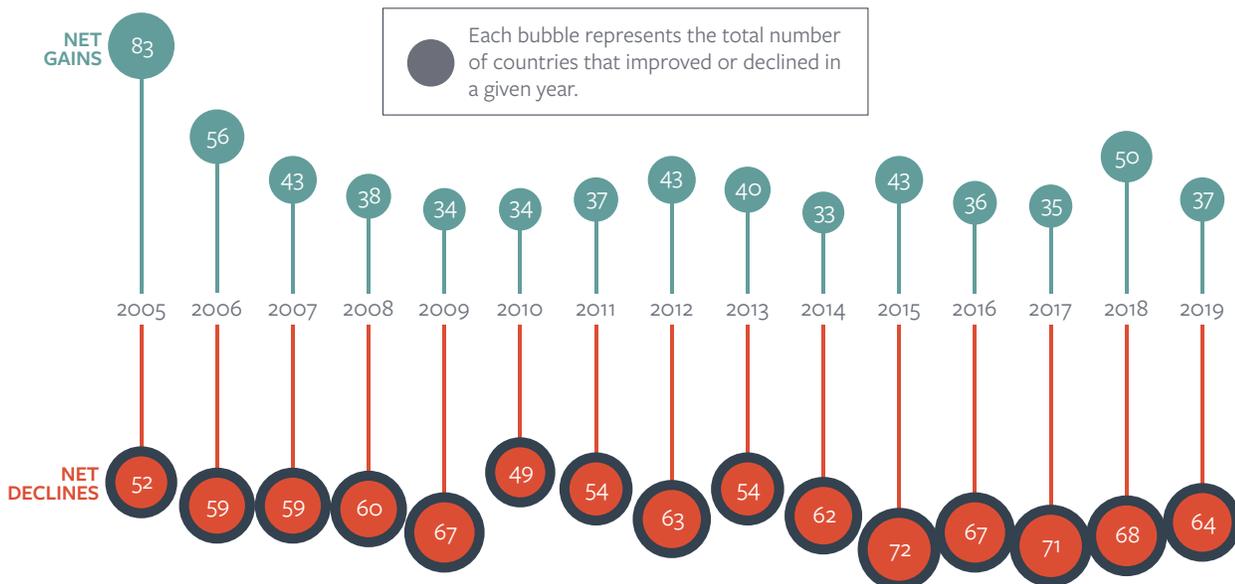# A Leaderless Struggle
for Democracy

by Sarah Repucci

Democracy is under assault across the globe. In 2019, *Freedom in the World* recorded the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. 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.

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 bottom of the scale. More than half of the countries that were rated Free or Not Free have suffered a net decline in the past decade.

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.

Each bubble represents the total number of countries that improved or declined in a given year.

NET GAINS

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
83	56	43	38	34	34	37	43	40	33	43	36	35	50	37

NET DECLINES

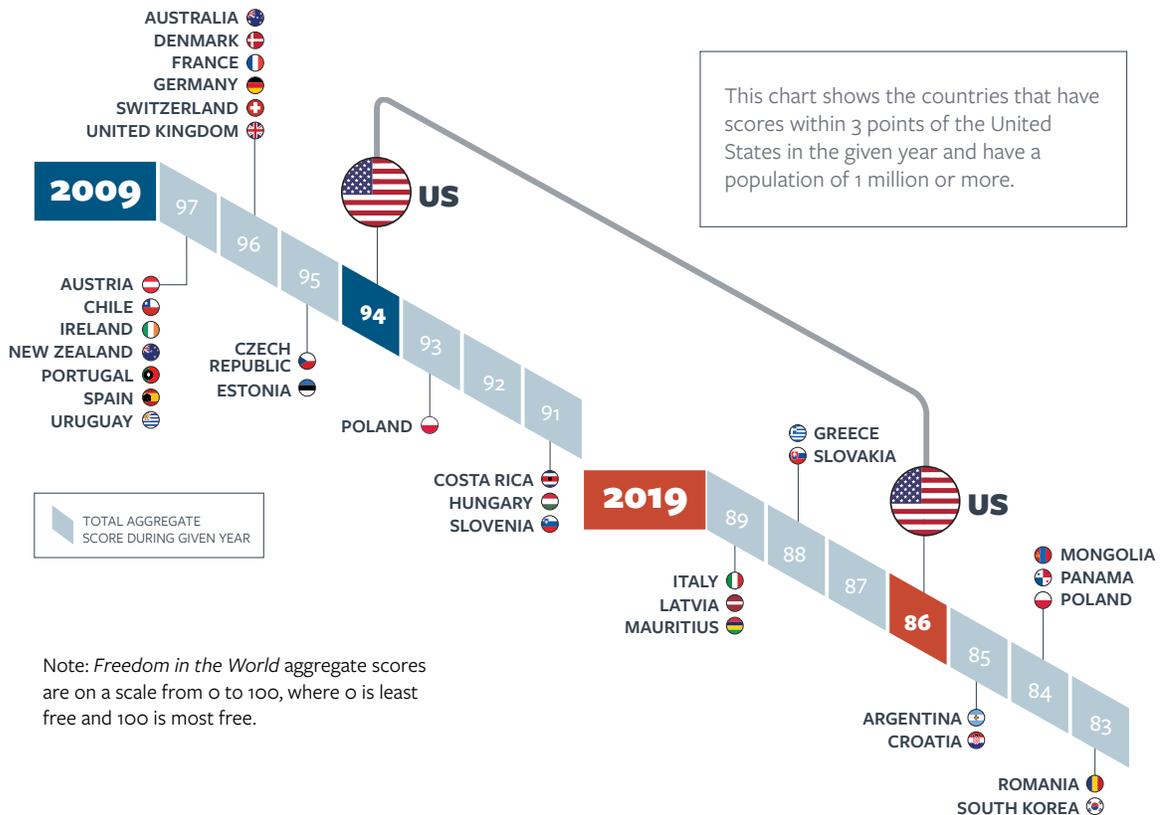| 2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
52	59	59	60	67	49	54	63	54	62	72	67	71	68	64

Key Global Findings

- Of the 25 largest democracies, **India** suffered the largest score decline. Continued aggressions against Muslims in the country have shaken the rule of law and threatened the secular and inclusive nature of its political system. Long viewed as a democratic counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific region, the Indian government's alarming departures from democratic norms could blur the values-based distinction between Beijing and New Delhi.

- The Indian central government's annulment of the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority state, caused **Indian Kashmir** to experience 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.

- Democratic processes in the **United States** are under threat, as shown through its failure to uphold a nonpartisan impeachment process, ensure the fair and equal treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and safeguard electoral integrity. At the same time, US foreign policy has been inconsistent on the deterioration of democratic institutions and respect for human rights abroad.

- The growth of mass protests across a variety of political environments underscores the universality of the human desire for basic freedoms and good governance. 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 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.

HOW DOES THE UNITED STATES MATCH UP?

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

This chart shows the countries that have scores within 3 points of the United States in the given year and have a population of 1 million or more.

2009

- 97 — AUSTRALIA, DENMARK, FRANCE, GERMANY, SWITZERLAND, UNITED KINGDOM
- 96 — AUSTRIA, CHILE, IRELAND, NEW ZEALAND, PORTUGAL, SPAIN, URUGUAY
- 95 — CZECH REPUBLIC, ESTONIA
- 94 — **US**
- 93 — POLAND
- 92 — COSTA RICA, HUNGARY, SLOVENIA
- 91

2019

- 89 — ITALY, LATVIA, MAURITIUS
- 88 — GREECE, SLOVAKIA
- 87
- 86 — **US**
- 85 — ARGENTINA, CROATIA
- 84 — MONGOLIA, PANAMA, POLAND
- 83 — ROMANIA, SOUTH KOREA

TOTAL AGGREGATE SCORE DURING GIVEN YEAR

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.

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.

Key Regional Findings

In addition to those listed above, the following countries saw developments of regional significance.

Americas

- A hike in Santiago's mass transit fares sparked widespread protests and a broader critique of the political system in **Chile**.

- **Venezuela** 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.

Asia-Pacific

- Legislative elections in the **Philippines** solidified majorities for allies of President Rodrigo Duterte, who has overseen a campaign of extrajudicial killings.

- Soon after Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of **Sri Lanka**'s former authoritarian ruler, was elected president himself, there were reports of a crackdown on journalist sand law enforcement officials who had investigated the Rajapaksa family for alleged corruption and human rights violations.

Eurasia

- 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.

- 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.

Europe

- 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.

Middle East and North Africa

- In April 2019, the regime of **Egypt**'s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi orchestrated a constitutional referendum that extended the president's current term to 2024, after which he can seek another six years in office.

- 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.

Sub-Saharan Africa

- **Ethiopia** 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.

- 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.

STATUS CHANGES

Benin

🔻 Declined from Free to Partly Free

El Salvador

🔻 Declined from Free to Partly Free

Indian Kashmir

🔻 Declined from Partly Free to Not Free

Mauritania

🔺 Improved from Not Free to Partly Free

Myanmar

🔻 Declined from Partly Free to Not Free

Senegal

🔻 Declined from Free to Partly Free

Thailand

🔺 Improved from Not Free to Partly Free

For more information, please visit **FreedomInTheWorld.org**

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

POPULATION
1.39 billion people[1]

GDP
$2.7 trillion[2]

Loss of autonomous status
The central government revoked Indian Kashmir's autonomous status and initiated a harsh crackdown on political rights and civil liberties.

INDIAN KASHMIR

Internet shutdown
An internet blackout in Indian Kashmir began in August and lasted into 2020, becoming the longest shutdown imposed by a democracy.

POPULATION AFFECTED: 7 million*

Suppression of protests
Demonstrations sparked by the Citizenship Amendment Act were often harshly suppressed by authorities.

POPULATION AFFECTED: Hundreds of thousands*

Freedom of expression under threat
Journalists, academics, and others have faced harassment and intimidation when addressing politically sensitive topics.

Controversial citizen register
Millions of people in Assam, mainly ethnic Bengali Muslims, were rendered stateless by a new count of citizens.

POPULATION AFFECTED: 2 million*

Localized internet shutdowns
Localized internet shutdowns were imposed during protests across the country.

Citizenship Amendment Act
A discriminatory law passed in late 2019 offered special protection only to non-Muslims from neighboring states.

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.

Recommendations

Strengthening and Protecting Core Values in Established Democracies

- **Respect, protect, and fulfill human rights at home**. 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.** 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 by increasing transparency requirements for foreign state-owned propaganda outlets, requiring social media companies to report foreign efforts to spread online disinformation and propaganda, and addressing the use of bots on social media; preventing election interference; strengthening laws that guard against foreign influence over government officials; preventing corrupt foreign officials from laundering stolen assets through democracies; and making the fight against kleptocracy and international corruption a key priority. In the United States, the following legislation would address some of these issues:

  o The 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.

- The Honest Ads Act (S. 1356/H.R. 2592) would modernize existing laws by applying disclosure requirements to online political advertising.

- 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.

- The 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.

- 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.

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. 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. Programs that ensure that elections are free, fair, and transparent and that power is genuinely contested, and programs that connect activists across borders so that they can share strategies, tools, and approaches should also be prioritized.

- **Focusing attention and funding on countries at critical junctures**, including countries—such as Ethiopia and Sudan—that have experienced recent expansions in freedom, and countries—such as Benin and Sri Lanka—in which democratic progress is threatened. 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.

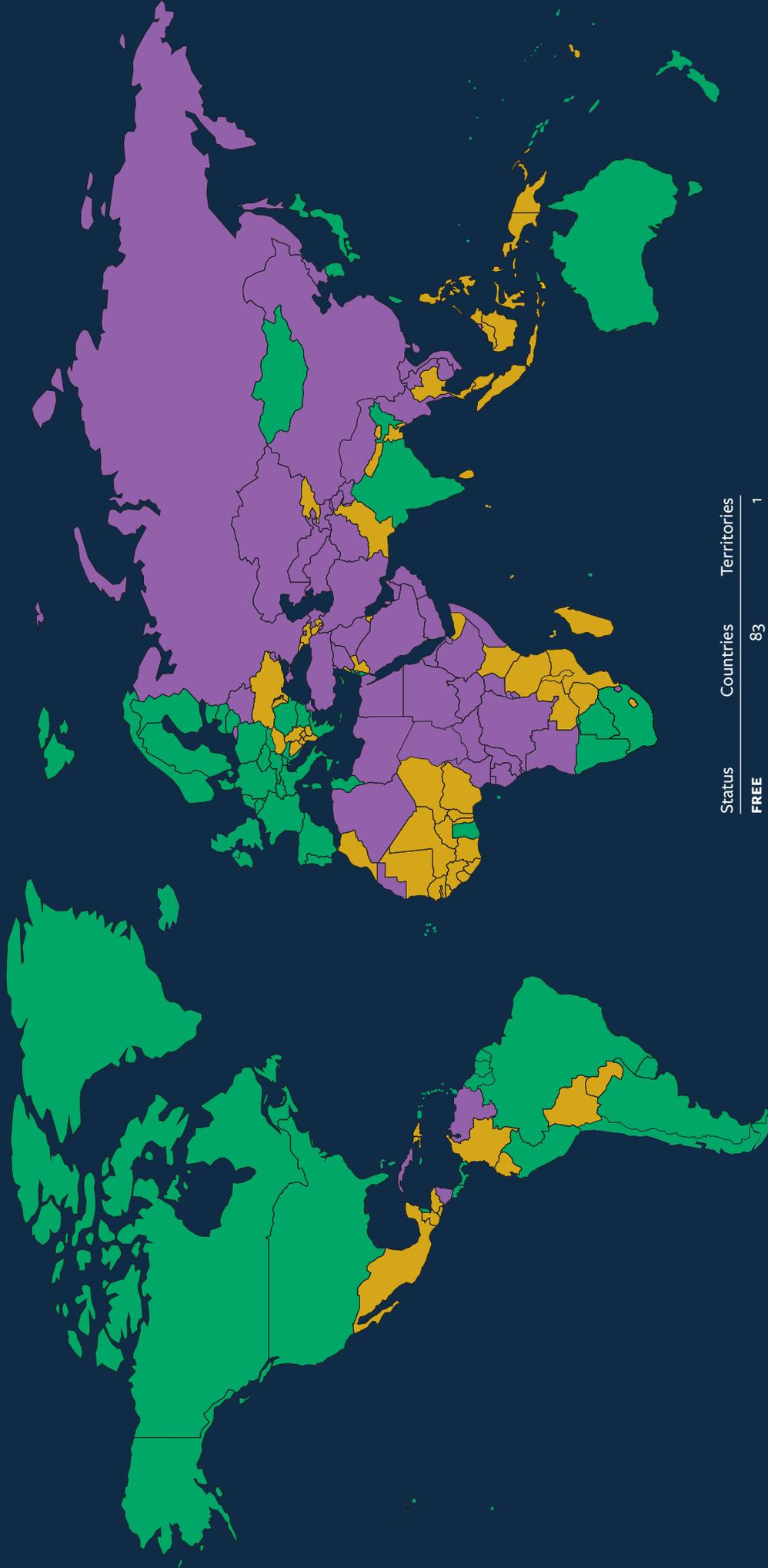- **Supporting civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy.** Democratic governments should provide vocal, public support for grassroots prodemocracy movements, and respond to any violent crackdowns by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance, and public condemnation.

- **Investing in alliances with other democracies, and in multilateral institutions.** 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.

Harnessing the Power of the Private Sector to Protect Democracy

- **Adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**, including by avoiding commercial relationships with authoritarian governments that force them to violate fundamental rights.

- **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 and can 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**, including by creating specialized teams that devise strategies to prevent and mitigate digital interference ahead of elections and times when political tensions are high and communicating openly about new policies companies are putting in place while engaging with local civil society actors that can provide expertise on political and cultural contexts.

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

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

Status	Countries	Territories
FREE	83	1
PARTLY FREE	63	4
NOT FREE	49	10
Total	**195**	**15**

FREE

PARTLY FREE

NOT FREE