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Freedom in the World 2018: **Democracy in Crisis**

WASHINGTON, January 16, 2018 — Democracy is under assault and in retreat around the globe, a crisis that has intensified as America’s democratic standards erode at an accelerating pace, according to *Freedom in the World 2018*, the latest edition of the annual report on political rights and civil liberties, released today by Freedom House.

The report finds that 2017 was the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Seventy-one countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties in 2017, with only 35 registering gains. Once-promising states such as Turkey, Venezuela, Poland, and Tunisia were among those experiencing declines in democratic standards. The recent democratic opening in Myanmar was permanently damaged by a shocking campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya minority.

“Democracy is facing its most serious crisis in decades,” said Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House. “Democracy’s basic tenets—including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—are under siege around the world.”

Freedom in the World 2018 reports on how China and Russia have taken advantage of the retreat of leading democracies both to increase repression at home and to export their malign influence to other countries. To maintain power, these autocratic regimes are acting beyond their borders to squelch open debate, pursue dissidents, and compromise rules-based institutions.

A major development of 2017 was the retreat of the United States as both a champion and an exemplar of democracy. While Freedom House has tracked a slow decline in political rights and civil liberties in the United States for the past seven years, the decline accelerated in 2017, owing to growing evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 elections, violations of basic ethical standards by the new administration, and a reduction in government transparency.

Although U.S. institutions like the press and the judiciary have remained resilient in the face of unprecedented attacks from President Trump, the attacks could ultimately leave them weakened, with serious implications for the health of U.S. democracy and America’s place in the world. Meanwhile, the abdication of the traditional U.S. role as the leading champion of democracy is of deep concern and potential consequence in the ongoing struggle against modern authoritarians and their pernicious ideas.

“The core institutions of American democracy are being battered by an administration that has treated the country’s traditional checks and balances with disdain,” Abramowitz said.

“The Trump administration has made a sharp break from the political consensus of the last 70 years by casting aside democracy as the animating force behind American foreign policy,” Abramowitz added. “The hastening withdrawal of the United States from its historical commitment to supporting democracy overseas makes the challenge posed by authoritarian regimes all the more powerful and threatening.”

In another significant development, Turkey moved from Partly Free to Not Free as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan broadened and intensified the crackdown on his perceived opponents that began after a failed 2016 coup attempt, with dire consequences for Turkish citizens.

Over the period since the 12-year slide began in 2006, 113 countries have seen a net decline, and only 62 have experienced a net improvement.

KEY GLOBAL FINDINGS:

- Of the 195 countries assessed, 88 (45 percent) were rated Free, 58 (30 percent) Partly Free, and 49 (25 percent) Not Free.
- The United States saw declines in its political rights due to:
 - Growing evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election campaign and a lack of action by the Trump administration either to condemn or to prevent a reoccurrence of such meddling
 - Violations of basic ethical standards by the new administration, including the president's failure to divest himself of his business empire, his hiring of family members as senior advisers, and his appointment of cabinet members and other senior officials despite apparent conflicts of interest
 - A reduction in government transparency, including an unusual pattern of false statements by the administration, the president's failure to disclose basic information such as his personal tax data, policy and other decisions made without meaningful input from relevant agencies and officials, and the removal of information on issues of public interest from government websites for political or ideological reasons
- Corrupt and repressive states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea put global stability at risk by perpetuating long-running regional conflicts, fueling humanitarian crises, and in North Korea's case, rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal.
- Sharp democratic declines in Tunisia in 2017 threatened the only Free country in the Arab world and the sole success story from the 2011 Arab Spring.
- The forced resignation under military pressure of elected president Robert Mugabe pushed Zimbabwe over the threshold from Partly Free to Not Free.
- Myanmar's campaign of ethnic cleansing in 2017 demonstrated the flawed nature of the country's limited democratic opening, which had been welcomed by the international community since 2010.

Worst of the Worst:

- Of the 49 countries designated as Not Free, the following 12 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties, earning less than 10 points on a 100-point scale (beginning with the least free): Syria, South Sudan, Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Sudan, Central African Republic, and Libya.

KEY REGIONAL FINDINGS:

Americas

- Under new president Lenín Moreno, Ecuador unexpectedly turned away from repressive rule, easing pressure on the media, promoting greater engagement with civil society, and supporting anticorruption efforts.
- Mexico's democracy has been shaken by new revelations of extensive state surveillance aimed at journalists and civil society activists who threatened to expose government corruption and other wrongdoing.

Asia

- Hong Kong's diminishing political rights received another blow as four prodemocracy lawmakers were expelled from the legislature, protest leaders were sentenced to jail time, and pro-Beijing authorities worked to stamp out a movement calling for local self-determination.
- The Communist Party leadership in Beijing continued to expand its international influence by building up a propaganda and censorship apparatus with global reach. It used economic and other ties to influence democracies like Australia and New Zealand, compelled various countries to repatriate Chinese citizens seeking refuge abroad, and provided diplomatic and material support to repressive governments from Southeast Asia to Africa.
- Hopes for democracy in Cambodia were dashed as Prime Minister Hun Sen oversaw a decisive crackdown on the country's beleaguered opposition and press corps.
- Nepal held its first national, regional, and local elections under a new constitution, with high voter turnout despite some reports of violence.

Eurasia

- Vladimir Putin's Russia demonstrated the increasing sophistication and reach of modern authoritarian regimes. It organized disinformation campaigns during elections in European democracies, cultivated ties with xenophobic political parties across the continent, threatened its closest neighbors, and served as an alternative source of military aid for Middle Eastern dictatorships. A central goal of these efforts was to disrupt democratic states and fracture the institutions that bind them together.
- Surrounded by neighbors with entrenched dictators, Uzbekistan prompted cautious optimism as its new administration—formed after the death of longtime autocrat Islam Karimov—ended some forms of forced labor and granted new if limited space for civil society.

Europe

- In Hungary and Poland, populist leaders continued to consolidate power, smearing the opposition in public media and passing laws designed to curb civil society. Poland's ruling party also pressed ahead with an alarming effort to assert political control over the judiciary.
- Reverberations from the 2015–16 refugee crisis continued to fuel the rise of xenophobic, far-right parties, which gained ground in elections in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria.
- In Serbia, EU leaders' tolerance of President Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian tendencies allowed him to further sideline the opposition and undermine what remains of the country's independent media.

Middle East and North Africa

- Libya slid into the Worst of the Worst category as disputes between rival authorities in the country's east and west led to political paralysis. Reports of modern-day slave markets were added to other abuses against refugees and migrants stranded in militia-run detention camps.
- In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced plans for social and economic reforms, but he also presided over hundreds of arbitrary arrests and aggressive moves against potential rivals. He showed no inclination to open the political system.

Sub-Saharan Africa

- The forced exit of President Robert Mugabe in late 2017 left the future of democracy in Zimbabwe uncertain, given that his successor was a key member of Mugabe's repressive regime.
- While Kenya's Supreme Court initially won broad praise for annulling the results of what it deemed to be a flawed presidential election, President Uhuru Kenyatta's ultimate victory in a rerun was marred by a lack of substantive electoral reforms, incidents of political violence, and a boycott by the main opposition candidate.
- In Tanzania, the government of President John Magufuli stepped up repression of dissent, detaining opposition politicians, shuttering media outlets, and arresting citizens for posting critical views on social media.
- In a rare positive story, The Gambia secured one of the largest improvements to date in *Freedom in the World*. The West African state moved from Not Free to Partly Free after former dictator Yahya Jammeh—under international pressure—finally conceded to elected president Adama Barrow, leading to successful legislative elections, a return of exiled journalists and activists, and the release of political prisoners.

Countries to Watch in 2018:

The following countries are among those that may experience important developments in the coming year, and deserve special scrutiny.

- Opposition alliances are crystallizing ahead of **Afghanistan's** long-overdue parliamentary elections, but preparations for the polls have been lacking, and it is uncertain whether they will be held as planned in 2018.
- Newly elected President João Lourenço of **Angola** moved to weaken the control of his predecessor's family in 2017, but it remains to be seen whether he will make a serious effort to stem endemic corruption or ease restrictions on politics, the media, and civil society.
- The ruling Georgian Dream party recently pushed through constitutional amendments in **Georgia** that—combined with the financial backing of its reclusive billionaire patron—will make an effective challenge by the fractured opposition in future elections even more unlikely, potentially cementing the party's control for years to come.
- Improved security in **Iraq** has enabled competition among newly registered parties and candidates ahead of the 2018 elections, which will test the resilience of the country's political system.
- A democratically elected, ethnically inclusive government in **Macedonia** is seeking to root out corruption and other systemic abuses that grew worse under its scandal-plagued predecessor.

- The July 2018 general elections in **Mexico** will serve as a referendum on an administration that has failed to curb rampant violence and corruption, and has become increasingly hostile toward independent media and civil society activists.
- Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s controversial reform program in **Saudi Arabia** is likely to cause even more upheaval in government and society, as small gains in social freedoms and efforts to attract foreign investors go hand in hand with attempts to quash dissent and fight off perceived opponents.
- Under new leadership, **South Africa**’s African National Congress will be under pressure to clean up its image—sullied by corruption linked to President Jacob Zuma—ahead of general elections in 2019.
- The media and the judiciary in the **United States**—both of which have a long history of independence—face acute pressure from the Trump administration, whose smears threaten to undermine their legitimacy.
- **Uzbekistan**’s new government has taken tentative steps toward greater openness and international engagement, but lasting change in one of the world’s most repressive political systems will require sustained international attention as well as support for independent voices in the country’s media and civil society.

To view the summary of findings, see the report here: www.freedomintheworld.org.

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