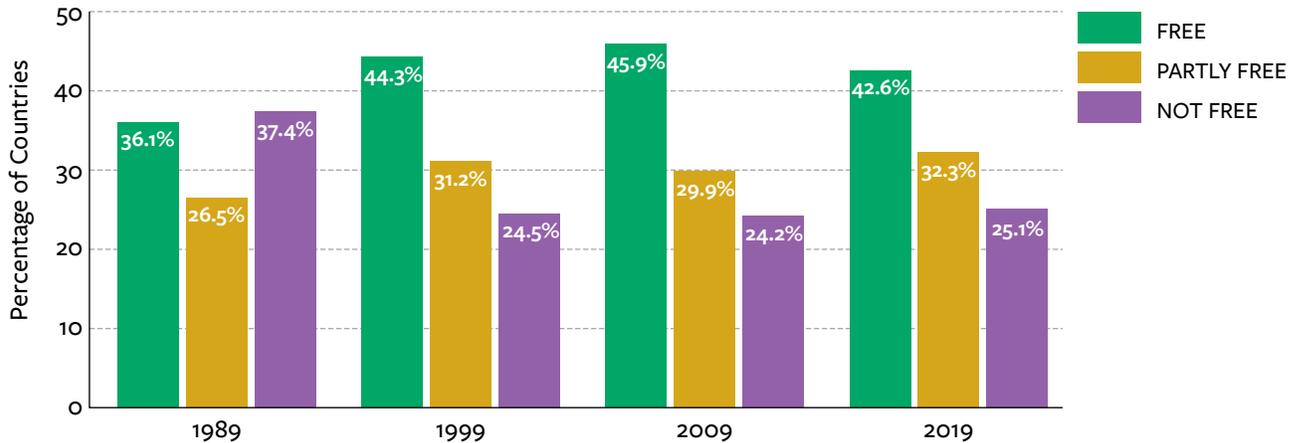
true, conditions for residents would not be greatly improved. The deployment of tens of thousands of security officers and state-of-the-art surveillance systems enable constant monitoring of the general population, converting Xinjiang into a dystopian open-air prison.

These policies have contributed to China's ranking as one of the 15 worst-performing countries in *Freedom in the World 2020*, and one of only 11 countries that Freedom House flagged for evidence of ethnic cleansing or some other form of forced demographic change.

The Communist Party's totalitarian offensive in Xinjiang is the product of decades of experience in persecuting ethnic and religious minorities, combining coercive measures and technological developments that were previously applied to Tibetans, Falun Gong practitioners, and others. There are already signs that similar techniques will be expanded

## FREEDOM IN THE BALANCE

After years of major gains, the share of Free countries has declined over the past decade, while the share of Not Free countries has risen.



to China’s entire population. Examples in 2019 included a requirement for telecommunications companies to perform facial scans on all new internet or mobile phone subscribers, and reports that local authorities nationwide were purchasing equipment for mass collection and analysis of citizens’ DNA. Chinese officials are routinely promoted and transferred based on the perceived effectiveness of their repressive efforts, meaning both the technology and the personnel tested in Xinjiang are likely to spread across the country.

The United States and other democracies have made some important diplomatic statements against the repression in Xinjiang, and the Trump administration has imposed sanctions on specific Chinese entities associated with the campaign. But in general the world’s democracies have taken few steps to rally international opposition or apply meaningful collective pressure to halt China’s rights abuses, and elected leaders in Europe and elsewhere have often been tepid in their public criticism. Many undemocratic governments have been similarly mute or even supported Beijing, including those in countries that have received Chinese loans and other investments. The pattern of de facto impunity bolsters China’s broader efforts to demand recognition as a global leader and aids its relentless campaign to replace existing international norms with its own authoritarian vision.

One aspect of this more assertive foreign policy that gained prominence in 2019 was Beijing’s apparent interventions in democratic elections. As with past Russian intrusions in the United States and elsewhere, China was suspected of sponsoring the spread of disinformation to create confusion around candidates and policies ahead of Taiwan’s January 2020 elections. The strategy may have backfired in this instance; domestic fears about Chinese encroachment helped the incumbent president defeat a more Beijing-friendly rival. Earlier, Chinese authorities were accused in November of seeking to fund a businessman’s election to Australia’s Parliament, and New Zealand’s intelligence chief spoke publicly about potential foreign influence on domestic politicians in April, a few months after the country’s opposition leader was accused of improperly hiding Chinese donations.

Beyond the context of elections, Freedom House research has shown that Chinese transnational censorship and propaganda activities are accelerating worldwide. For example, dozens of Swedish news outlets and journalists have been denounced by the Chinese embassy in that country for their reporting on China. Even a Russian newspaper was threatened with visa denials if it did not take down an article that mentioned China’s weakening economy. Beijing has also used paid online trolls to distort content on global social

## Freedom in the World 2020 Status Changes

### Benin



Benin's status declined from Free to Partly Free because a new electoral code and a series of decisions by the courts, electoral authorities, and the government resulted in the exclusion of all opposition parties from the April 2019 parliamentary elections.

### El Salvador



El Salvador's status declined from Free to Partly Free because criminal groups continue to commit acts of violence and intimidation against politicians, ordinary citizens, and religious congregants, and because the justice system has been hampered by obstruction and politicization.

### Indian Kashmir



Indian Kashmir's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the Indian government's abrupt revocation of the territory's autonomy, the dissolution of its local elected institutions, and a security crackdown that sharply curtailed civil liberties and included mass arrests of local politicians and activists.

### Mauritania



Mauritania's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to a relatively credible presidential election that resulted in the country's first peaceful transfer of power after the incumbent completed his term, signaling a departure from a history of military coups.

### Myanmar



Myanmar's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to worsening conflicts between the military and ethnic minority rebel groups that reduced freedom of movement in the country.

### Senegal



Senegal's status declined from Free to Partly Free because the 2019 presidential election was marred by the exclusion of two major opposition figures who had been convicted in politically fraught corruption cases.

### Thailand



Thailand's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to a slight reduction in restrictions on assembly and tightly controlled elections that, despite significant flaws, ended a period of direct rule by military commanders.

media platforms that are blocked in China itself, with tactics including the demonization of political enemies like Hong Kong's prodemocracy protesters on Facebook and Twitter, and the manipulation of content-ranking systems on Google, Reddit, and YouTube. And the Chinese government is gaining influence over crucial parts of other countries' information infrastructure through companies that manage digital television broadcasting and communications on mobile devices.

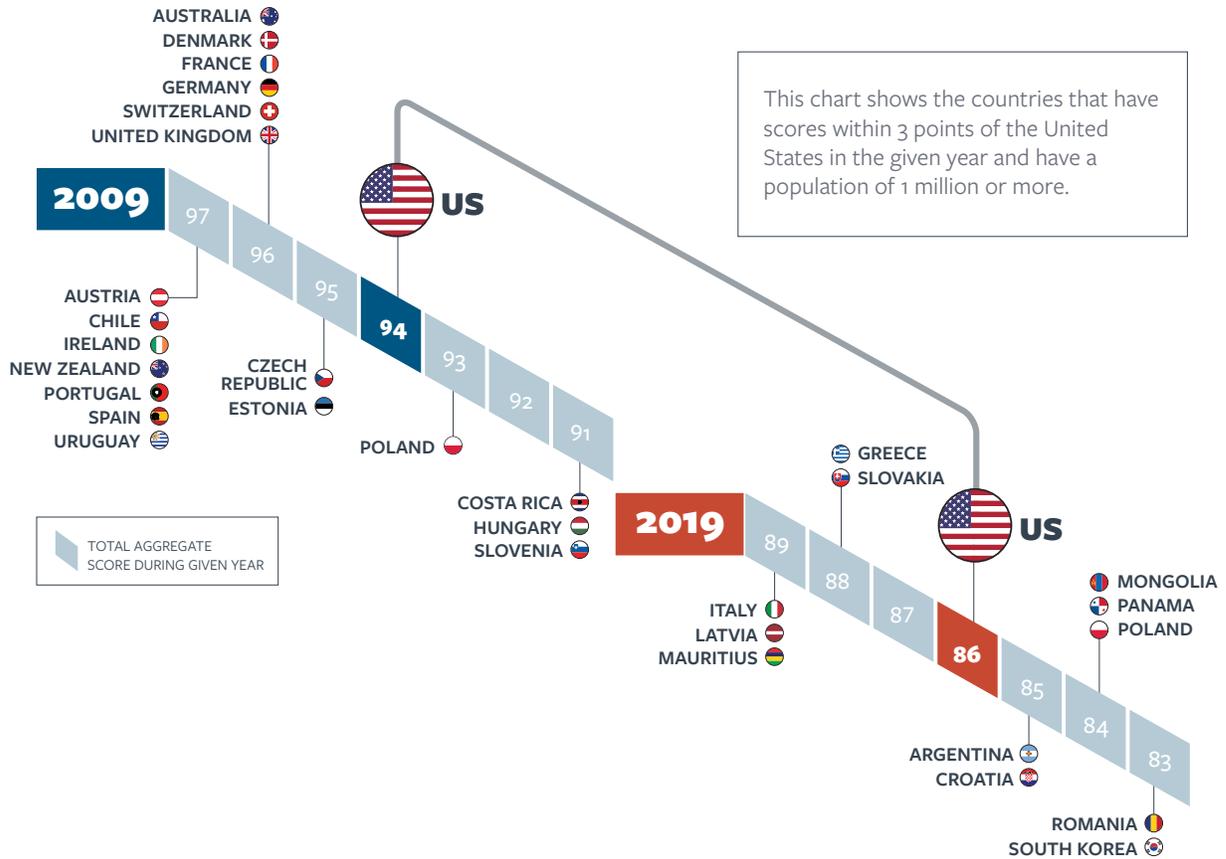
The past year featured a new wave of pushback against certain aspects of China's global ambitions, with public resistance to the harmful effects of Chinese investment projects intensifying in host countries, and some politicians growing more vocal about protecting national interests against Beijing's encroachment. Nevertheless, piecemeal responses are unlikely to deter the Chinese leadership in the long term.

## An unsteady beacon of freedom in the United States

Democracy advocates around the world have historically turned to the United States for inspiration and support, and Congress has continued to fund programs to that end in practice. To date, however, the Trump administration has failed to exhibit consistent commitment to a foreign policy based on the principles of democracy and human rights. Although the president has been outspoken in denouncing authoritarian abuses by US adversaries in countries like Venezuela and Iran, and he reluctantly signed legislation supporting basic rights in Hong Kong after it passed almost unanimously in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, he has excused clear violations by traditional security partners such as Turkey and Egypt. He has also given a pass to tyrannical leaders whom he hopes to woo diplomatically, including Vladimir Putin of Russia and Kim

## HOW DOES THE UNITED STATES MATCH UP?

After declining by eight points in 10 years, the US has fallen below its traditional democratic peers.

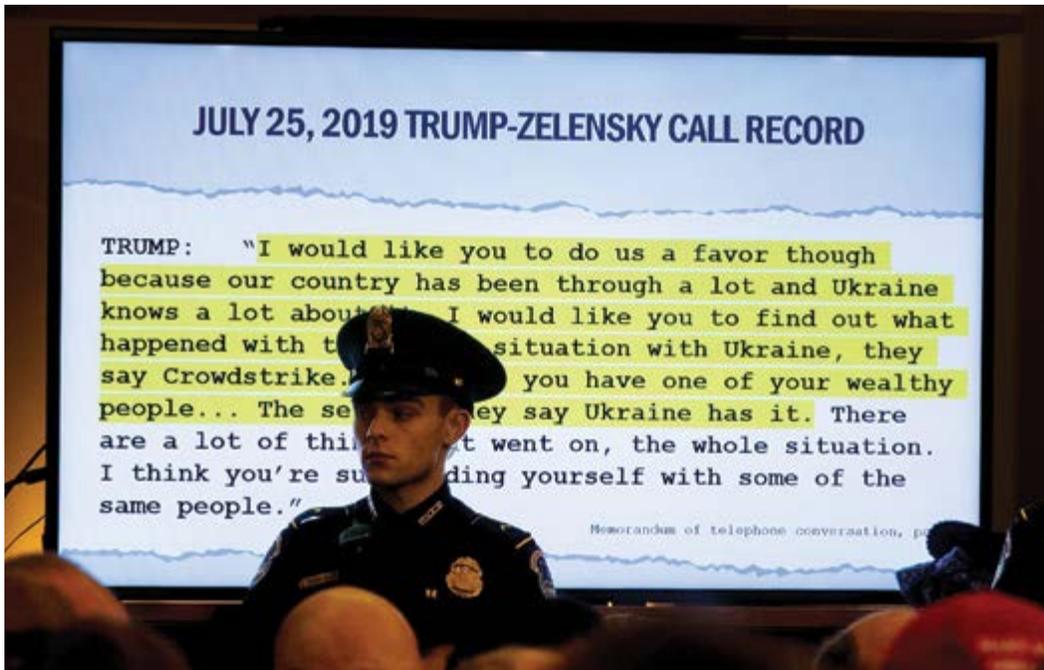


Note: *Freedom in the World* aggregate scores are on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 is least free and 100 is most free.

Jong-un of North Korea. On multiple occasions during 2019, he vetoed bipartisan efforts in Congress to limit arms sales and military assistance to Saudi Arabia. Balancing specific security and economic considerations with human rights concerns has been difficult for every administration, but the balance has grown especially lopsided of late.

This problem has been compounded by efforts to undermine democratic norms and standards within the United States over the past several years, including pressure on electoral integrity, judicial independence, and safeguards against corruption. Fierce rhetorical attacks on the press, the rule of law, and other pillars of democracy coming from American leaders, including the president himself, undermine the country's ability to persuade other governments to defend core human rights and freedoms, and are actively exploited by dictators and demagogues.

An ongoing decline in fair and equal treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is also particularly worrisome for a country that takes pride in its traditional role as a beacon for the oppressed. In 2019, new federal rules or policies allowed the blanket rejection of asylum claims for those who cross through Mexico from other countries to reach the southern US border, forced asylum seekers with credible claims to wait in Mexico while their applications are considered, and gave states and localities the power to block refugee resettlement in their jurisdictions, among other restrictions. Many of the administration's tactics appear to violate existing national and international law, leading to a plethora of court challenges. In a move that also drew lawsuits, President Trump declared a national emergency in order to redirect Defense Department funds to the construction of a wall along the southern border. The project was a core feature of his efforts to control migration and



US Capitol police stand by a monitor showing a transcript of US president Donald Trump's July 25, 2019, phone call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Editorial Credit: Michael Reynolds/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.

reduce the number of asylum claims, but Congress had refused to provide the necessary spending.

A more consequential circumvention of congressional authority lay at the heart of the impeachment process touched off in November by allegations that President Trump had abused his office in a bid to extract a personal political favor from Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Trump temporarily blocked military aid that Congress had allocated to Ukraine and withheld a White House visit, while concurrently asking Zelenskyy to announce two investigations—one aimed at his potential 2020 election rival, former vice president Joe Biden, and another bolstering a debunked conspiracy theory meant to absolve Russia of interference in the 2016 election. The administration then ordered current and former officials to defy all congressional subpoenas for documents and testimony about the matter. These actions threatened important components of American democracy, including congressional oversight of the executive branch and the fairness and integrity of electoral competition. The constitution's impeachment mechanism offers a powerful means of holding presidents and other senior officials accountable for major transgressions, but it remains unclear whether the process that began in 2019, and ended in acquittal, will ultimately be successful in restoring balance to the system. Indeed, with Republican lawmakers largely defending the president's actions and questioning the motives and fairness of House Democrats' efforts,

the impeachment seemed to drive a wedge through the American public and political class, reinforcing the impression on both sides that elected representatives were placing partisan loyalty above the national interest and the constitution.

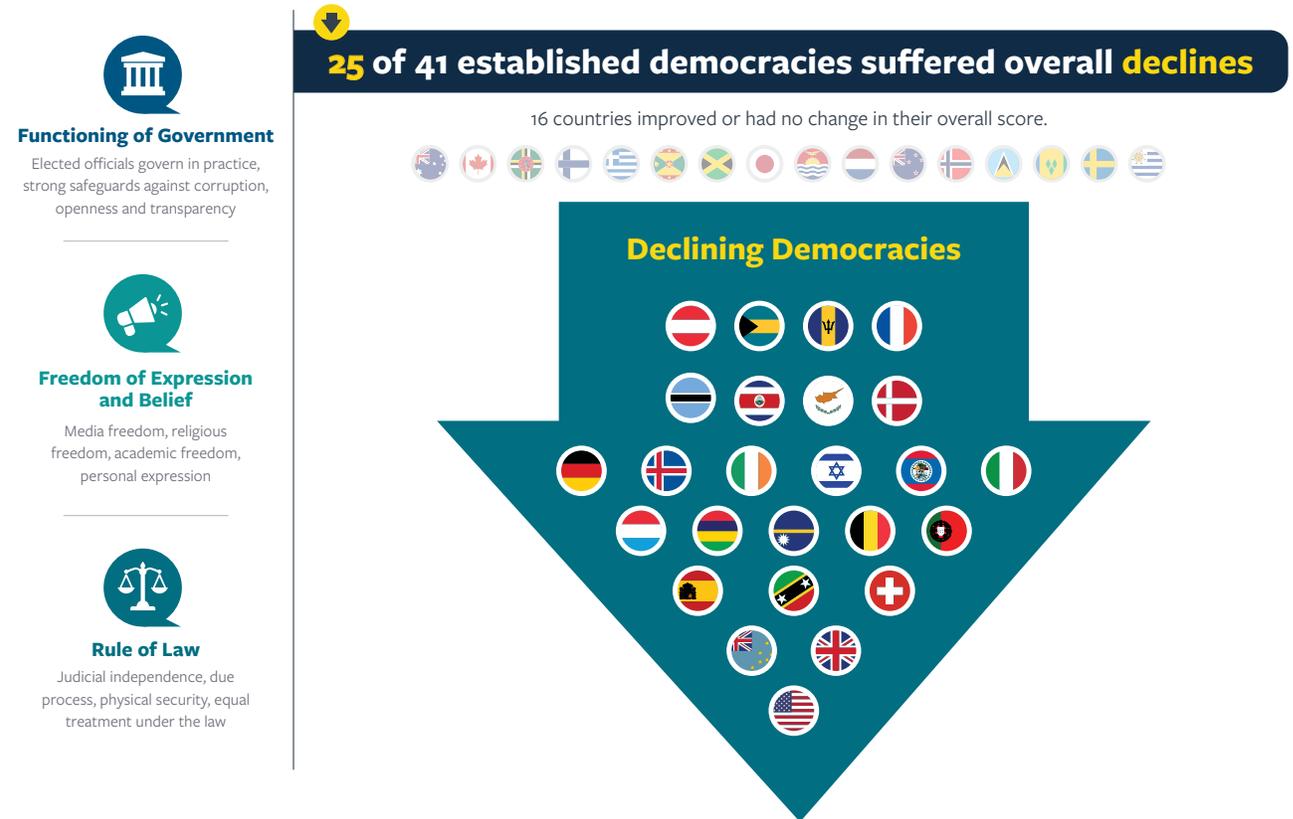
### Division and dysfunction in democracies

India and the United States are not alone in their drift from the ideals of liberal democracy. They are part of a global phenomenon in which freely elected leaders distance themselves from traditional elites and political norms, claim to speak for a more authentic popular base, and use the ensuing confrontations to justify extreme policies—against minorities and pluralism in particular.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was at the vanguard of nationalistic and chauvinistic populism when he returned to power a decade ago, but his antidemocratic tendencies gained prominence recently as his hold on the premiership came under threat. Netanyahu has taken increasingly drastic steps to maintain the loyalty of far-right groups, entrenching and expanding West Bank settlements at the expense of the moribund Palestinian peace process, banning foreign activists based on their opposition to such policies, and enacting a discriminatory law that reserved the right of self-determination in Israel to the Jewish people. He has countenanced no criticism, denouncing his perceived enemies in the parliament,

## DEMOCRACIES IN DECLINE

More than half of the world’s established democracies deteriorated over the past 14 years. Functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, and rule of law are the most common areas of decline.



Note: Established democracies are defined here as countries that had a Free status for 20 consecutive years prior to the beginning of the 14-year decline.

civil society, the media, and law enforcement agencies over actions that were consistent with their legal and democratic functions. His struggle came to a head in 2019, when he was indicted on three separate corruption charges, refused to step down, and actively sought immunity even as he ran for reelection. Netanyahu governed Israel as a caretaker prime minister throughout the year, having failed to secure majority coalitions in two successive popular votes in April and September. Israel’s score has slipped six points since 2009, an unusually large decline for an established democracy.

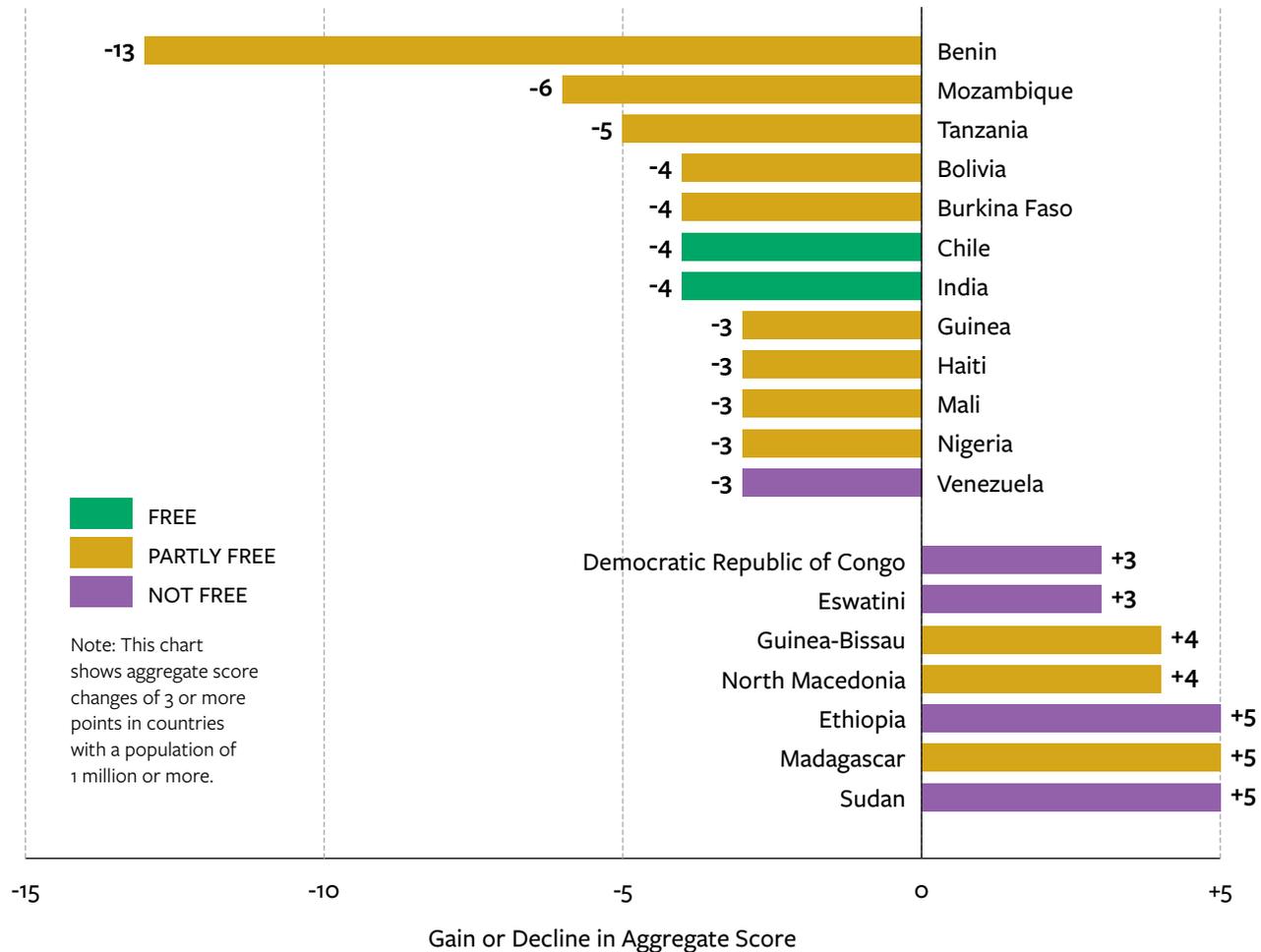
The trajectory of Spain’s politics illustrates a related pattern in which centrist parties have lost ground to more extreme factions, which often pursue their particular interests at the expense of democratic norms and institutions. Over the

course of two elections in 2019 and four in as many years, the country’s two main parties—the center-left Socialists and the center-right Popular Party—have been hobbled by the rise of smaller, more radical groups. The far-right Spanish nationalist party Vox entered Parliament for the first time in April and doubled its support in repeat elections in November, becoming the third-largest group overall. It emerged partly in response to leftist parties from Catalonia that have pushed for the region’s independence in defiance of the law. However, in addition to reductions in regional autonomy, Vox advocates various restrictions on immigration and Islam.

In Austria, the traditionally conservative People’s Party swung toward the hard right when leader Sebastian Kurz endorsed restrictive asylum and integration policies in the wake of

## LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2019

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



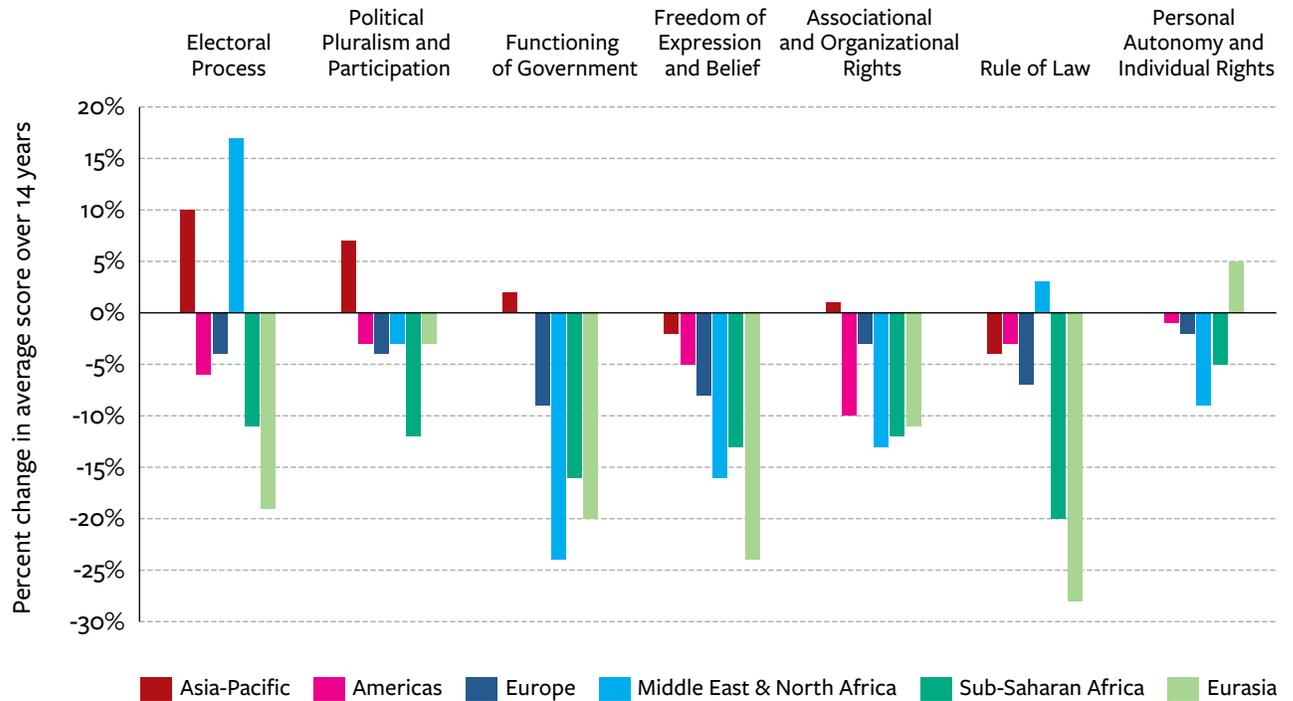
Europe’s 2015 migration crisis. After taking office as chancellor in 2017, Kurz controversially chose the far-right Freedom Party as his coalition partner, though the government collapsed in 2019 after that party was ensnared in a scandal centered on its warm ties with Moscow. Snap elections in September resulted in the People’s Party forming a new coalition with the moderate-left Greens, but it maintained its populist orientation on migration, with a policy agenda that included preventive detention for asylum seekers who are designated as potentially violent, a ban on headscarves for Muslim girls, and opposition to the European Union’s refugee redistribution agreement.

In some countries, diverse parties have banded together to challenge antidemocratic populist leaders. Hungary has

suffered from the concentration of power under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s populist-nationalist Fidesz party for the past nine years, losing 20 points in its *Freedom in the World* score since the 2010 election and becoming the first European Union member state to be classified as Partly Free. Nevertheless, after fragmented opposition groups joined forces for local elections in October, they defied expectations and captured 11 major cities across the country. In Poland on the same day, the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party lost control of the Senate to an opposition umbrella group, its first such setback since taking power in 2015. Poland’s score has fallen nine points in that time as Law and Justice adopted a series of measures to break down judicial independence, dominate the media, and mute criticism from civil society.

## DECLINES ACROSS THE BOARD

The 14 years of decline have affected all regions and *Freedom in the World* subcategories.



### A world without democratic leadership

The same trends that have destabilized major democracies and pulled them away from their founding principles have also pulled them apart from one another, creating a vacuum on the international stage. Where once democracies might have acted in unison to support positive outcomes to global crises, disparate authoritarian states now frequently step into the breach and attempt to impose their will.

In the Middle East and North Africa, lack of consistent international leadership from democracies has encouraged authoritarian powers to engage in devastating proxy wars, which sometimes feature nominal US partners fighting on opposite sides. In Syria, which has languished as the world's least free country for the past seven years, the precipitous withdrawal of US troops from the northern border area in late 2019 left Russia and Turkey to fill the void, unleashing a fresh wave of abuses against the Kurdish population and imperiling the campaign against the Islamic State militant group.

An even more perplexing conflict unfolded in Libya, where Russia joined Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and others in supporting a local warlord's assault on the capital, which was defended by militias with backing from Turkey and Qatar. As with Syria, the extended chaos has contributed to the global migration crisis and allowed terrorist groups to organize in ungoverned areas. Another wantonly destructive war dragged on in Yemen, with Iran and Saudi Arabia pursuing their regional rivalry through local proxies. The Trump administration continued to support the Saudi-led air campaign in the country despite bipartisan opposition in Congress and a partial withdrawal by the Saudis' main partner, the UAE.

At the same time, the United States failed to provide steady, meaningful support for democratic processes or an effective, coordinated response to Iranian influence in Lebanon and Iraq, where mass protests against corruption and sectarian politics were met with violence from Iranian-backed militias. In Lebanon, the US administration withheld aid assigned to the national army for months in late 2019 without explanation, undermining one of the few state institutions that is



National Assembly president and interim leader Juan Guaidó climbs a fence in an attempt to enter the assembly building, which is occupied by forces loyal to the regime of Nicolás Maduro. Editorial Credit: Matias Delacroix/AP/Shutterstock.

seen as nonpartisan and nonsectarian. The demonstrations there triggered the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, but there were few signs of any fundamental reforms at year's end, with existing elites choosing Hariri's successor.

In Iraq, protesters focused their ire on both the Iranian regime, which they blamed for manipulating the political system and enabling the corrupt rule of allied sectarian groups, and the United States, whose mixed legacy in the country has also shaped current conditions. Iraq held competitive elections in 2018 and was allowing increased space for political opposition and civil society, but the violent response to the 2019 protests and recent Iranian and US military action on Iraqi territory have thrown its future into doubt.

Even as Iran's leadership continued to sow discord across the region, it confronted angry protests at home sparked by a rise in fuel prices and an accumulation of other grievances. Security forces used live ammunition to crush the demonstrations, leading to hundreds of deaths and an unprecedented internet shutdown intended to smother news of the violence.

In contrast to the Middle East, the United States has been fairly steadfast in its support for democratic forces in Venezuela, and many other democracies have followed suit. However, authoritarian states like China, Russia, and Cuba

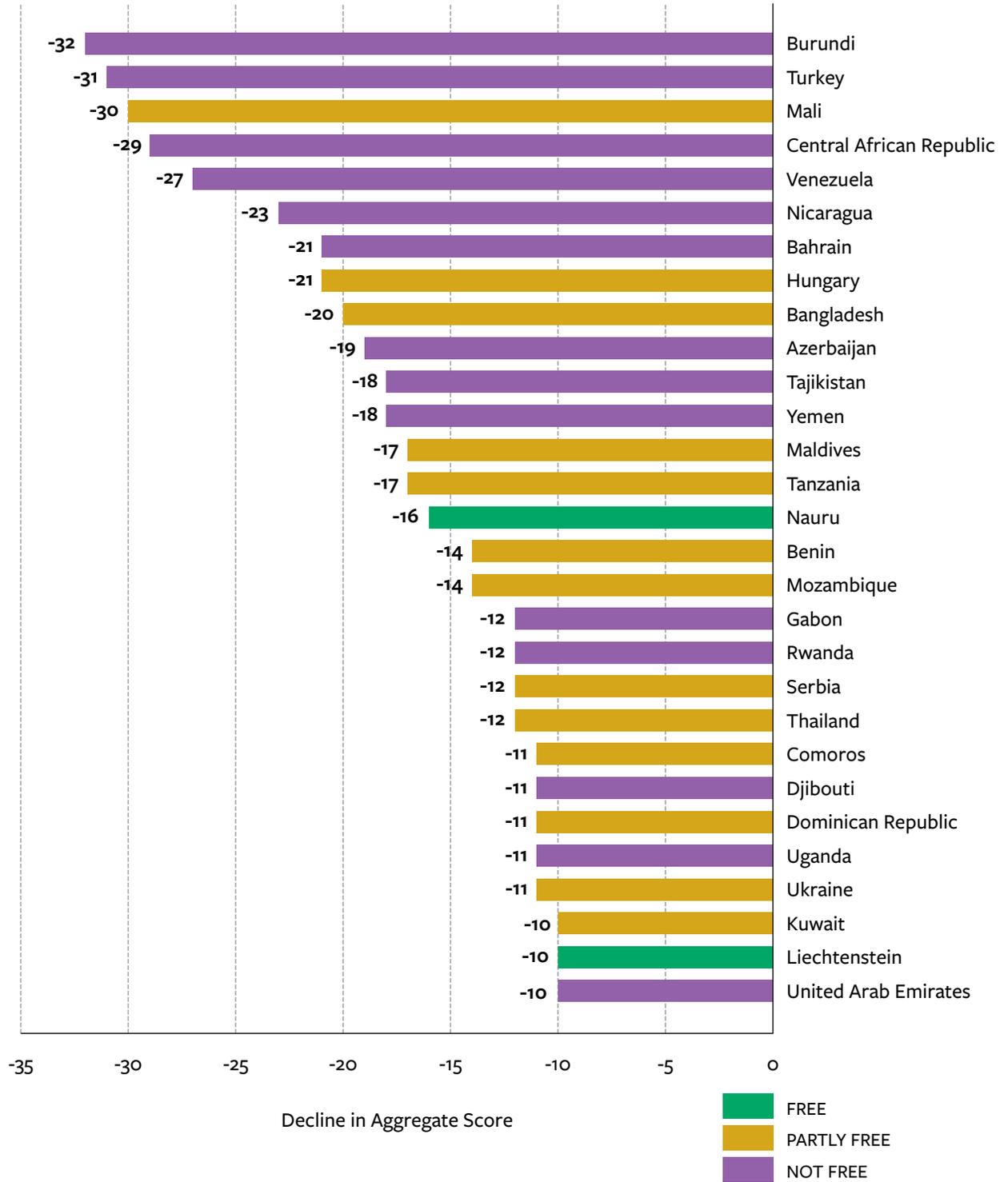
have come to the aid of Nicolás Maduro's regime, allowing him to cling to power despite a worsening political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. Hope was high in early 2019 as Juan Guaidó was sworn in as the country's interim president; the opposition-controlled National Assembly found that Maduro's reelection in 2018 had been fraudulent, and cited a constitutional provision calling for the National Assembly's president to serve as temporary leader in the event of a vacancy. But even as protests continued throughout the year, Maduro proved resilient. In January 2020 he initiated a new power grab, deploying security forces to physically block opposition lawmakers from entering the National Assembly, the country's last democratically elected institution. The years-long turmoil in Venezuela has created operating space for cross-border criminal and insurgent groups while contributing to mass migration across Latin America and the Caribbean.

### Public demands for democratic governance

The mass protests that emerged or persisted during 2019 in every region of the world are a reminder that the universal yearning for equality, justice, and freedom from oppression can never be extinguished. In Free, Partly Free, and Not Free countries alike, people took to the streets to express discontent with existing systems of government and demand changes that would lead to better, more democratic

## LARGEST 10-YEAR DECLINES

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





Sudanese demonstrators gather outside a court in Omdurman on December 30, 2019, during the trial of intelligence agents implicated in a detained protester's death in custody. Editorial Credit: Marwan Ali/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.

outcomes. While striking in their numbers, the protests have frequently foundered in the face of resistance from defenders of the status quo. Progress is evident in some cases, but the ultimate outcomes are unclear, and the protests in general have yet to usher in a new period of global democratic progress.

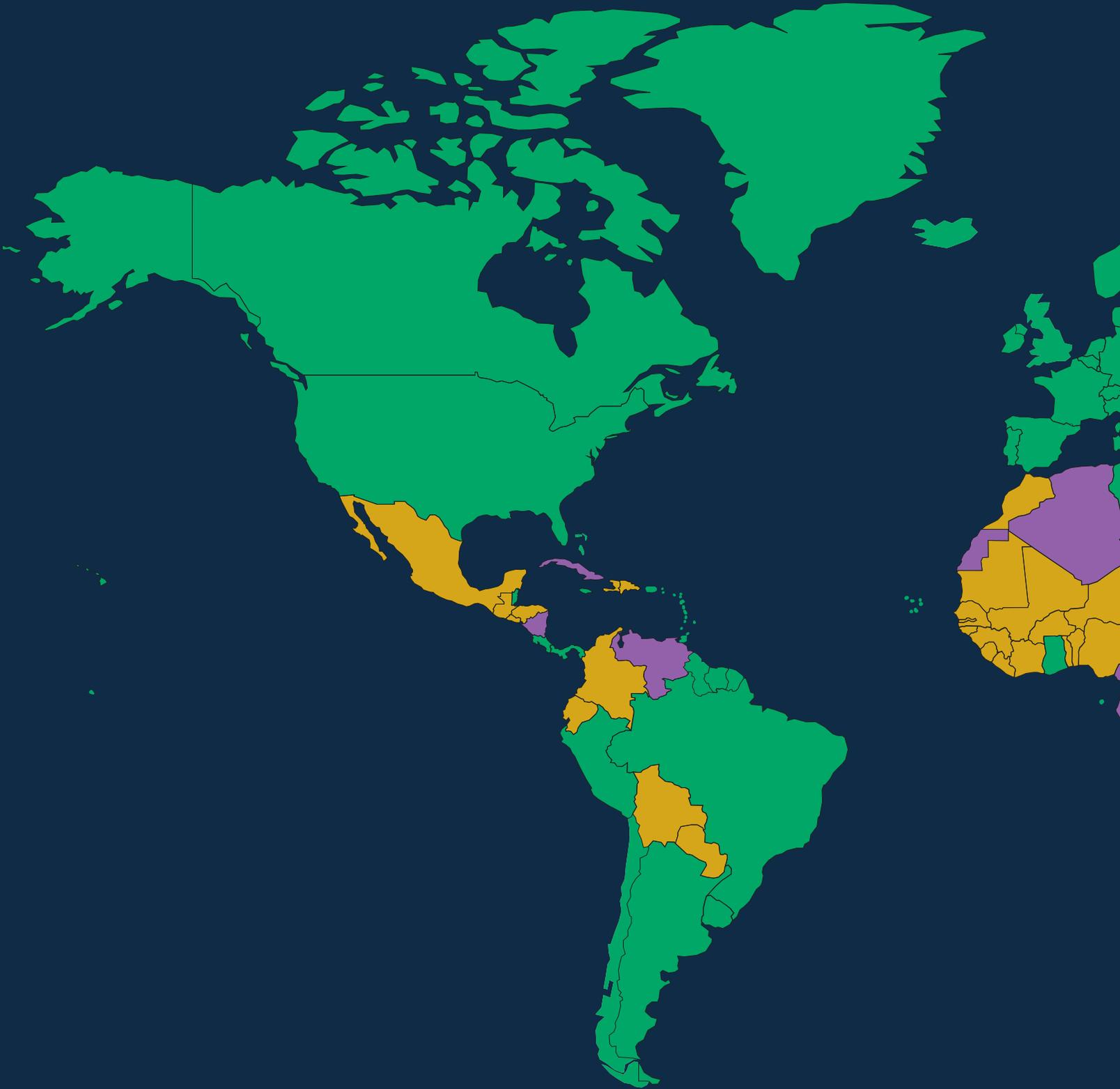
The dramatic protests in Hong Kong erupted in response to a proposed extradition bill that underscored the erosion of civil liberties in the territory under Chinese rule. Even when the bill was eventually withdrawn, the public continued to press for other key demands, including universal suffrage. But Beijing has refused to yield any more ground, and despite a sweeping opposition victory in neighborhood-level elections in November, Hong Kong has suffered more repression to date than it has gained in freedom.

In Algeria, demonstrations broke out following President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement that he would seek a fifth term. Although he resigned in April and a new president was elected in December, protesters dismissed the electoral process as a bid by entrenched military and economic elites to perpetuate their rule, and the movement has continued into 2020.

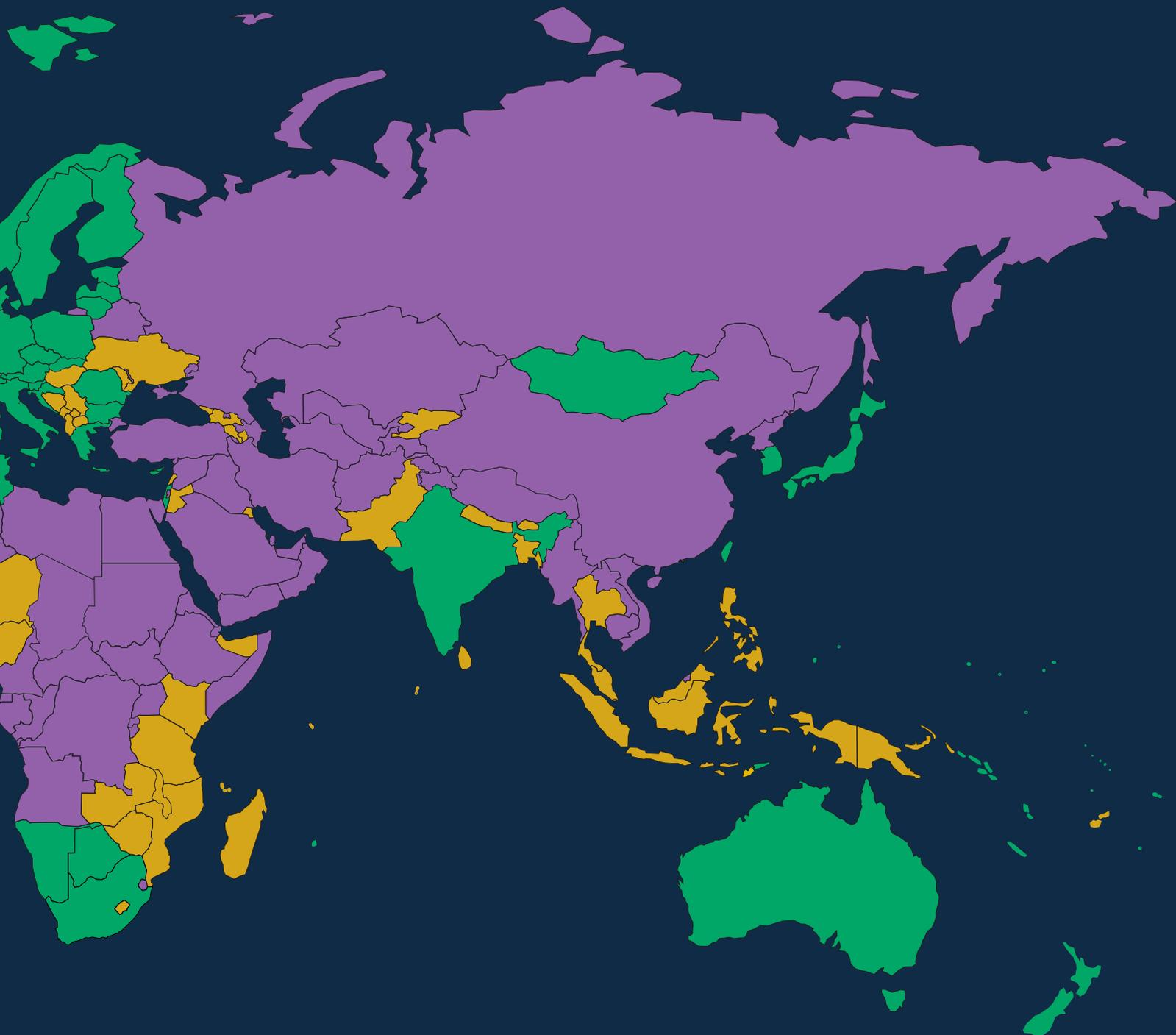
Courageous protests in Sudan that began in December 2018 led to the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir in April, ending a 30-year reign that featured multiple civil wars and alleged genocide. The demonstrators, not satisfied with the military junta that replaced al-Bashir, continued to demand systemic reform and civilian rule, enduring horrific crackdowns by the armed forces as democratic powers largely stood by. The protest leaders eventually secured a power-sharing deal in August, raising hopes for justice and free elections in the future, though military and paramilitary commanders retained enormous influence and valuable support from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. Sudan's *Freedom in the World* score received a five-point net improvement for the year, reflecting real gains that may or may not lead to broader political transformation.

In Bolivia, leftist president Evo Morales left the country amid protests in November after ignoring national referendum results and attempting to secure a fourth term in office through a fraudulent election. However, the interim president who succeeded him, conservative senator Jeanine Áñez, proved to be a polarizing figure and relied on the military to curb counterprotests by Morales's supporters. New elections are scheduled for May, and there are hopes that democratic governance will be fully restored in Bolivia after years of increasingly heavy-handed rule.

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020



FREE PARTLY FREE NOT FREE



Status	Countries	Territories
<b>FREE</b>	83	1
<b>PARTLY FREE</b>	63	4
<b>NOT FREE</b>	49	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>15</b>

*Freedom in the World 2020*  
 assessed 210 countries and  
 territories around the globe.

## PROTESTERS AROUND THE WORLD CALL FOR CHANGE

Protests around the globe served as a reminder of the common desire for equality, justice, and freedom. The map highlights a selection of countries where mass protests were held in 2019.





**IRAN**

Hike in fuel prices led to antigovernment demonstrations, reprisals



**RUSSIA**

Muscovites rallied over exclusion of opposition city council candidates



**HONG KONG**

Prodemocracy protesters resisted Beijing's influence



**INDIA**

Discriminatory citizenship law sparked mass protests



A wave of protests with diverse origins that took place in Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador were initially met with unacceptable force. However, they soon led to dialogue on political reforms, including an agreement by the Chilean government to hold a referendum on constitutional revisions in April 2020. This sort of response shows that while governance problems may touch off protests in any political environment, democracies should have the flexibility to address popular grievances without resorting to repression or extralegal measures.

In Ethiopia, years of futile attempts to repress mass protests finally convinced the authoritarian government to opt for reform. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who came to power in 2018 with a mandate to overhaul the system, pressed ahead with his agenda during 2019, revising excessively restrictive laws on elections, terrorism, the media, and civil society organizations. The country has earned a 12-point improvement over the past two years in *Freedom in the World*. However, as the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front—recently reorganized to form the Prosperity Party—has loosened its authoritarian grip, various ethnonationalist elements have contributed to political and communal violence, and the government has responded with a partial return to repressive tactics like internet shutdowns and arrests of journalists.

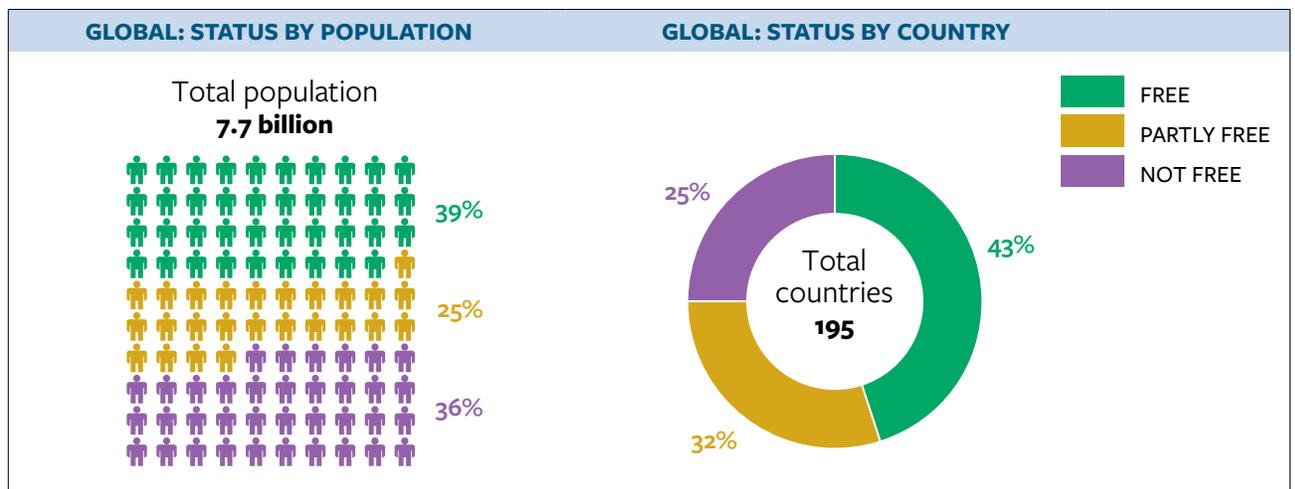
### The urgent need for democratic solidarity

Local movements of citizens should not be expected to confront entrenched power structures—often backed by powerful foreign autocracies—without some form of

assistance. International democratic actors can help these movements achieve their goals, blunt authoritarian reprisals, and convert breakthrough moments into long-term gains. Unfortunately, instead of consistent and constructive engagement, the world’s democratic powers in 2019 offered only fitful support, frequent indifference or ambiguity, and at times outright abandonment.

Those in the United States and elsewhere who doubt the value of a foreign policy designed to advance human freedom should realize that no one’s rights are safe when tyranny is allowed to go unchecked. History has shown that the chaotic effects of authoritarian misrule abroad are not confined by national borders, and that authoritarian powers will seek to expand their control by subverting the democratic sovereignty of other states. The same is true in domestic affairs: attacks on the rights of specific groups or individuals in a given country ultimately imperil the liberty of the entire society.

Today, as authoritarians fortify themselves at home and extend their international reach, and as some elected leaders adopt a myopic, self-serving, and discriminatory view of their official responsibilities, the world is becoming less stable and secure, and the freedoms and interests of all open societies are endangered. The tide can be reversed, but delay makes the task more difficult and costly. Rather than putting international concerns on hold while they address problems in their own countries, the citizens and genuine public servants of democracies must apply their core principles simultaneously in both domestic and foreign policy, and stand up for fundamental rights wherever they are threatened.



# Regional Trends

## AMERICAS

### Mass protests, governance crises, and migration restrictions

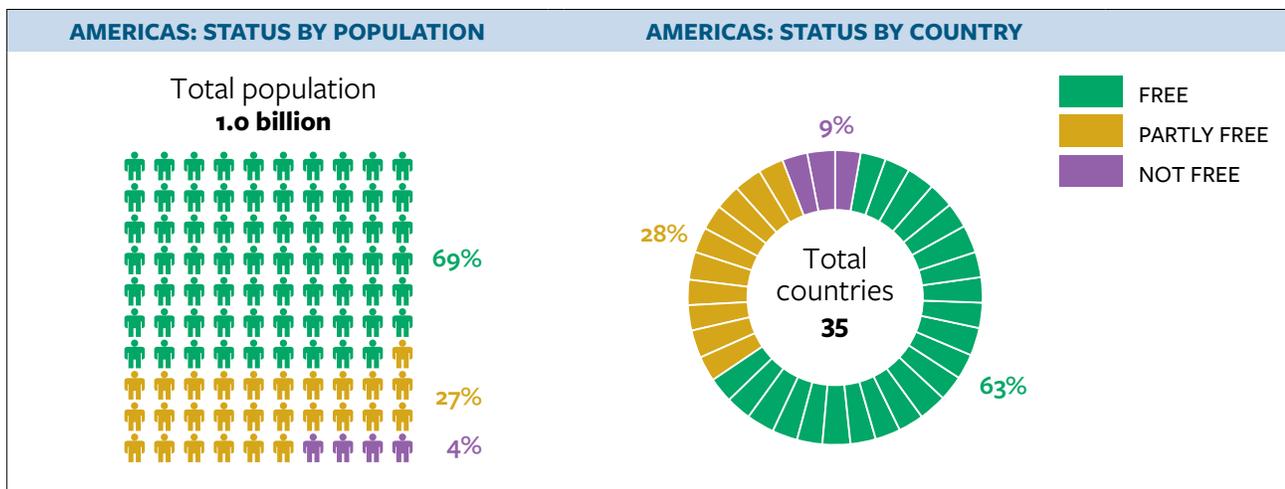
The Americas experienced a series of mass protests in 2019, many of which featured violent clashes between protesters and security forces, contributing to a regional pattern in which countries that suffered declines in their freedom scores outnumbered those with improvements. However, some of the protest movements also prompted authorities to address underlying grievances.

In addition to the demonstrations in Bolivia, where Evo Morales was forced from power after seeking a fourth presidential term in a deeply flawed election, strikes in Colombia against the administration of President Iván Duque were met by some police abuse, while a hike in Santiago’s mass transit fares sparked widespread protests and a broader critique of the political system in Chile. The Chilean unrest resulted in at least 29 deaths and thousands of injuries, but in response to protesters’ demands, the government agreed to hold a plebiscite on a new constitution in April 2020. Some concessions were also granted in Ecuador, where austerity measures were reversed following protests that led to seven deaths and injured more than a thousand people.

Acute political and governance crises also affected the region during the year, leading two countries to decline in the *Freedom in the World* indicator pertaining to representative rule. In Peru, President Martín Vizcarra took the unusual step of dissolving the opposition-controlled Congress after it obstructed his anticorruption efforts. The Congress then attempted to “suspend” Vizcarra, but he remained in control and scheduled legislative elections for January 2020. An impasse between the president and parliament in Haiti left that country without a prime minister for most of the year, and local and legislative elections were postponed indefinitely. Meanwhile, antigovernment protests drew a violent police response, leaving more than 40 people dead.

Venezuela, which experienced another year of deterioration in its scores, remained in a political, economic, and humanitarian purgatory as Juan Guaidó, the interim president named by the opposition-controlled National Assembly, struggled to dislodge Nicolás Maduro, who claimed reelection in a fraudulent 2018 vote. Brutal repression of dissent by Maduro’s regime and the allied administration of Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega has encouraged millions of people to flee abroad, contributing to the region’s larger migration crisis. Nicaragua’s multiyear score decline also deepened.

Restrictive migration policies continued to threaten the basic rights of those seeking refuge outside their home countries.



Among other problematic initiatives, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras agreed to deals with Washington that would oblige asylum seekers traveling north to apply for and be denied protection in those countries before filing asylum claims in the United States; those who fail to do so risk being sent back to the countries through which they passed, despite the poor security and human rights conditions there. The three Central American states each suffered score declines for the year, though the specific reasons varied.

## ASIA-PACIFIC

### Authoritarians flout fundamental rights of minorities, government critics

Political rights and civil liberties declined overall in Asia, as authoritarian rulers showed their disdain for democratic values through practices ranging from fabricated criminal cases against opposition leaders to mass persecution of religious and ethnic minorities.

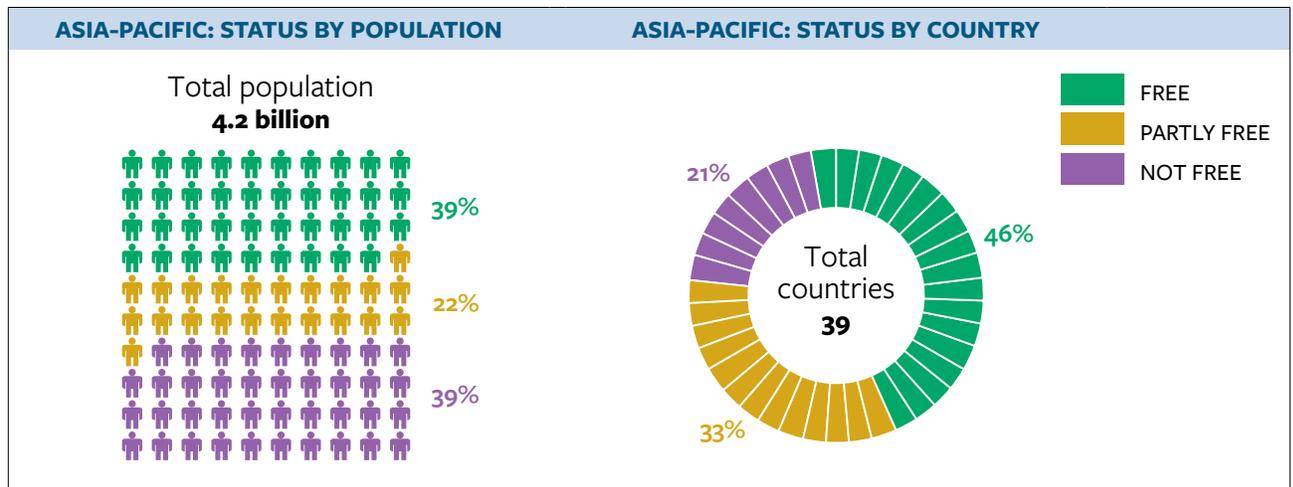
In several countries, repressive governments rounded on their perceived enemies after securing new terms through elections. Legislative elections in the Philippines, which experienced a two-point decline on Freedom House’s 100-point scale, solidified majorities for allies of President Rodrigo Duterte, who has overseen a campaign of extrajudicial killings. Just weeks after the voting, prosecutors launched sedition cases against an array of critical politicians, clergymen, and civil society activists. Soon after Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of Sri Lanka’s former authoritarian ruler, was elected president himself, there

were reports of a crackdown on journalists and law enforcement officials who had investigated the Rajapaksa family for alleged corruption and human rights violations. While Sri Lanka’s overall score remained unchanged, its corruption score worsened. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s discriminatory moves against the political rights of Muslims during the year followed the BJP’s general election victories in the spring, contributing to a four-point decline.

Thailand held its first elections since a military junta took control in 2014, enabling its return to Partly Free status, but opposition parties’ relatively strong showing even in a fundamentally unfair electoral system prompted further repression by authorities. For example, the state filed spurious charges against key opposition leaders later in the year, and pro-democracy activists faced physical attacks.

Conditions in other countries deteriorated in advance of elections due in 2020. Myanmar was downgraded to Not Free as armed conflicts between the military and ethnic rebel groups intensified. Members of the Rohingya minority who remained in the country after years of persecution and mass expulsions continued to face the risk of genocide, according to UN investigators. Singapore passed a “fake news” law that was quickly invoked to silence the opposition and other government critics, resulting in a score decline for freedom of expression.

Meanwhile, autocratic states with no competitive elections found new ways to oppress their citizens and consequently suffered declines in their scores. As China assailed the rights of its Muslim minorities, the sultanate of Brunei activated a new penal code derived from Islamic law that prescribed the death penalty for crimes such as sex outside of marriage.



## EURASIA

### Closed balloting in autocracies offset by reform hopes elsewhere

Entrenched strongmen across Eurasia, long one of the worst-performing regions in *Freedom in the World*, used various types of stage-managed elections in 2019 to extend the life of their regimes.

In Russia, the ruling United Russia party won all of the year’s gubernatorial elections, largely by ensuring that viable opposition candidates were not allowed to participate. Even in the Moscow city council elections, which featured a successful strategic-voting campaign organized by dissident leader Aleksey Navalny, the votes lost by United Russia largely went to Kremlin-approved alternatives. Parliamentary elections in Belarus and Uzbekistan also shut out any genuine opposition, leaving legislatures entirely in the hands of pro-government groups.

Longtime president Nursultan Nazarbayev transferred power to a hand-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, through a rigged election in Kazakhstan, and the authorities used arrests and beatings to break up mass protests against the move.

Despite the grim picture overall, some positive signs were evident in several of the region’s Partly Free environments. Newly elected leaders who came to power on promises of systemic reform—Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine, and Prime

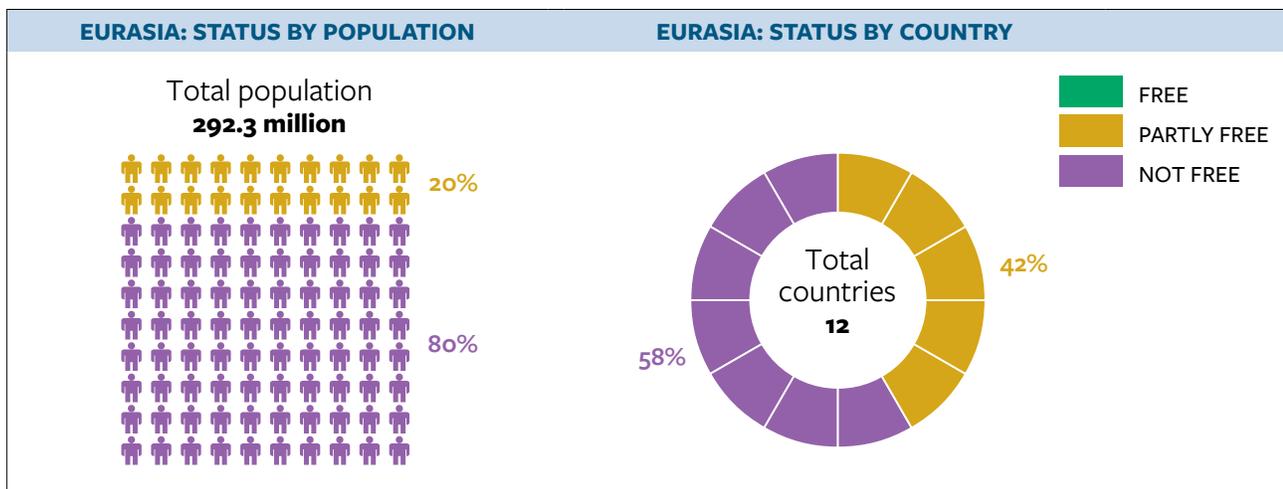
Minister Maia Sandu of Moldova—took initial steps to uproot the kleptocratic forces that have long stymied their countries’ democratic aspirations. Although Moldova’s reforms stalled when Sandu’s coalition government collapsed in November after just five months in power, corrupt former power-broker Vladimir Plahotniuc remained a fugitive after that government’s formation prompted him to flee abroad to avoid criminal charges.

The political opening in Armenia that began with Pashinyan’s long-shot rise to the premiership in 2018 had a positive effect on the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh during 2019. There was an increase in competition and civil society activity surrounding local elections in September, and the stage was set for further changes in the 2020 elections for Nagorno-Karabakh’s president and parliament. Unfortunately, the Eurasia region’s other break-away territories, which are all occupied by Russian troops, remained locked in a pattern of stagnation or decline in political rights and civil liberties.

## EUROPE

### Illiberal populists defend or gain power, threatening democratic norms

The principles of liberal democracy in Europe, historically the best-performing region in *Freedom in the World*, have been under serious pressure in recent years.



Illiberal populist leaders and parties in Central Europe maintained their assault on independent institutions during the year. In the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's replacement of the justice minister with a close ally raised concerns that he was attempting to block criminal charges for his alleged misuse of European Union funds, prompting the country's largest protests since 1989. Poland's legislative elections laid bare the extent to which the ruling Law and Justice party had politically captured the state media, whose taxpayer-funded broadcasts leading up to the voting amounted to partisan propaganda. Although it lost control of the Senate, the less powerful upper house of Poland's parliament, Law and Justice retained its lower-house majority and redoubled its efforts to purge the judiciary at year's end.

In Montenegro and Serbia, independent journalists, opposition figures, and other perceived foes of the government faced ongoing harassment, intimidation, and sometimes violence. Public frustration with the entrenched ruling parties boiled over into large protests in both countries, but they failed to yield any meaningful change.

Far-right parties made electoral gains in Estonia, where the Conservative People's Party entered government for the first time, and in Spain, where Vox capitalized on gridlock that left the country without a governing majority for most of the year.

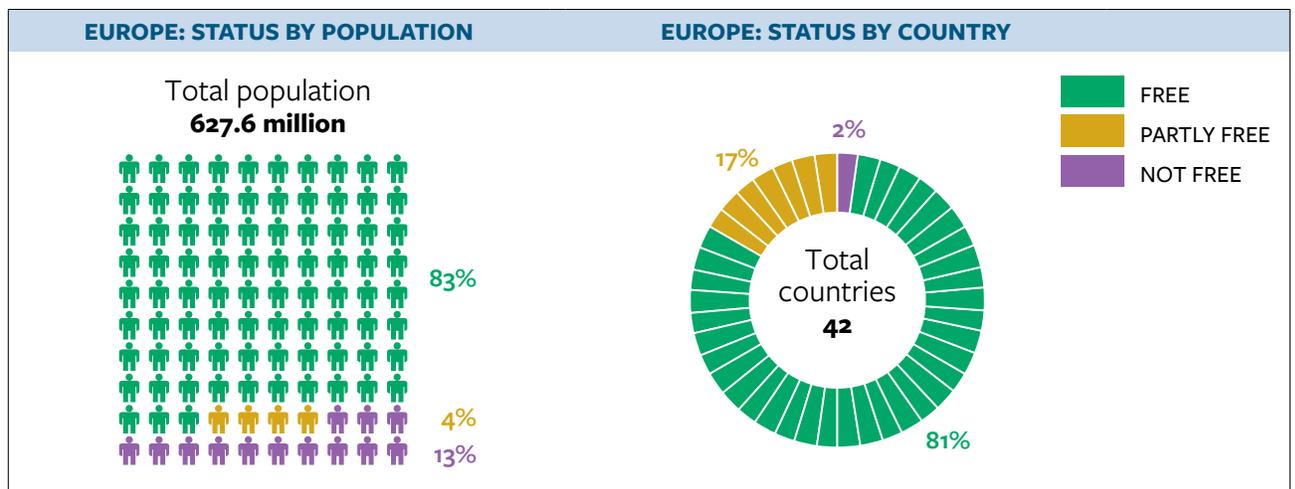
In several cases, however, elections produced at least the possibility of improvements for liberal democracy. Voters in Turkey ousted the ruling Justice and Development Party

from municipal governments in Ankara and Istanbul, even if President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's power was still unchecked at the national level. To the north, Latvia's new government committed itself to tackling corruption and oligarchic influence, and balloting in Kosovo lofted the opposition nationalist Vetëvendosje party into office, where it has an opportunity to change the country's culture of corruption. North Macedonia held a competitive presidential election, helping to repair the antidemocratic legacy of former prime minister Nikola Gruevski. And Romania amended its electoral code, expanding access to the franchise ahead of its presidential vote. The country ended the year with a new government after the corruption-plagued Social Democratic Party, whose agenda had endangered the rule of law, was defeated in a parliamentary confidence motion.

## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

### Elections are rare, rigged, or indefinitely postponed

Tunisia held competitive and credible elections for the presidency and parliament in September and October 2019, confirming its status as the only Free country in the region other than Israel. It was also the only country to earn a score improvement for the year. Tunisians continued to face serious challenges, including an unreformed security sector and the constant threat of terrorist attacks. A state of emergency has been in place continuously since 2015. Nevertheless, Tunisia's democracy, born during the 2011 Arab Spring, has



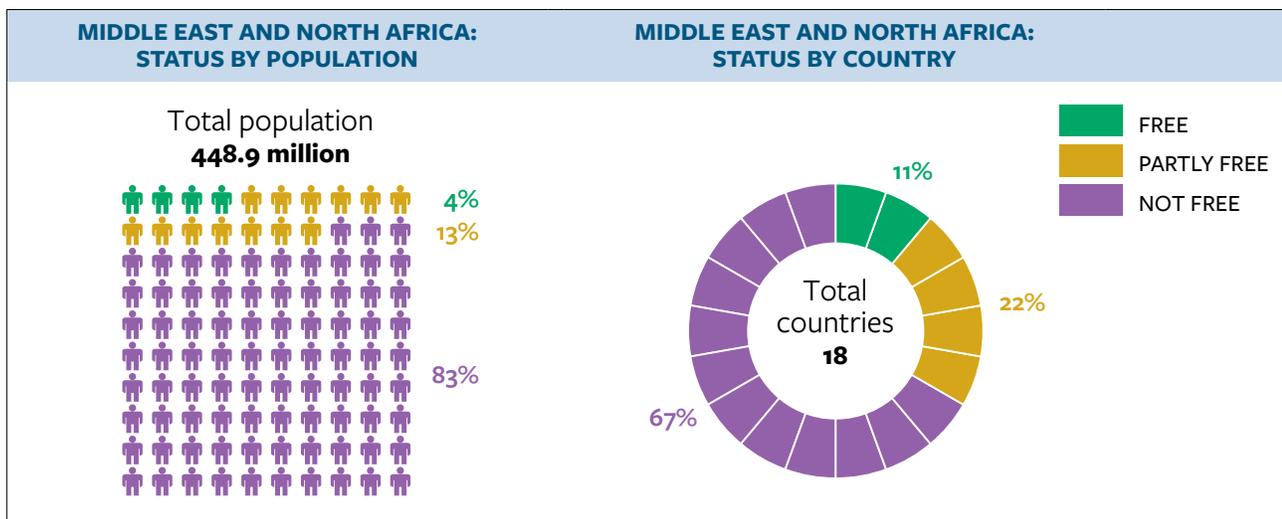
proven resilient so far, and its political achievements are especially impressive in comparison with the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, where credible elections remain exceedingly rare.

In Qatar, for example, the 2003 constitution promised that two-thirds of the national advisory council—the country’s closest thing to a parliament—would be elected every four years, but the emir has repeatedly postponed the voting, most recently in 2019, contributing to a low political rights rating. The elections are currently not expected before 2021, though like Saudi Arabia, which has one of the worst scores in all of *Freedom in the World*, Qatar has held circumscribed balloting for municipal advisory bodies. The UAE, another Persian Gulf state ruled by hereditary monarchs, has held nonpartisan elections for half of its Federal National Council since 2006, but the franchise in 2019 was still limited to a fraction of the citizen population, which in turn accounts for only a tenth of the country’s residents. Turnout remained low even among those with the power to vote.

Elections and governance in Iraq and Lebanon are distorted by sectarian militias, corrupt patronage networks, and interference from foreign powers—entrenched problems that stoked the frustration of protesters during 2019. In Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, all Partly Free countries, powerful monarchies continue to assert their dominance over elected parliaments and control cabinet appointments. In October, for instance, Morocco’s king engineered a cabinet shuffle that replaced many elected politicians with nonpartisan technocrats, leading to a one-point decline.

In the Palestinian territories, both consistently ranked Not Free, the unresolved schism between the Islamist group Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority led by the Fatah faction in the West Bank has contributed to legal confusion and repeated postponement of elections. No presidential election has been held since 2005, and the last parliamentary balloting was in 2006. Authorities loyal to Fatah and Hamas continued to suppress dissent in their respective territories during 2019, underscoring their lack of democratic legitimacy.

Egypt has held multiple elections since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi seized power in 2013, but they have all been tightly controlled, rubber-stamp affairs, with no genuine opposition campaigning permitted. In April 2019, the regime orchestrated a constitutional referendum that extended the president’s current term to 2024, after which he can seek another six years in office. The plebiscite, which suffered from low turnout despite alleged vote-buying and intimidation meant to ensure a strong endorsement, also further weakened judicial independence and strengthened the military’s role in civilian governance, causing a one-point decline in the indicator for representative rule.



## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

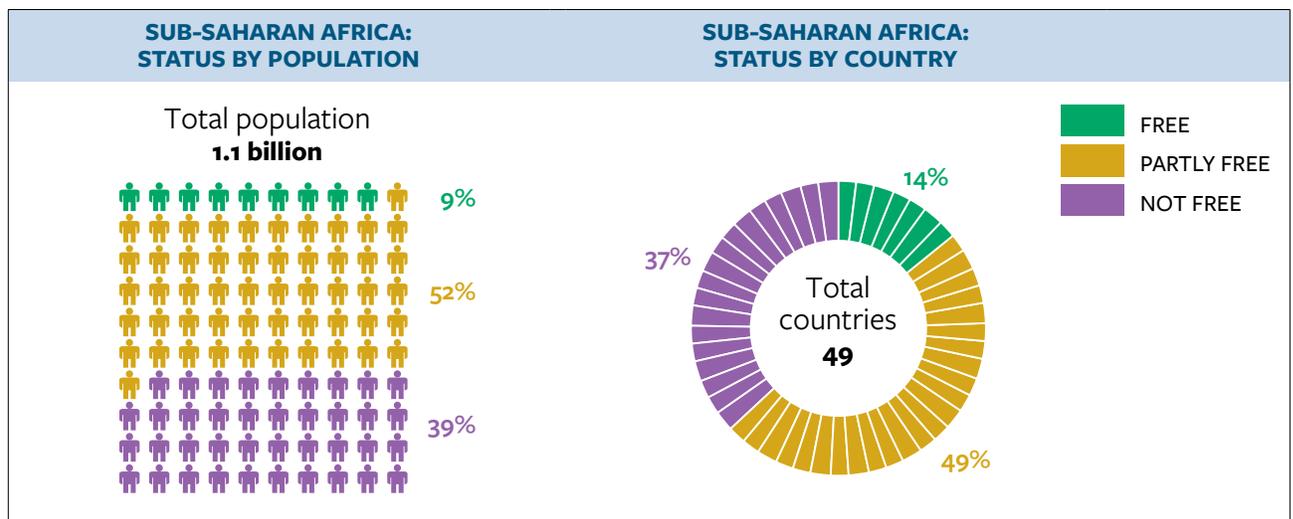
### Setbacks for democracies, authoritarian states in transition

Democratic backsliding in West Africa accelerated in 2019. Benin, previously one of the continent’s top performers, held legislative elections from which all opposition parties were effectively excluded. The flawed process, which featured an internet shutdown and violence against antigovernment protesters, contributed to a remarkable 13-point decline. Senegal’s presidential election went forward without two of the country’s most prominent opposition figures, who were barred from running due to criminal cases that were widely viewed as politically motivated, leading to a one-point decline.

Opposition parties were able to compete in Nigeria’s general elections, but the balloting was marred by major procedural irregularities and a rise in violence and intimidation, driving the country’s scores down in all three election-related indicators. The manipulation of online content during the electoral period and the government’s increasing hostility toward the media threatened free expression throughout the year. In Guinea, which was set to hold a presidential election in 2020, protesters turned out in an attempt to block President Alpha Condé’s drive to change the constitution and run for a third term. The country suffered a three-point decline as legislative elections were postponed and civic groups faced harassment for opposing the third-term effort.

East and Southern Africa presented more of a mixed picture. In Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, the space for independent civic and political activity continued to shrink as incumbent leaders worked to silence dissent. All three countries experienced declines in their scores. However, there was notable progress in some authoritarian states as they proceeded with tenuous reforms. While it remains to be seen whether the military in Sudan will abide by its power-sharing agreement with prodemocracy protest leaders and cede control to civilian leadership ahead of elections in 2022, the Sudanese people have already experienced initial improvements in political rights and civil liberties.

Ethiopia also made notable strides under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, reforming restrictive laws and allowing previously banned political groups to operate openly. Still, internal conflict threatened the durability of these gains, and the 2020 elections will be an important test. Angola’s early progress after a change in leadership in late 2017 was fairly dramatic, but the momentum slowed in 2019, and the results of President João Lourenço’s reform agenda, with its emphasis on battling corruption, have yet to be fully realized.





Protesters set up burning barricades in Benin on May 1, 2019, following parliamentary elections in which all opposition parties were barred from competing. Photo credit: Yanick Folly/AFP via Getty Images.

## Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries featured important developments in 2019 that affected their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny in 2020.

- **Bolivia:** Protesters helped oust President Evo Morales after he claimed a fourth term in a severely compromised election, and a new vote is expected this year.
- **Haiti:** A political stalemate prevented the government from tackling critical problems, as elections were postponed and mass protests disrupted activity at schools, businesses, and hospitals.
- **Hong Kong:** Sustained demonstrations against meddling by Beijing were met with police violence, but undeterred voters expressed overwhelming support for prodemocracy candidates in local elections.
- **India:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi's discriminatory actions against Muslims, and a fierce crackdown on protesters opposing the changes, indicated a deterioration of basic freedoms in the world's largest democracy.
- **Iran:** Security forces killed hundreds of people and arrested thousands in a bid to stamp out antigovernment protests, and authorities set a worrying new precedent with a near-complete internet shutdown that suppressed media coverage and ordinary communications during the crisis.
- **Nigeria:** The year's elections were marred by serious irregularities and widespread intimidation of voters, poll workers, and journalists, marking a decline from the 2015 elections.
- **Sudan:** A prodemocracy protest movement overcame violent reprisals to secure a power-sharing deal with the military, which overthrew entrenched dictator Omar al-Bashir under pressure from the demonstrators.
- **Tunisia:** Competitive presidential and parliamentary elections reinforced the country's democratic institutions, though a state of emergency remained in place due to the ongoing threat of terrorism.
- **Turkey:** Municipal elections yielded landmark victories for the opposition, but restrictions on basic rights persisted, including repression of those speaking out against the state's latest military incursion into northern Syria.
- **Ukraine:** Electoral victories by Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his party offered the new president a mandate to end hostilities in Russian-occupied Donbas and restart the fight against corruption.

### Worst of the Worst

Of the 49 countries designated as Not Free, the following 10 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate Score
Syria	0
Eritrea	2
South Sudan	2
Turkmenistan	2
North Korea	3
Equatorial Guinea	6
Saudi Arabia	7
Somalia	7
Libya	9
Tajikistan	9

## Recommendations for Democracies

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A growing disregard for the conditions that form the foundations of democracy—including respect for the rights of minorities and migrants, space for critical dissent, and commitment to the rule of law—threatens to destabilize the democratic order. At the same time, prioritizing a narrow support base at the expense of ensuring fundamental freedoms for all, and neglecting to tie democratic principles to foreign policy, leaves democracies vulnerable to interference from authoritarian regimes, which have increased repression at home and abroad. Yet mass civic movements serve as a reminder that basic freedoms and good governance are a universal desire.

Democracies should work to support their core principles at home and around the world. The following recommendations are intended to provide a framework for democratic countries as they pursue this goal.

### STRENGTHENING AND PROTECTING CORE VALUES IN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRACIES

- **Respect, protect, and fulfill human rights at home.** Attacks by elected leaders on democratic institutions—including the press, an independent judiciary, and anticorruption agencies—and on the rights of minorities and migrants undermine faith in democracy around the world. Democratic leaders should demonstrate respect for fundamental norms at home by adhering to domestic legislation in line with international human rights laws and standards, and refraining from rhetoric that undermines these standards.
- **Strengthen public support for democratic principles by investing in civic education.** To protect freedom domestically and build support for a foreign policy that protects democratic rights and values abroad, it is essential to foster a stronger public understanding of democratic principles, especially among young people. 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.
- **Guard against the manipulation of open democracies by authoritarian actors by:**
  - **Fighting manipulation of media and social media.**
    - **Increase transparency requirements for foreign state-owned propaganda outlets operating in democratic states.** Outlets like Russia’s RT and China’s CGTN spread government-approved narratives without clearly disclosing that they are government financed. Measures to improve transparency could include reporting requirements for media outlets’ spending on paid advertorials (advertisements designed to resemble an independent, objective news article), ownership structures, and other economic ties to repressive state actors.
    - **Require social media companies to report foreign efforts to spread online disinformation and propaganda.** Social media companies should be required to report regularly to target governments on efforts by foreign governments and nonstate actors to manipulate public opinion and undercut democratic values by spreading disinformation and propaganda on their platforms. In the United States, the government should assess which entities would be the most appropriate to receive these reports, since this information is of interest across jurisdictions, including to intelligence agencies, Congress, the US State Department’s Global Engagement Center, the Securities and Exchange

Commission, and the Department of Justice. The US government should carefully decide on the types and sizes of social media companies required to comply, the data they must submit, and appropriate penalties for noncompliance. The entity receiving the information should report findings regularly to the public and make the data publicly available, while ensuring the protection of users' privacy.

- **Address the use of bots on social media.** Bots (automated accounts pretending to be real people) can be used to distort the online media environment by rapidly spreading false information, fomenting discord, and drowning out independent reporting and factual information. Democracies should address the use of bots in social media manipulation. In the United States, the proposed Bot Disclosure and Accountability Act (S. 2125) would authorize the Federal Trade Commission to require the conspicuous and public disclosure of bots intended to replicate human activity.
  - o **Preventing election interference.** Efforts should include protecting elections from cyberattacks through the use of paper ballots and election audits, and improving transparency and oversight of online political advertisements. In the United States, Congress should pass and the president should sign the Honest Ads Act (S. 1356/H.R. 2592), which would modernize existing laws by applying disclosure requirements to online political advertising.
  - o **Strengthening laws that guard against foreign influence over government officials.** Legislative proposals requiring greater transparency about 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, and modernizing financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.
  - o **Preventing corrupt foreign officials from laundering stolen assets through democracies.** Corrupt actors steal more than \$3 trillion annually from their home countries, the effects of which undermine institutions critical to democracy and harm economic growth in these countries. Stolen funds are routinely funneled through international financial markets, laundered via seemingly legitimate purchases in democratic nations.
- These practices pose a risk to the reputations of companies unwittingly involved and to financial markets overall. Democracies should strengthen transparency laws to ensure that accurate identifying information about purchasers and their funding sources is available. Governments should ensure robust enforcement of laws and investigate and prosecute violators when necessary. In the United States, lawmakers should advance proposed measures like the Corporate Transparency Act (H.R. 2513) and the similar ILLICIT CASH Act (S. 2563), which would prohibit corrupt actors from hiding behind shell corporations by requiring the disclosure of true, beneficial owners.
- o **Making the fight against kleptocracy and international corruption a key priority.** In the United States, the proposed CROOK Act (H.R. 3843) would establish an action fund that would offer financial assistance to foreign countries during historic windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms. Another draft law, the Combating Global Corruption Act (S. 1309) would require the US government to assess corruption around the world and produce a tiered list of countries. US foreign assistance directed at the lowest-tiered countries would require specific risk assessments and anticorruption mechanisms, such as provisions to recover funds that are misused.
  - **Restrict the export of sophisticated surveillance tools to unfree countries, and require businesses exporting dual-use technologies to report on the human rights impact of those products.** Technologies such as facial-recognition surveillance, social media monitoring, and targeted interception or collection of data equip authoritarian governments with new and robust power to violate fundamental rights. The sale of such technologies—including those that use machine learning, natural-language processing, and deep learning—should be restricted for countries rated Partly Free or Not Free by any Freedom House publication. Businesses exporting dual-use technologies (those with both civilian and military purposes) should be required to report annually on the impact of their exports, including by disclosing the countries to which they have exported such technologies, potential human rights concerns in those countries, a summary of pre-export due diligence undertaken to ensure that products are not misused, any human rights violations that have occurred as a result of the use or potential use of their technologies, and any efforts undertaken to mitigate the harm done and prevent further abuses.

## DEFENDING AND EXPANDING DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD

- **Support democracy in both word and deed as a key pillar of foreign policy by:**

- **Emphasizing democracy-strengthening programs in foreign assistance.** Democracies are to be applauded for the significant resources they have invested in recent decades to strengthen democratic movements, systems, and institutions around the world. Yet significant, consistent funding and creative approaches that take advantage of new technological tools and data are needed to counter authoritarian resurgence. Democracies should select priorities based on recognition of what can realistically be achieved through external assistance, with emphasis on long-term and locally driven solutions. A high priority should be supporting nonstate actors, including civil society and citizen-led social movements, with technical assistance and training on issues such as coalition and constituency building, advocacy, and how to operate safely both physically and digitally. Connecting activists across borders so that they can share strategies, tools, and approaches should also be prioritized. Programs to ensure that elections are free, fair, and transparent and that power is genuinely contested are also critical.
- **Focusing attention and funding on countries at critical junctures.** These include countries that have experienced recent expansions in freedom, such as Ethiopia and Sudan, as well as countries in which democratic progress is threatened, such as Benin and Sri Lanka. Policymakers from democratic nations should engage in high-level public diplomacy with these states to signal international commitment to democratic progress. Funding should assist democratically inclined leaders and local civil society organizations in delivering tangible expansion of political rights and civil liberties.
- **Supporting civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy.** Peaceful protest movements calling for reform can spur 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 crackdowns by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance, and public condemnation.

- **Investing in alliances with other democracies, and in multilateral institutions.** Confronting authoritarian and antidemocratic trends globally requires a united front among democratic nations. Assumptions that a country's individual sovereignty is threatened by deep cooperation with allies will only isolate democracies from one another, leaving them weaker and less capable of meeting the challenge of resurgent authoritarianism. Democracies should work together to promote their shared values and constrain the behavior of 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 taking advantage of international systems—such as China's efforts to constrain Taiwan's participation in international fora, the recent abuse of Interpol "red notices" to apprehend journalists and rights defenders, and joint efforts by undemocratic rulers to cut the number of human rights-related jobs within UN peacekeeping missions.
- **Addressing impunity by imposing targeted sanctions on individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses and acts of corruption.** In the United States, a variety of laws allow authorities to block visas or freeze the assets of any person or entity, including private companies, that engages in or supports corruption or human rights abuses. These accountability tools allow governments to sanction perpetrators without harming the general population, and should be applied to individuals and entities regardless of whether their home country is considered an ally or adversary. Countries with similar laws should robustly enforce them, and legislatures in countries without such laws should seek to pass them.

## Recommendations for the Private Sector

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Private companies play a key role in sustaining—or weakening—democracy. They have a special responsibility to be mindful of the impact their business activities have on democracy and human rights, and should:

- **Adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.** This includes avoiding commercial relationships with authoritarian governments that force them to violate fundamental rights. Instead, companies should commit to respecting the human rights of their customers and workers. As part of this effort, they should conduct periodic assessments to help them fully understand the effects of their products, policies, and activities. Upon completion of these assessments, companies should develop actionable plans to remedy any evident or potential harm. Given its unique position in authoritarian settings, the technology sector in particular should refuse business arrangements that require either active complicity in or passive acceptance of political censorship and information controls. All companies should ensure that products are not being manufactured through the use of forced labor, and that joint research is not being used for rights violations.
- **Evaluate potential partners' adherence to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.** Companies should refrain from partnering 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.
- **Develop rapid-response teams to address cybersecurity and disinformation incidents.** Ahead of significant elections and at times when political tensions are high, social media companies and other content providers should create specialized teams in countries around the world that anticipate digital interference, and devise strategies to prevent interference tactics and mitigate their effects. When designing and implementing new tools to address cybersecurity and disinformation, companies should communicate openly about what new policies they are putting in place and engage with local civil society actors that can provide expertise on the political and cultural contexts in which companies work. Companies should also consult objective research that will help inform them of potential flashpoints.

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

*Freedom in the World 2020* evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2019. Each country and territory is assigned between 0 and 4 points on a series of 25 indicators, for an aggregate score of up to 100. The indicators are grouped into the categories of political rights (0–40) and civil liberties (0–60), whose totals are weighted equally to determine whether the country or territory has an overall status of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

The methodology, which is derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is applied to all countries and territories, irrespective of geographic location, ethnic or religious composition, or level of economic development.

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

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



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

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036

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[@FreedomHouse](https://twitter.com/FreedomHouse)  
[info@freedomhouse.org](mailto:info@freedomhouse.org)  
202.296.5101

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