

The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule

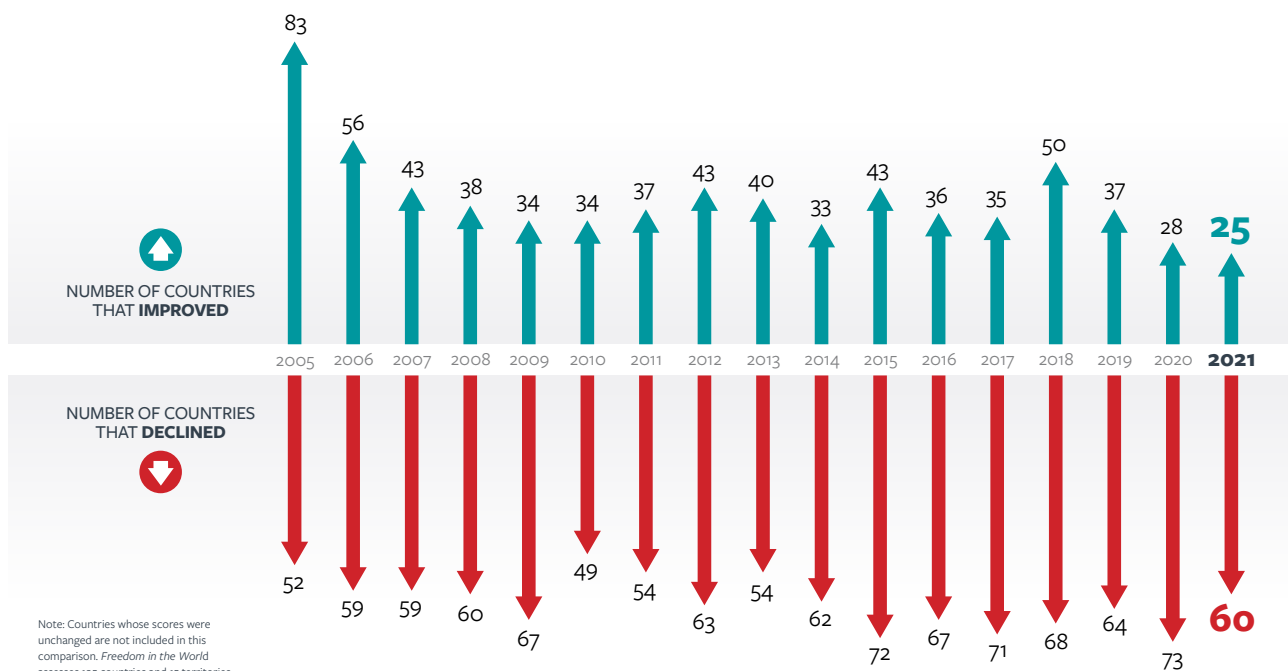
By Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz

Global freedom faces a dire threat. Around the world, the enemies of liberal democracy—a form of self-government in which human rights are recognized and every individual is entitled to equal treatment under law—are accelerating their attacks.

Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same. In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power.

A GROWING DEMOCRACY GAP: 16 YEARS OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

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

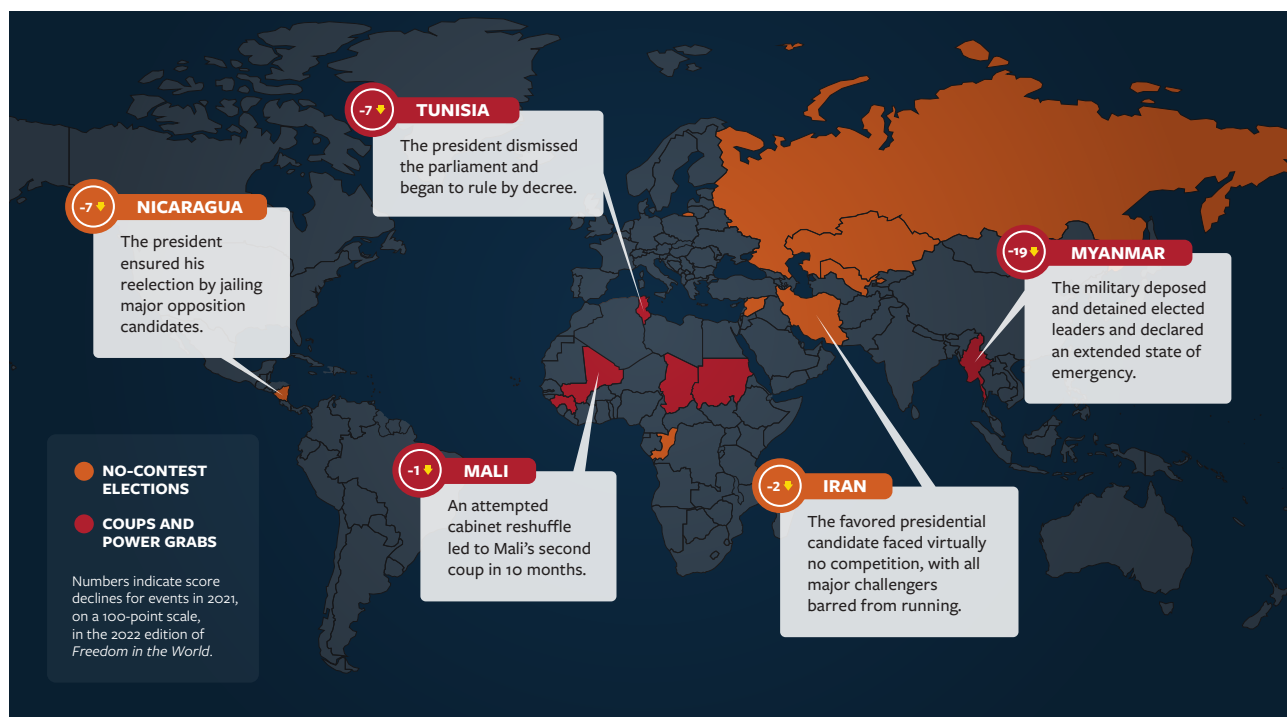


Those countries that have struggled in the space between democracy and authoritarianism, meanwhile, are increasingly tilting toward the latter. The global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy's defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail.

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

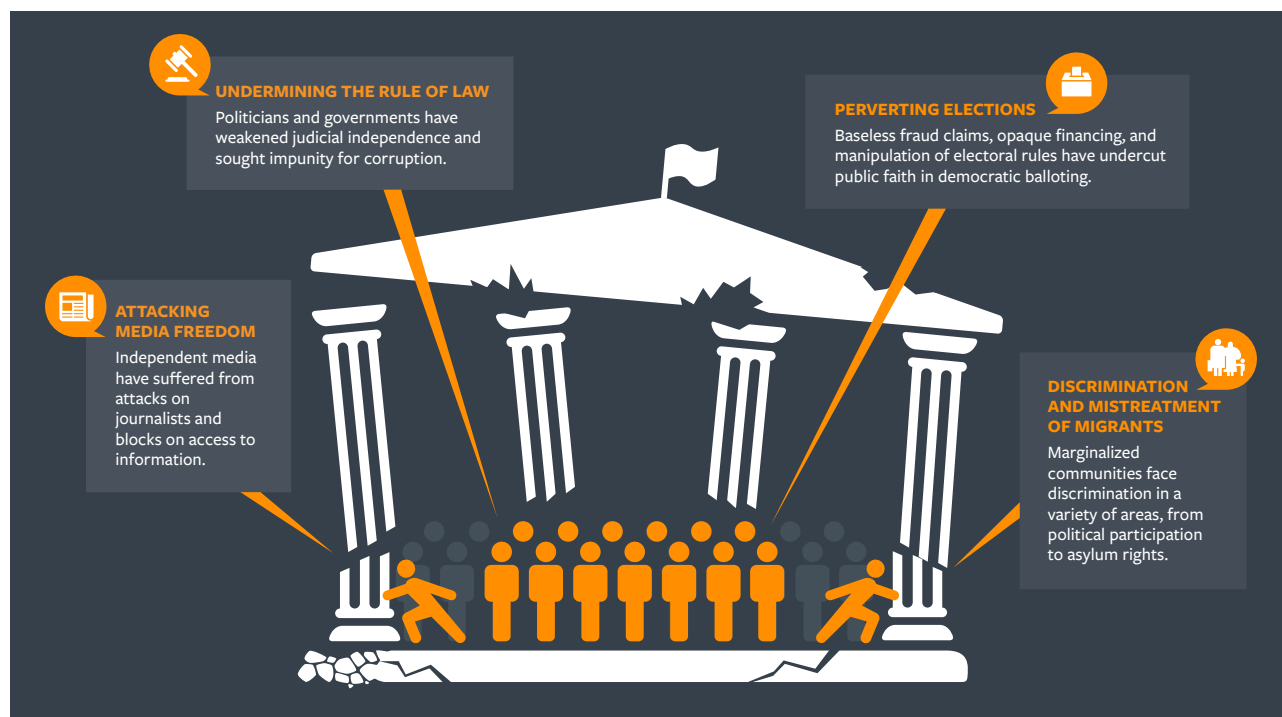
BREAKING DEMOCRATIC NORMS

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



CHALLENGES WITHIN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRACIES

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



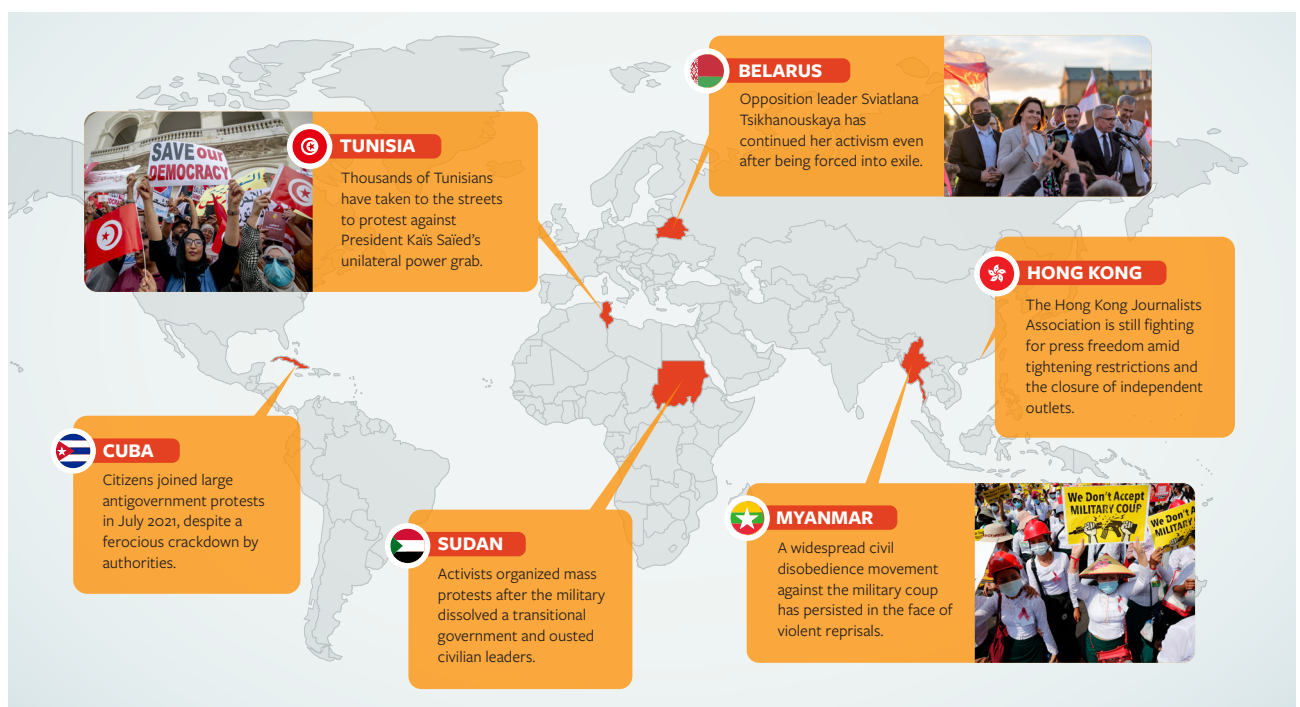
Key Global Findings

- Autocrats have created a more favorable international environment for themselves over the past decade and a half,** empowered by their own political and economic might as well as waning pressure from democracies. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays a leading role in promoting autocratic norms. Citing its self-serving interpretation of state sovereignty, the party strives to carve out space for incumbent governments to act as they choose without oversight or consequences. It offers an alternative to democracies as a source of international support and investment, helping would-be autocrats to entrench themselves in office, adopt aspects of the CCP governance model, and enrich their regimes while ignoring principles like transparency and fair competition.
- Elections, even when critically flawed, have long given authoritarian leaders a veneer of legitimacy, both at home and abroad. **As international norms shift in the direction of autocracy, however, these exercises in democratic theater have become increasingly farcical.** In the run-up to Russia's September 2021 parliamentary elections, the regime of President Vladimir Putin dispelled the illusion of competition

- by imprisoning opposition leader Aleksey Navalny and tarring his movement as “extremist,” which prevented any candidates who were even loosely associated with it from running for office. The November 2021 presidential election in Nicaragua was similarly uncompetitive. President Daniel Ortega’s authoritarian government arrested at least seven potential opposition candidates on charges including treason.
- In another sign that international deterrents against antidemocratic behavior are losing force, **coups were more common in 2021 than in any of the previous 10 years.** The first took place in February in Myanmar. As a result, Myanmar experienced the world’s largest contraction in freedom last year. In Sudan, weeks before the transitional government was scheduled to come under full civilian control after a 2019 coup, the military seized power in October 2021 and declared a state of emergency.
 - **Democracies are being harmed from within by illiberal forces, including unscrupulous politicians willing to corrupt and shatter the very institutions that brought them to power.** This was arguably most visible last year in the United States, where rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6 as part of an organized attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election. But freely elected leaders from Brazil to India have also taken or threatened a variety of antidemocratic actions, and the resulting breakdown in shared values among democracies has led to a weakening of these values on the international stage.

GLOBAL RESISTANCE TO AUTHORITARIAN RULE

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



- **Authoritarian leaders are no longer isolated holdouts in a democratizing world. Instead they are actively collaborating with one another to spread new forms of repression and rebuff democratic pressure.** In some cases the authoritarian assistance is largely economic. For example, the governments of Russia, China, and Turkey have provided trade and investment to the Venezuelan regime, offsetting sanctions imposed by democracies for its rigged elections and crackdowns on the opposition. But in other instances the support is much more direct: During the 2020 protests against fraudulent elections in Belarus, the Kremlin dispatched Russian propagandists to take the place of striking Belarusian journalists, and offered its security forces to bolster the Belarusian authorities’

violent dispersal of demonstrations. Antidemocratic figures within more democratic countries have begun to engage in international cooperation as well.

- **Even in a year dominated by disturbing setbacks to democracy, people around the world demonstrated its continued appeal and capacity for renewal.** From Sudan to Myanmar, people continue to risk their lives in the pursuit of freedom in their countries. Many others undertake dangerous journeys in order to live freely elsewhere. Democratic governments and societies must harness and support this common desire for fundamental rights and build a world in which it is ultimately fulfilled.

Freedom in the World 2022 Status Changes

Ecuador



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

Guinea



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

Haiti



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

Peru



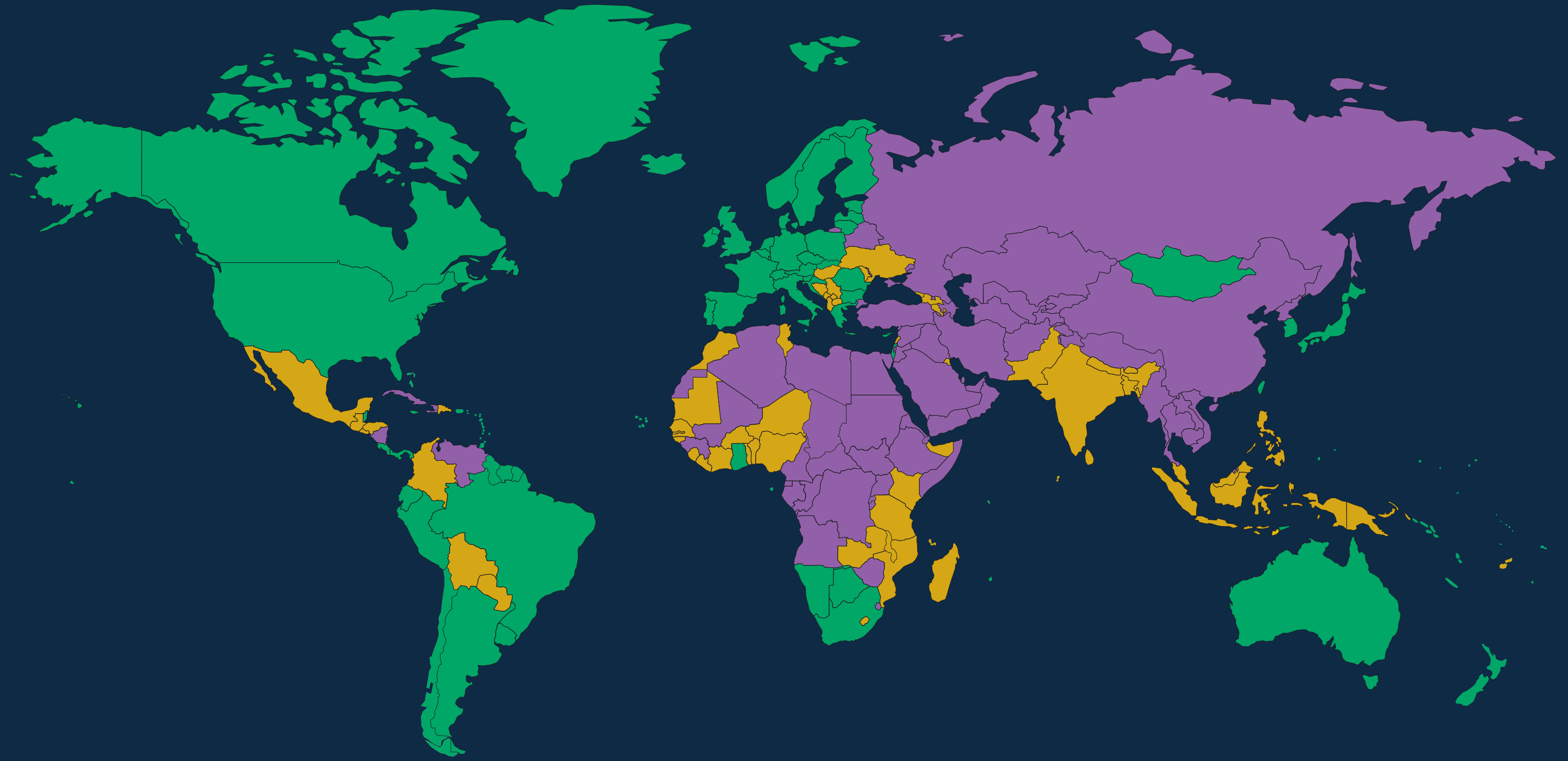
Peru’s status improved from Partly Free to Free because the successful election of a new president and Congress served to ease, at least temporarily, a pattern of institutional clashes between the executive and legislative branches that had disrupted governance for a number of years.

Tunisia



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

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022



FREE PARTLY FREE NOT FREE

Countries in the Spotlight

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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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

Worst of the Worst

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

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

Key Regional Findings

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

AFRICA

- Political crises and power grabs further compromised the struggle for democratic progress in Africa, most notably through the resurgence in military coups that affected Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan.
- In Ethiopia, a state of emergency granted broad powers to the security forces, allowing the arbitrary detention of anyone suspected of cooperating with terrorist groups.
- Charges of terrorism and “incitement” were used to undermine press freedom across North Africa, with multiple Algerian and Egyptian journalists detained for their reporting.

AMERICAS

- In 2021, previous reforms in Honduras plus a large voter turnout resulted in the defeat of President Juan Orlando Hernández, who had been implicated in corruption and drug-trafficking scandals.
- Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro continued to prioritize his grip on power over the population’s socioeconomic well-being, and Cuban security forces violently repressed protests calling for democratic freedoms.

ASIA-PACIFIC

- In Hong Kong, prominent prodemocracy politicians were arrested at the beginning of the year for participating in primary elections designed to unify the democratic opposition, then remained behind bars during the tightly controlled Legislative Council balloting in December.
- India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party tried to limit the opposition’s ability to compete through various methods, including by pursuing selective corruption investigations.

EURASIA

- The Russian government used expanded “foreign agent” laws to sideline human rights groups and activists, culminating in an order to close the widely respected organization Memorial.
- In Belarus, authoritarian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka sought greater integration with Russia and oversaw the liquidation of more than 200 civil society organizations as he attempted to extinguish political opposition and independent civic activism.

EUROPE

- In Hungary, the parliament dealt a blow to the rights of LGBT+ people by adopting legislation that bans the portrayal or promotion of homosexuality to minors in media content and schools.

- The Polish government continued its assault on judicial independence, in part by defying an order from the European Court of Justice to disband a flawed new disciplinary chamber in Poland's Supreme Court.

MIDDLE EAST

- While Iraq's parliamentary elections were genuinely competitive and had fewer

irregularities than in the past, due in part to the presence of independent observers, there were still reports of vote buying, intimidation, and media suppression.

- Syrian president Bashar al-Assad won reelection with a purported 95 percent of the vote in balloting that lacked any meaningful competition.



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

Policy Recommendations

NURTURING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

- **Turn the initial momentum of the Summit for Democracy into concrete multilateral action to strengthen democracy and confront expanding authoritarianism.** In December 2021, the Summit for Democracy focused the world's attention on the importance of, and challenges to, the promise of democracy. But if the summit is to be a true success, participating nations will need to move beyond rhetoric and undertake sustained, multilateral initiatives to strengthen democracy, in part by rethinking traditional approaches and exchanging best practices to creatively address modern challenges and opportunities.
- **Prioritize democracy-strengthening programs in foreign assistance and provide enhanced support when countries and territories face critical junctures.** When disbursing aid, democracies should select democracy support priorities with an emphasis on long-term, locally driven, and evidence-based solutions, since this type of effort has proven effective.
- **Support civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy.** Democratic governments should provide vocal, public support for grassroots prodemocracy movements, and respond to any violent crackdown by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance, and public condemnation.

- **Support free and independent media, and protect access to information.**

Democracies should scale up efforts to support independent media—including public-interest journalism and exile media—through financial assistance and innovative financing models, technical support, skills training, and mentoring. They should also expand protections for journalists who face physical attacks and harassment, including by supporting the creation of emergency visas for those at risk.

COUNTERING THREATS TO GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

- **Guard against and combat transnational repression.** Democratic governments should work together to constrain the ability of states to commit acts of transnational repression, increase accountability by imposing multilateral sanctions on perpetrators, and restrict security assistance for states that engage in these practices. [Detailed recommendations are available here.](#)
- **Utilize targeted sanctions as part of a comprehensive strategy of accountability for human rights abusers and corrupt officials.** Democracies should devise comprehensive strategies for deploying targeted sanctions in concert with their full suite of foreign policy tools in order to ensure accountability for international human rights abuses and acts of corruption. When possible, democracies should coordinate

their efforts and jointly impose sanctions on perpetrators for maximum impact.

- **Make the fight against kleptocracy and international corruption a key priority.** In the United States, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network should identify and eliminate any loopholes in the implementation of the Corporate Transparency Act. Congress should also pass the CROOK Act (S.158/H.R.402), which would establish an action fund to offer financial assistance to foreign countries during historic windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms, and the Combating Global Corruption Act (S.14/H.R.4322), which would require the US government to assess the extent of corruption around the world and produce a tiered list of countries.
- **Curtail assistance to nations whose leaders evade term limits.** US law blocks funding “to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’état or decree” until the secretary of state “can certify that a democratically elected government has taken office.” [This law should be amended to include violations of or changes to term limits](#) that allow incumbent leaders to extend their time in office.
- **Scrutinize the export of technologies and other products that could be used to violate human rights.** When considering the export of technological and other products that could be used to violate human rights, governments should carefully study deals with countries that are rated as Partly Free or Not Free by any of Freedom House’s publications.

- **Address declines in internet freedom and protect a free and open internet.** Reversing the antidemocratic transformation of today’s internet will require a focused, coordinated effort by governments, civil society, and technology companies. [Detailed recommendations on protecting internet freedom are available here.](#)

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY AT HOME

- **Work at the local level to strengthen democracy.** As backsliding continues in once-established democracies, greater attention should be given to strengthening democracy at the state, provincial, territorial, and local levels. Domestically focused civil society organizations and groups focused on international democracy should work together to develop ideas for strengthening local governance in democracies, in part by exchanging best practices and applying lessons learned from their respective areas of work. Democratic governments should take up these ideas and consult with domestically focused civil society groups to identify and address institutional deficiencies with honesty and clarity.
- **Cultivate public support for democratic principles by investing in civic education.** 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



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

legislation, the US Department of Education should, to the extent possible, make funding available to states for civic education that focuses on democratic principles.

- **Protect free and fair elections.** New laws on election security in the United States should not impose financial, logistical, or bureaucratic burdens that effectively perpetuate or exacerbate barriers to voting for people of color, and federal legislation should establish new criteria for determining which states and political subdivisions with a history of racially discriminatory voting rules must obtain federal clearance before implementing changes to electoral laws. Globally, democratic governments, civil society, and technology companies should work together to ensure that elections are protected from cyberattacks and politicized efforts to undermine or overturn elections.
- **Paper ballots, which ensure that votes have a verifiable paper trail, and independent audits with detailed audit trails, which ensure results are accurate, should be used, and independent election monitors should be present.**
- **Improve laws that guard against improper influence over government officials.** In the United States, this could include passing legislation to enforce the principles of the constitution's foreign emoluments clause, closing loopholes in rules on reporting foreign influence by updating lobbying and foreign agent registration rules, and updating financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.

Freedom in the World Methodology

Freedom in the World 2022 evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2021. Each country and territory is assigned between 0 and 4 points on a series of 25 indicators, for an aggregate score of up to 100. The indicators are grouped into the categories of political rights (0–40) and civil liberties (0–60), whose totals are weighted equally to determine whether the country or territory has an overall status of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

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

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

[For complete information on the methodology, click here.](#)



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

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