

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2026

The Growing Shadow of Autocracy



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

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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2026 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.

ON THE COVER

Russian President Vladimir Putin and other foreign leaders, including Chinese President Xi Jinping and Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon, attend a military parade marking the end of World War II in Moscow on May 9, 2025. (Photo by Angelos Tzortzinis/AFP)

Key Findings

Global freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2025.

A total of 54 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties during the year, while only 35 countries registered improvements. Guinea-Bissau, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, and El Salvador had the largest one-year score declines, while Syria, Sri Lanka, Bolivia, and Gabon recorded the largest gains. Three countries—Bolivia, Fiji, and Malawi—improved from Partly Free to Free status thanks to competitive elections, growing judicial independence, and the strengthening of the rule of law.

Among countries rated Free, the United States, Bulgaria, and Italy have experienced the year's largest declines.

In the United States, an escalation in both legislative dysfunction and executive dominance, growing pressure on people's ability to engage in free expression, and the new administration's moves to undermine anticorruption safeguards all contributed to the negative score change. The United States lost 3 points on the report's 100-point scale, bringing its net decline since 2005 to 12 points, more than any other country rated Free during the same period except for Nauru and Bulgaria.

Although many rights and liberties have been diminished over the last two decades, media freedom, freedom of personal expression, and due process have suffered the heaviest impacts.

Coups, armed conflicts, attacks on democratic institutions by elected leaders, and intensified repression by authoritarian regimes have been the main drivers of deterioration during this 20-year period.

Since 2005, the group of countries with Partly Free status has shrunk substantially.

Nineteen Partly Free countries have dropped to Not Free, swelling the ranks of the world's autocracies, which have become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad. Democratic governments have long worked together to counter the spread of authoritarian rule. But in recent years, European countries have sharply reduced their funding for foreign democracy aid. And in 2025, the US administration abruptly canceled most foreign aid programs, began to disengage from international organizations, and refrained from condemning fraudulent elections—effectively abandoning long-standing principles of its foreign policy. As democracies move further away from their traditional role as defenders of freedom, the world could face a dangerous future led by emboldened autocrats.

Most democracies remain resilient in the face of daunting challenges.

Despite internal pressures and threats from foreign powers, democracies continue to demonstrate that their domestic political systems are responsive and capable of course correction. Of the 87 countries rated Free in 2005, a total of 76—more than 85 percent—have remained Free throughout the two-decade period of global decline. Moreover, new democracies have repeatedly taken root under difficult circumstances, and aspirations for democracy routinely find popular support in even the most repressive environments.

Freedom in the World Methodology

Freedom in the World 2026 evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 13 territories during calendar year 2025. 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 in the World 2026 Status Changes

Bolivia



Bolivia's status improved from Partly Free to Free due to successful general elections in which voters and state institutions rebuffed attempted interference by a former president's faction, and an opposition victory resulted in a peaceful transfer of power.

Fiji



Fiji's status improved from Partly Free to Free following several years of progress in reversing the institutional damage from a 2006 coup, including a peaceful rotation of power after 2022 elections, eased restrictions on civil liberties, and more recent gains in judicial independence and the rule of law.

Malawi



Malawi's status improved from Partly Free to Free because the country held successful general elections in which the incumbent president accepted defeat and the main opposition party won a plurality of seats in the legislature, leading to a peaceful transfer of power.

Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy

By Yana Gorokhovskaia, Cathryn Grothe, and Amy Slipowitz

The Year in Brief

Global freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2025. A total of 54 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, while only 35 countries registered improvements.

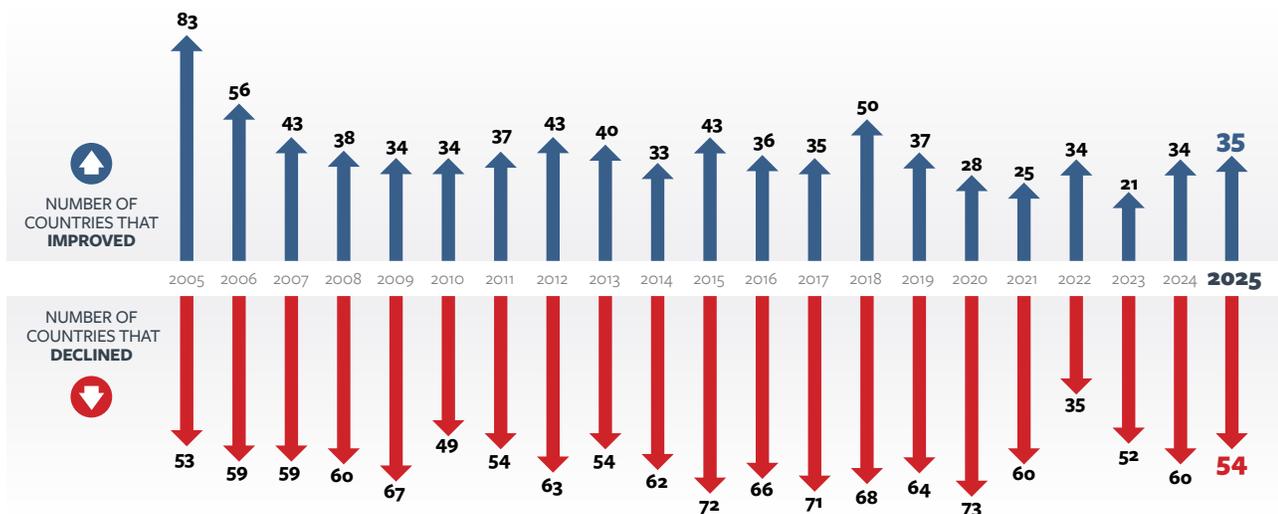
The largest declines in freedom for the calendar year were caused by military coups and efforts by incumbent leaders to crush peaceful dissent or change constitutional rules in their favor. Guinea-Bissau received the year’s single largest score change, losing 8 points on *Freedom in the World’s* 100-point scale after the November general elections were disrupted by a coup in which armed men stormed the election commission’s office and destroyed ballots. Military officers also ousted the elected government in Madagascar, bringing the total number of African countries to have experienced a coup since 2019 to nine. In Burkina Faso, which has been

under military rule since a 2022 coup, the score declined by 5 points as state security forces and junta-sponsored militias engaged in mass killings and forced displacement of Fulani civilians, while Islamist insurgents attacked people of other faiths and imposed their own religious practices in areas under their control.

Tanzania registered the second most significant deterioration in rights and liberties in 2025, losing 7 points and sinking further into the Not Free category. The incumbent president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, was declared the winner of an election marred by the exclusion of opposition candidates, restrictions on the media, a campaign of forced disappearances of political opponents, and widespread violence against protesters that resulted in at least 1,000 deaths. El Salvador tied with Madagascar for the third largest decline in the world, losing 5 points. Salvadoran authorities persecuted high-profile

20 YEARS OF DECLINE IN GLOBAL FREEDOM

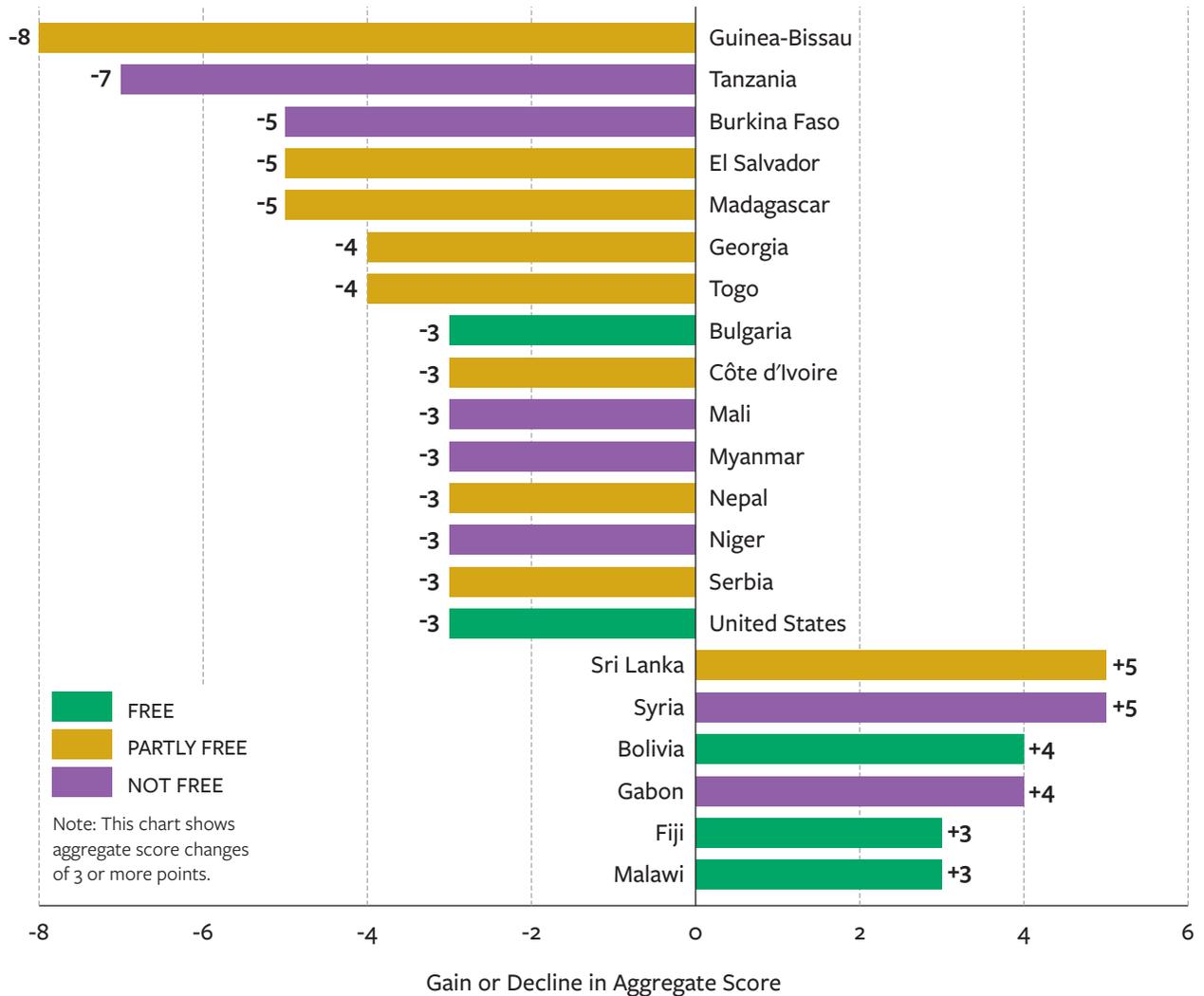
Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 20 years. The declines in 2025 affected more than 40 percent of the world’s population.



Note: Countries whose scores were unchanged are not included in this comparison. Population data are from the Population Reference Bureau’s 2024 World Population Data Sheet.

LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2025

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



academics who were critical of the government, threats against the media drove journalists into exile, and the government seized land without providing compensation. The Legislative Assembly, dominated by President Nayib Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party, passed a constitutional reform that abolished presidential term limits and extended the terms from five to six years, clearing the way for Bukele to seek reelection indefinitely.

In Georgia, large-scale antigovernment protests that began in 2024 continued throughout 2025, even as demonstrators faced disproportionate force and ill-treatment from the police. Opponents of the ruling party, Georgian Dream, experienced physical assaults, harassment, and new legal restrictions aimed at hindering the participation of opposition

parties and civil society in public affairs. The country's score declined by 4 points. Serbia lost 3 points after authorities retaliated against teachers and professors who participated in widespread, student-led anticorruption protests by withholding pay and employment contracts. At the same time, police used excessive force against protesters and failed to protect them from armed gangs.

In the world's worst-performing countries, where the scores on many indicators have already hit 0, armed conflict and authoritarian repression generated profound human rights violations. The ongoing conflict in Sudan between the regular Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has led to the deaths of thousands of civilians.



Voters check information at a polling station in Yangon, Myanmar, on December 28, 2025. (Photo by Myo Kyaw Soe/Xinhua via Getty Images)

Sudan's score fell to just 1 out of 100 in the wake of mass killings, sexual violence, and forcible displacement of non-Arab civilians as the RSF seized control of the city of El Fasher. Myanmar's score was reduced by 3 points—to just 4 out of 100—after the military junta, which has been fighting a brutal civil war against popular resistance forces and ethnic minority militias since it seized power in a 2021 coup, banned criticism of its tightly controlled election plans and imposed other restrictions on political participation ahead of the first round of voting in December. Conditions for freedom continued to deteriorate in Iran, with authorities arresting more than 21,000 people as part of a crackdown on alleged espionage and collaboration following the regime's 12-day war with Israel in June. Security forces also expelled approximately 1.8 million Afghan migrants and refugees over the course of the year, including many who were born in Iran and thousands of unaccompanied children, without due process or protections for their basic rights. The campaign drove the country's score down by 1 point to 10 out of 100.

The scores for Russia and China remained unchanged at 12 and 9 out of 100, respectively, but Moscow and Beijing took further steps to suppress perceived dissent. As the Kremlin continued its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine for a

fourth year, Russian authorities prosecuted a growing number of people at home for their antiwar speech and activism. In January 2025, two media outlets were designated as terrorist organizations for the first time. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued to exert significant control over people's political rights and civil liberties in China, prosecuting journalists, cracking down on small but multiplying protests, and constraining international travel. Activist and citizen journalist Zhang Zhan, for example, was sentenced to four years in prison in September after being released from another prison term the previous year.

In the world's worst-performing countries, where the scores on many indicators have already hit zero, armed conflict and authoritarian repression generated profound human rights violations.

Among countries rated Free, Bulgaria, Italy, and the United States registered the largest declines. Bulgaria lost 3 points amid continued fallout from 2024 parliamentary elections that were marred by vote buying and fraud. At the end of 2025, the coalition government brought to power through those elections was forced to resign in the face of mass protests against corruption. In Italy, the national government weakened anticorruption safeguards even as reports emerged of corruption among regional politicians. This development, along with state efforts to restrict the work of migration-focused nongovernmental organizations, led to a 2-point decline.

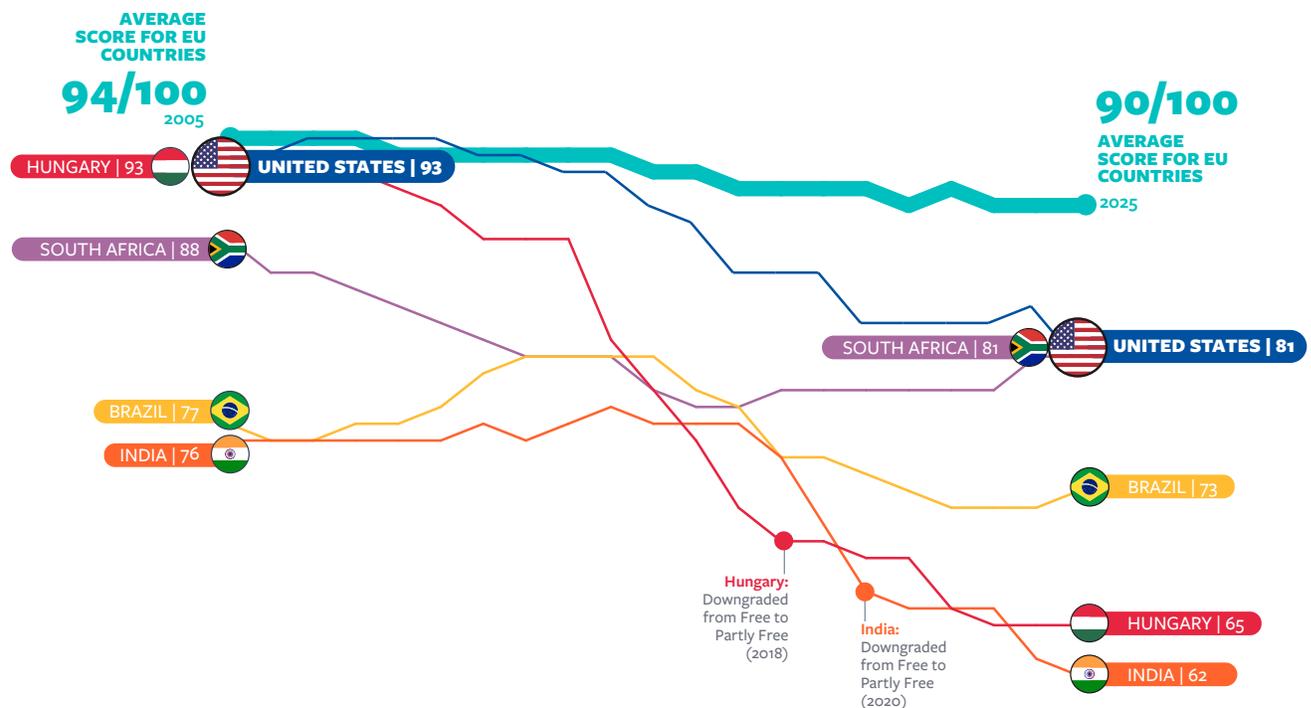
In the United States, the decline in freedom stemmed from a combination of long-term patterns and recent developments. There was an intensification of chronic partisan gridlock and dysfunction in Congress, including a funding impasse that culminated in the longest government shutdown in US history. The growing legislative paralysis was accompanied by a parallel escalation in the executive branch's assertions of unilateral authority. Separately, a multiyear rise in threats and reprisals for political speech as well as government efforts to punish nonviolent expression by noncitizens produced

a chilling effect on personal expression more broadly. The new presidential administration also disregarded conflicts of interest and weakened both anticorruption safeguards and enforcement practices. As a result of these factors, the country's score declined by 3 points, for a net loss of 12 points over the last 20 years—more than any other country rated Free during the same period, except for Nauru and Bulgaria.

Despite the global negative trend, there were some positive developments in 2025. Three countries—Bolivia, Fiji, and Malawi—were upgraded from Partly Free to Free, entering that status for the first time in the last two decades. These status changes were driven by competitive national elections as well as growing judicial independence and strengthening of the rule of law. Sri Lanka continued to make gains after the 2024 presidential election, receiving a 5-point improvement as the new government worked to combat corruption and promote religious tolerance. Although both Syria and Gabon remained Not Free as they recovered from decades of dynastic authoritarian rule, their new leaders oversaw modest progress in the rebuilding of political institutions and the loosening of restrictions on basic rights, contributing to score increases of 5 and 4 points, respectively.

THE US SCORE IN PERSPECTIVE

The United States has declined by a total of 12 points on a 100-point scale over the last 20 years, while Hungary has declined by 28 points, India by 14 points, South Africa by 7 points, and Brazil by 4 points. The average total score for European Union (EU) countries declined by 4 points.



Understanding the Long Decline in Freedom

Three trends characterize the 20 consecutive years of decline in global freedom.

First, the group of Partly Free countries, where at least some democratic institutions coexist with weak protections for rights and liberties, shrank substantially. While nine of these countries improved and became Free over the 20-year period, 19 of them declined and became Not Free, swelling the ranks of autocracies.

Second, although the past 20 years were marked by many significant events—including the ousting of autocratic leaders in Bangladesh and Syria; mass prodemocracy movements in Bahrain, Belarus, Cuba, Hong Kong, and Iran; the reversal of democratic gains that followed the Arab Spring; and a global pandemic that spurred many arbitrary and violent restrictions on freedom of movement—four common factors drove the largest declines in freedom: armed conflicts, coups, erosion of democratic institutions, and crackdowns on rights by authoritarian leaders.

Finally, among the many political rights and civil liberties that were negatively affected by the events of the last two decades, the indicators pertaining to media freedom, freedom of personal expression, and due process declined the most. These fundamental freedoms came under significant pressure in both democracies and autocracies.

It is important to note that conditions for freedom dramatically changed not only within many countries, but also at the global level, as a growing number of authoritarian regimes banded together to undermine civil society groups, international institutions, and election monitoring in a campaign to make the world safer for autocracy. Although wealthy democracies like the United States and member states of the European Union (EU) had long battled against these efforts, many have now pivoted significantly away from their traditional activities, like foreign aid programs designed to uphold and advance political rights and civil liberties. The consequences of these changes will continue to reverberate worldwide.

Despite the overall deterioration in global freedom, however, democratic countries continued to demonstrate

Since 2005, Partly Free countries have been much less likely to consolidate their democracies and much more likely to experience substantial deterioration in freedoms.

substantial resilience in the face of foreign and domestic challenges, and democratic forces in some of the world's most repressive environments continued their struggle for a brighter future.

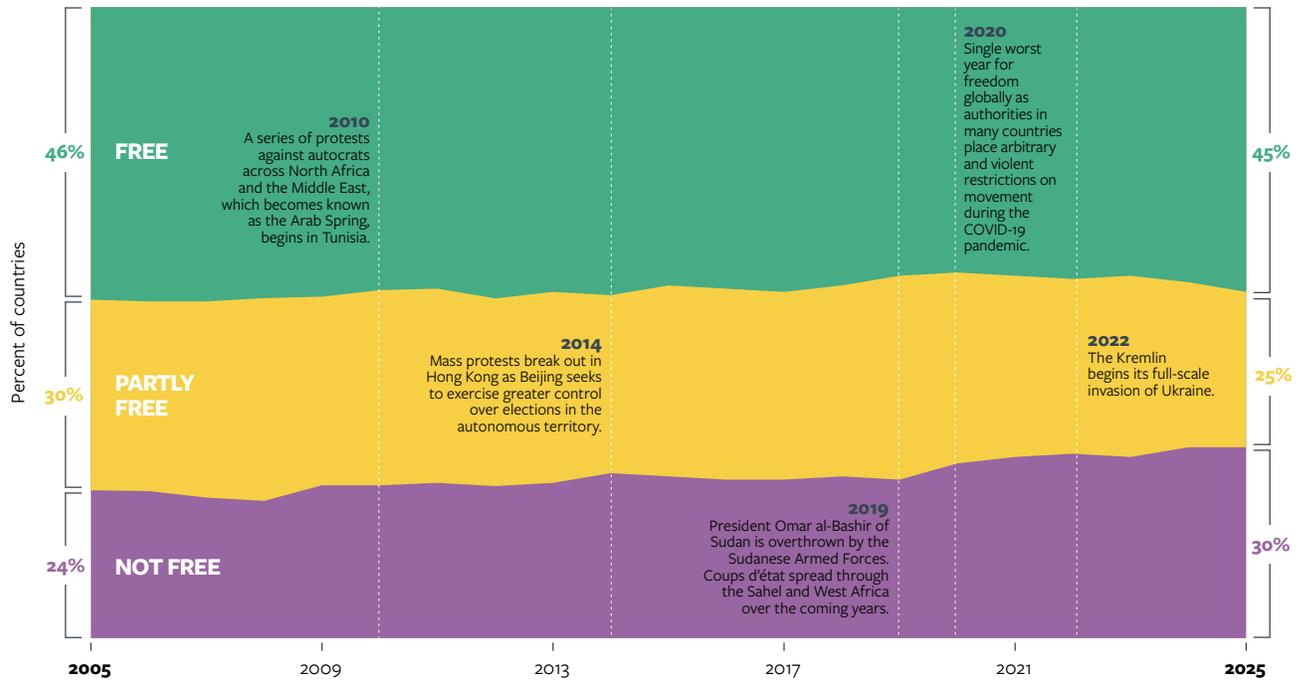
No longer Partly Free

More than 85 percent of the countries rated Free as of 2005 remained Free 20 years later, and 71 percent of those rated Not Free as of 2005 have remained Not Free. Yet fewer than half of the Partly Free countries as of 2005 have retained that status. Disproving predictions made in the early 2000s about global momentum toward political liberalization, Partly Free countries have in fact been far less likely to consolidate their democracies and much more likely to experience substantial deterioration in freedoms. Just nine countries—Bolivia, Colombia, Fiji, Guyana, Malawi, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Tonga—improved from Partly Free at some point in the last 20 years and remain Free today. Meanwhile, 19 countries moved in the opposite direction, falling from Partly Free to Not Free. Outside of armed conflicts and coups, these transformations were mostly driven by illiberal leaders who experimented with the tactics for eroding democracy that are increasingly being employed around the world.

Nicaragua and Venezuela are illustrative cases of how a weak democracy can be distorted and remolded into an outright autocracy. In both settings, presidents who had won relatively competitive elections in the past went on to oversee dramatic deteriorations in political rights and civil liberties, bringing all branches of government and state institutions under their control and violently suppressing political dissent through arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and torture.

FEWER DEMOCRATIZING STATES, MORE AUTOCRATS

Over the last 20 years, the percentage of Free countries has been stable, while more and more Partly Free countries have deteriorated into authoritarianism.



Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega’s long push for autocratic power was punctuated by a bloody episode in 2018, when the army, police, and paramilitary groups quashed mass antigovernment protests that began in response to social security reforms, killing over 300 people and injuring more than 2,000. Since then, Ortega and his wife, now-Copresident Rosario Murillo, have further consolidated their rule with constitutional reforms that explicitly ended the separation of powers and crackdowns on independent media, civil society, and the political opposition. Many of the regime’s perceived foes have been arbitrarily detained, forced into exile, and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship in recent years.

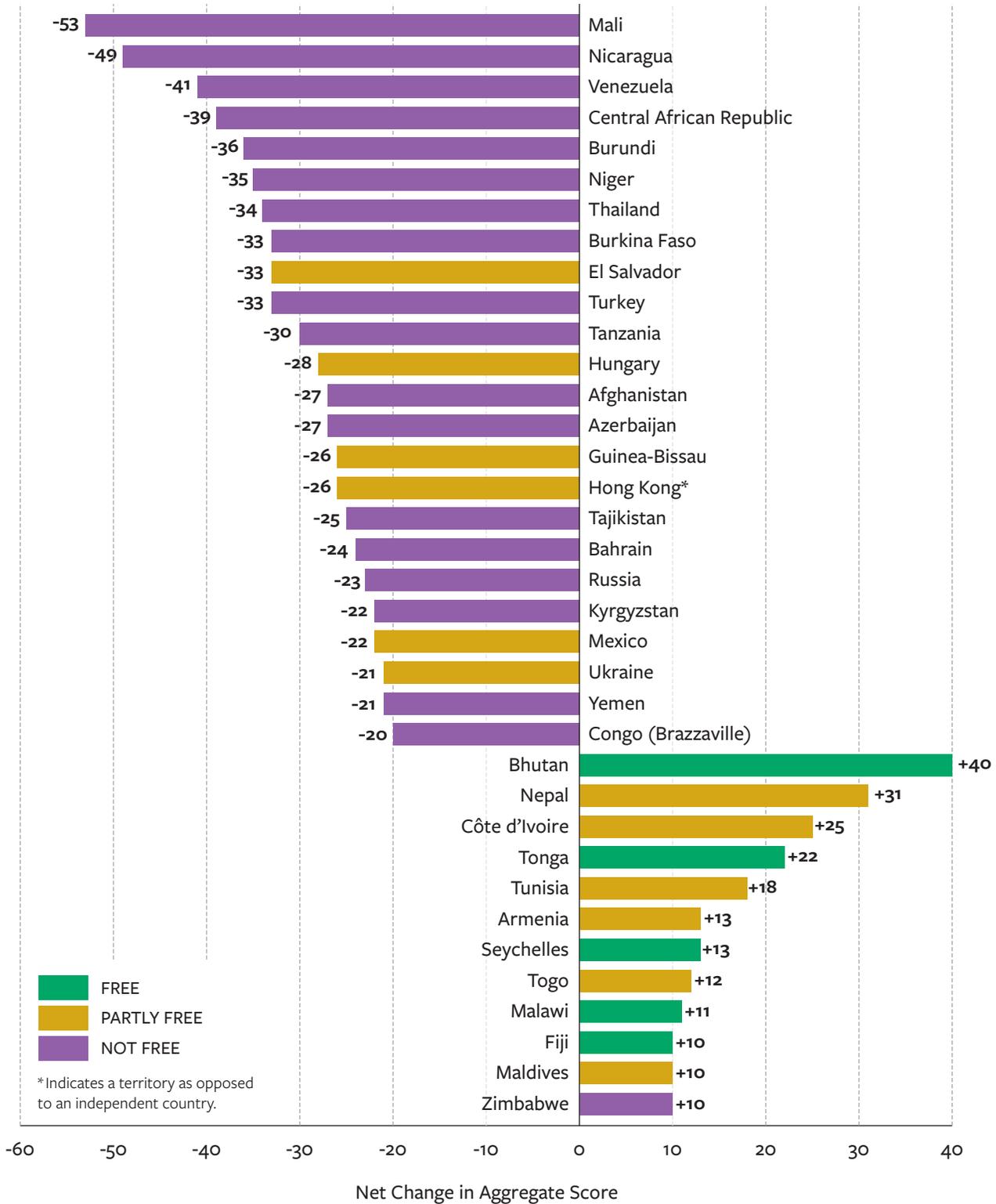
Venezuela began its democratic decline before Nicolás Maduro took power in 2013, having dropped from Free to Partly Free in 1999 under his predecessor, President Hugo Chávez. The decline dramatically accelerated under Maduro,

however, as the population similarly faced violent responses to numerous antigovernment protests, including attacks by state-affiliated armed groups and widespread detentions and prosecutions for expressions of dissent. A subservient judiciary, a legislature stripped of its constitutional functions, and a co-opted electoral council that facilitated a fraudulent presidential vote in 2024 all contributed to the deprivation of Venezuelans’ fundamental freedoms. Maduro himself was suddenly removed from power by US forces in early 2026, but it was not immediately clear how this might affect his regime or the country’s future trajectory.

Nicaragua and Venezuela were downgraded from Partly Free to Not Free in 2018 and 2016, respectively, losing 49 and 41 points over the last 20 years. Due largely to the illiberal rule of their leaders, the two countries experienced the second and third largest declines in *Freedom in the World* since 2005.

LARGEST 20-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES

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



Drivers of the deterioration

While no single cause can explain the two-decade deterioration in global freedom, Freedom House data point to four factors that have presented the greatest threats to democracy and human rights: violence and armed conflict, coups d'état, erosion of democratic institutions, and escalating repression by autocrats.

Violence and armed conflict endanger people's physical safety and destroy the foundations of a state. Military coups, which have been on the rise in recent years, typically start by upending all political institutions; in the long run, however, military rulers tend to expand their repression to reach broader sections of society, making a return to elected civilian government more difficult. The gradual erosion of democracy is less obvious and shocking than wars or coups, but tactics such as the manipulation of elections or the undermining of judicial independence are also extremely damaging to freedom. Even in existing autocracies, regimes must work constantly to suppress recurrent demands for basic rights and ride out the many crises associated with their own misrule, and these downward spirals have contributed significantly to the global decline of the past 20 years.

Violence and armed conflict

Violence and armed conflict directly jeopardize physical safety, but they also undermine many other fundamental

freedoms, including freedom of movement and property rights. Women and members of ethnic and religious minority groups tend to be disproportionately affected by conflicts, and in some cases they are deliberately attacked. As conflicts drag on, they often spill across borders, attract foreign mercenaries or interventions, and make it extremely difficult for the country to create or rebuild democratic institutions.

Violence and armed conflict have contributed to some of the largest score declines of the last 20 years, including in the Central African Republic (CAR), Ethiopia, and Ukraine. Yemen's score has dropped by 21 points since 2005, with most of the deterioration occurring during a devastating civil war that began in 2015, after Iranian-backed Houthi rebels seized control of the capital. Saudi forces launched a military campaign against the Houthis to support Yemen's internationally recognized government, which was led by a close ally of Saudi Arabia. Governance of the country has since been fractured between the warring parties, most state institutions have ceased to function, civilian political activity has been halted, and elections are long overdue.

While active fighting in Yemen had largely subsided in recent years, little progress has been made in peace negotiations, and recent clashes involving southern separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates threatened to plunge the country back into acute conflict. Even civil wars seldom remain confined to one country; fighting may become entangled



Children play at the Dharawan camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) near Sanaa, Yemen, in March 2022. Approximately 4.5 million people have been internally displaced in Yemen since a civil war began in 2015. (Photo by Mohammed Mohammed/Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

with other regional conflicts, such as when the Houthis and the Israeli military exchanged missile and drone strikes during the war between Israel and Hamas that began in October 2023. More often, conflicts drive migration across borders as people seek safety from violence. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled Yemen, and in 2025 some 4.5 million people were still internally displaced as a result of the conflict.

Decades of fighting between armed nonstate actors, foreign mercenary groups, and government forces in the CAR have led to chronic insecurity, persistent political instability, and serious rights abuses. The country descended into a brutal civil conflict in 2013 after the Séléka rebel group seized the capital and ousted the government. The conflict featured targeted violence against Muslim and Christian civilians by the respective warring parties, who ultimately took control of large swaths of the country and rendered the government powerless in the areas under their control. Women and girls were subjected to sexual violence by armed groups as well as UN peacekeepers. As a result, the country's scores for political rights and civil liberties plummeted, and the CAR's status changed from Partly Free to Not Free for the events of 2013.

In both Yemen and the CAR, the rebuilding of governing institutions has been severely hindered by the power and influence of foreign and nonstate actors as well as the central government's lack of control over its own territory. While the 2016 election of President Faustin Archange Touadéra in the CAR helped the government regain control of the capital city, and the overall level of violence fell compared with 2013, most of the country was still subject to a fractured array of armed groups. The CAR has grown more authoritarian in recent years and remains one of the least free places in the world, scoring only 5 points out of 100 for 2025.

Military coups

Coups occur when the incumbent government or constitutional system is illegally overthrown and executive power is seized, often by a small group of military or political elites. When coup leaders use their unchecked power over the political system to entrench themselves through institutional changes, there can be long-term effects on a country's ability to return to democratic governance.

After years of democratic progress in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a 2012 military coup in Mali resulted in the swift dismantling of the country's democratic institutions

and subsequent repression of civil liberties. The coup set Mali on a path of persistent crisis and conflict, and its status declined from Free to Not Free that year, swiftly bypassing the Partly Free category. Mali suffered two additional coups in 2020 and 2021, and since then the military has cemented its power by capturing state institutions and repeatedly postponing elections.

Freedom in Mali declined even further in 2025, when the military regime dissolved all political parties and enacted a law that effectively allowed its president to extend his term indefinitely. As a result of this long period of largely military rule, and the effects of complex armed insurgencies, the country has suffered the world's single largest score decline over the last 20 years, dropping by a total of 53 points.

Mali provides just one example of the lasting damage done by military coups. Conditions in several countries, including Burkina Faso and Niger, continued to deteriorate in 2025 after a wave of military coups beginning in 2019 toppled governments across the Sahel and West Africa. In Burkina Faso, two back-to-back military coups in 2022 tore down the significant political reforms and development of democratic institutions that had been implemented after a transition from the longtime rule of President Blaise Compaoré in 2015. In Niger, which had experienced its first transfer of power between democratically elected presidents in 2020–21, the military toppled the civilian government in 2023.

In both countries, freedom continued to decline in the years following the coups, as the junta leaders acted unilaterally to consolidate power and used increasingly violent methods to suppress dissent. In Burkina Faso, the military regime postponed elections indefinitely, contributing to a 5-point decline in 2025. In Niger, the military dissolved all political parties during the year, effectively stamping out any remaining alternative to the junta's rule and helping to drive the score down by 3 points.

The damage a military coup causes to a country's institutions also leaves them more susceptible to future coups. Thailand has experienced over 20 coups or attempted coups since the country emerged from absolute monarchical rule in the 1930s, and like Mali, it has registered one of the world's largest declines over the last two decades as a result of a military coup in 2014. While the country transitioned to a semielected government in 2019, its unelected authorities—including the military, the judiciary, and the monarchy—continue to exert decisive influence over political affairs. Myanmar has a



Nigerien General Abdourahamane Tiani, Malian Colonel Assimi Goïta, and Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré arrive ahead of the Confederation of Sahel States (AES) summit in Niamey, Niger, on July 6, 2024. The heads of the three countries, who took power through military coups in recent years, had announced that they were severing ties with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2024. (Photo by AFP via Getty Images)

similarly long history of military influence over politics, and its 2021 military coup not only derailed a struggling transition from military dictatorship to democracy, but also plunged the country into a renewed and expanded civil war.

Erosion of democratic institutions

Democratic institutions such as free and fair elections, independent legislatures and courts, and strong anticorruption agencies serve to facilitate public participation and representation, protect individual rights, and place checks on those in power. The erosion of these features of democracy, while typically gradual, can effectively exacerbate authoritarian rule in already Not Free countries and undermine the remaining safeguards in Partly Free countries, as demonstrated by the experiences of six countries, including Ethiopia and Kyrgyzstan, that have declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to manipulated elections since 2005.

Elections are a defining component of democracy, but incumbent leaders around the world are manipulating the contests to extend their own power. In Not Free countries, governments work to make elections lopsided by harassing, disqualifying, or jailing opposition candidates and parties. In Egypt's 2025 parliamentary elections, for example, the National Elections Authority eliminated all but President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's National Unified List for Egypt from the party-list portion of the ballot, giving voters no real choice. In Tajikistan, the authoritarian regime of President Emomali Rahmon, who has held power since 1992, stripped legal registration from the main opposition party and harassed, imprisoned, and in some cases killed party members and their relatives before an election in 2015. This repression has continued in the years since, and today there is little space for meaningful competition in Tajikistan's elections. The country's score for 2025 was just 5 out of 100, compared with 30 as of 2005.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán meets Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico in Bratislava, Slovakia, on April 28, 2025. (Photo by Imago/Alamy)

In democracies, illiberal leaders rely on more nuanced tactics than imprisoning or banning the opposition. Gerrymandering and malapportionment of legislative districts give the appearance of full political participation in elections while ensuring that certain parts of the population cannot influence the outcome. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party took this approach ahead of the 2014 parliamentary elections. Gerrymandering of new constituencies and disproportionate vote allocation to Fidesz supporters helped cement Orbán's grip on power, and the ruling party's supermajority in the parliament allowed it to push through legal and constitutional changes that undermined Hungary's independent institutions and ultimately set the country on a sustained path of democratic decline.

Vote buying and intimidation not only sway election outcomes but can mark the first steps toward greater electoral manipulation. Georgia's 2018 presidential election, for example, while peaceful, was marred by credible reports of illegal campaign donations, vote buying, and intimidation

by powerful political elites. Just days before the runoff vote in November, a charitable foundation controlled by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia and the founder of the ruling Georgian Dream party, promised to write off the debts of over 600,000 Georgian voters. Since then, the country's elections have suffered from more extensive problems, including the abuse of state resources, physical intimidation at polling places, violence, boycotts by political parties, and threats to ballot secrecy.

A growing number of elected leaders have sought to undermine other branches of government, like the judiciary and the legislature, because they provide critical checks on the executive. Since his election in 2019, President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador has governed under a state of emergency, arrested and persecuted individuals who challenge his administration's human rights abuses, and eliminated the independence of other state institutions, contributing to the world's eighth largest score decline over the last 20 years. During his first years in office, the Supreme Court frequently ruled against the president, and he often

responded by defying its orders. In 2021, however, Bukele used his enlarged majority in the legislature to replace all members of the court's Constitutional Chamber as well as the attorney general with government loyalists. The new panel of judges quickly set aside a constitutional ban on presidential reelection, allowing Bukele to run again in 2024. In 2025, the legislature rubber-stamped a constitutional amendment that removed presidential term limits entirely, further aiding the incumbent's consolidation of power.

Because independent auditing organizations are often the first to raise the alarm about executive overreach, illiberal leaders have found ways to pressure and discredit them. In 2024, the Mexican Congress approved a constitutional reform that eliminated the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information, and Personal Data Protection (INAI), and no similar body has since been established to replace it. The reform has effectively resulted in less transparency, and the loss of integrated access-to-information systems has made it harder for journalists to hold the government accountable for its performance. This was one of a series of changes to Mexico's institutions that year, including sweeping judicial reforms that replaced the appointment system for judges with direct judicial elections, which limits the courts' independence by subjecting judges to partisan oversight and making it harder for them to issue rulings against the government.

Authoritarian repression

During the last two decades, the rulers of established autocracies have not simply dismantled institutional checks on their rule. They have taken the additional step of converting the structures and resources of the state into weapons with which to attack their opponents and critics. In settings where institutional guardrails have already been weakened or eliminated, there is nothing to prevent autocrats from using the security forces and the courts as tools of repression.

Since 2005, Azerbaijan has experienced a steady consolidation of authoritarian rule centered on President Ilham Aliyev and his extended family. After succeeding his father as president in 2003, Aliyev pushed through constitutional changes that expanded presidential authority, removed term limits, and weakened any remaining legislative or judicial autonomy. In the absence of an independent judiciary or even independent media, corruption has continued to proliferate, and the Aliyev family has treated public assets as a source of private wealth.

Authoritarian regimes like that in Azerbaijan can leverage the full weight of state institutions, abuse state resources, and rely on corrupt patronage networks to maintain their political dominance. The Aliyevs have used the state oil company as a vehicle for political and economic largesse, awarding lucrative contracts and senior company positions to businesses and individuals who are loyal to the regime. In return, during elections, the recipients of this patronage pressure employees to support the ruling party by attending political rallies and participating in other public displays of fealty. Furthermore, public funds are used to finance progovernment media that boost the regime's image while smearing any opposition.

When patronage and propaganda prove insufficient to silence dissent, autocrats use their control over the security forces and criminal justice system to engage in blunter forms of repression. Although Azerbaijan has retained its Not Free status since 2002, it has dropped from a score of 33 to just 6 out of 100 over the last two decades, as authorities have intensified their crackdown on civil liberties. Journalists, human rights activists, and members of the political opposition face arbitrary arrest and prosecution on trumped-up criminal charges, and they are denied basic due process during unfair trial proceedings. Legal amendments adopted in 2018 stipulated that only lawyers from the Azerbaijani Bar Association, which acts on the orders of the Ministry of Justice, could represent clients in court, and nearly all independent human rights lawyers in the country have been disbarred or suspended.

In the worst cases, autocrats have used the military and security services to violently crush citizens' attempts to exercise their rights. In 2020, Belarus's deeply authoritarian government was confronted with mass demonstrations against the fraudulent reelection of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Security forces employed disproportionate and lethal violence to break up the protests, with officers arresting, beating, or firing at Belarusian and foreign journalists who attempted to cover the events. More than 32,000 people were detained, and there were reports of detainees facing assaults, torture, and other human rights abuses. Ultimately, scores of prodemocracy leaders and activists were expelled from the country for their involvement in the protests, and many others have been forced into exile since then. The violent crackdown led to an 8-point decline in Belarus's score for 2020, and after further declines it is now just 7 out of 100.

ROOTING OUT THE CAUSES BEHIND TWO DECADES OF ERODING FREEDOM

Armed conflicts, coups, attacks on democratic institutions by elected leaders, and intensified repression by authoritarian regimes have been the main drivers of deterioration over the last 20 years.



Violence and Armed Conflict

Violence and armed conflict directly jeopardize physical safety, but they also undermine many other fundamental freedoms, including freedom of movement and property rights. Women and members of ethnic and religious minority groups tend to be disproportionately affected by conflicts, and in some cases they are deliberately attacked. As conflicts drag on, they often spill across borders, attract foreign mercenaries or interventions, and make it extremely difficult for the country to create or rebuild democratic institutions.



Military Coups

Coups occur when the incumbent government or constitutional system is illegally overthrown and executive power is seized, often by a small group of military or political elites. When coup leaders use their sudden, unchecked power over the political system to entrench themselves through institutional changes, there can be long-term effects on a country's ability to return to democratic governance. The damage a military coup causes to a country's institutions also leaves them more susceptible to future coups.



Erosion of Democratic Institutions

Incumbent leaders around the world are manipulating elections to extend their own power, while a growing number of elected leaders are undermining other branches of government, like the judiciary and the legislature, because they provide critical checks on the executive. Democratic procedures and institutions such as free and fair elections, independent legislatures and courts, and strong anticorruption agencies serve to facilitate public participation and representation, protect individual rights, and place checks on those in power. The erosion of these features of democracy, while typically gradual, can effectively exacerbate authoritarian rule in already Not Free countries and undermine the remaining safeguards in Partly Free countries.



Authoritarian Repression

During the last two decades, the rulers of established autocracies have not simply dismantled institutional checks on their rule. They have taken the additional step of converting the structures and resources of the state into weapons with which to attack their opponents and critics. In settings where institutional guardrails have already been weakened or eliminated, there is nothing to prevent autocrats from using the courts as tools of repression. In the worst cases, autocrats have used the military and security services to violently crush citizens' attempts to exercise their rights.

Fundamental Freedoms Under Pressure

The past two decades of democratic deterioration have affected a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, but three fundamental freedoms—media freedom, freedom of personal expression, and due process of law—have sustained the most damage during this period. Although autocrats have certainly gutted these freedoms in their countries, they have not been the only culprits. Governments ranging from dictatorships to democracies have adopted tactics including heavy-handed media regulation, overt censorship, digital surveillance, and political prosecution to chip away at each of these important rights. The result has been reduced accountability for corruption and abuse of power, a less informed and

engaged public, limited debate on major issues and policies, and fewer protections against arbitrary infringements on individual liberty.

Attacks on media freedom

Broad freedom for independent media ensures that governments are held accountable for their performance and allows for transparent, diverse, and critical reporting. However, authorities have employed a variety of tactics to restrict media freedom. In more democratic settings, illiberal leaders tend to exert undue political, regulatory, or economic influence over the media sector, and subject journalists and news outlets to legal harassment. Dramatic, wholesale attacks are relatively rare; instead, media freedom is weakened through a series of escalatory maneuvers.

FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS UNDER ATTACK

Though many fundamental freedoms have declined over the past 20 years, freedom of the media, freedom of personal expression, and the right to due process were most impacted.

MEDIA FREEDOM	PERSONAL EXPRESSION	DUE PROCESS
<p>Onerous regulations, legal harassment, direct censorship, and arrests and imprisonment of journalists undermine media freedom and thwart efforts to hold governments and other powerful actors accountable.</p>	<p>Prosecution of speech, the use of spyware against government critics, social media monitoring, and informant networks create a broader chilling effect across society, inhibiting free and open discussion.</p>	<p>Increased political control over courts, prosecutors, and police enables the persecution of dissidents while undermining justice and due process rights for all.</p>

A common first step in undermining independent journalism is to increase control over public media or the regulation of private media. Further escalation can involve more frequent legal harassment, such as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs); the withholding of publicly allocated funds; and the redirection of advertising revenue away from critical news outlets. At this point, government allies may begin to buy up media outlets and skew their coverage. In media landscapes that become dominated by state-funded or government-aligned outlets, the authorities could seek to suspend the licenses or intimidate the journalists of the remaining independent news sources.

In more autocratic states, where media freedom has already experienced significant deterioration or has historically been restricted, the government often engages in extralegal harassment or more explicit and comprehensive censorship, leading to further authoritarian entrenchment. For example, the CCP had long exerted significant control over China's media landscape when party leader and state president Xi Jinping took power in 2012–13, but censorship efforts have since intensified as he consolidated authority to an unprecedented degree, with increasingly tight and technologically sophisticated restrictions on the internet and online content. This trend caused China's score for media freedom to drop to 0 out of 4 in 2018.

Rwanda's media freedom score likewise declined to the lowest possible level in 2010. That year, as the ruling party was working to ensure incumbent President Paul Kagame's reelection, the government suspended about 30 news outlets and arrested two journalists for allegedly insulting Kagame and denying the 1994 genocide, which are common allegations used by Rwandan authorities to prosecute political opponents and dissidents. The editors of two prominent newspapers fled the country due to death threats, and one of their colleagues was assassinated.

Shrinking space for personal expression

Freedom of personal expression facilitates open discussion on sensitive or contentious topics, creating a marketplace of ideas in which crucial policies can be debated and democracy in general can flourish. While the rise of the internet and other information technologies has fueled innovative prodemocracy activism over the last 20 years, illiberal and authoritarian governments have increasingly responded with digital surveillance and prosecutions for online speech. Constraints on offline speech continue to be imposed as well.

During the last two decades, digital surveillance has more frequently resulted in heavier restrictions on personal expression. Such declines have tended to cluster in weaker democracies.

During the last two decades, digital surveillance has more frequently resulted in heavier restrictions on personal expression. Such declines have tended to cluster in weaker democracies. In Serbia, which has faced democratic backsliding under President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party, police and intelligence services have reportedly deployed a variety of spyware products to surveil journalists, civil society actors, and protest organizers. For example, at least dozens and perhaps hundreds of personal devices have been targeted with a unique spyware tool referred to as NoviSpy, but the exact number is unknown given that authorities have installed it secretly during arrests, detentions, and police interviews. Such actions have contributed to Serbia's overall score decline in *Freedom in the World* in recent years, as awareness of unchecked state surveillance motivates self-censorship among ordinary citizens.

Extensive offline surveillance—and the risk of physical repercussions—has driven some countries to the worst possible score for personal expression. In Burundi, for example, the score for this indicator declined to 0 out of 4 due to events ahead of a 2018 constitutional referendum that would lengthen presidential terms. The national intelligence services engaged in heightened surveillance, while a ruling party militia checked citizens' voter registration status and reportedly assaulted people who spoke against the referendum in public spaces.

In just the last five years, prosecution of offline and online speech has grown increasingly common in authoritarian states, further hindering public and private discussion and deepening overall repression in environments that were already heavily constrained. Between 2020 and 2025, six countries—Belarus, Iran, Nicaragua, Russia, Tajikistan, and Venezuela—dropped to the lowest possible score for freedom of personal expression due to large-scale arrests



Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica demonstrate in San José to commemorate the third anniversary of the beginning of the protests against the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, on April 18, 2021. Nicaragua’s political crisis erupted in April 2018, when protests mushroomed into a popular uprising that was met with a brutal crackdown in which hundreds were killed. (Photo by Ezequiel Becerra/AFP via Getty Images)

for or prosecution of critical speech. Combined with measures such as social media monitoring, the use of civilian informants, and the application of new laws with harsher penalties, such extensive enforcement practices have created a chilling effect throughout society.

Minimal due process rights

Due process is a key component of the rule of law, ensuring that no one is deprived of their liberty or property arbitrarily, without a fair hearing before an impartial tribunal and ample opportunity for appeal. The rights of defendants and detainees have suffered amid the broader assault on global freedom, and two key tactics have become prominent over the past 20 years. The first is increased government control over courts, prosecutors, and police. The second is the use of criminal cases to sideline political dissidents at moments when the ruling power faces significant pressure.

Political control over the justice system and police forces, including interference in individual cases, tends to increase in backsliding democracies and nascent authoritarian regimes. In Turkey, for example, where Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his

Justice and Development Party have gradually consolidated power and repressed dissent since taking office in 2002, a 2010 constitutional referendum cleared the way for an overhaul of the judiciary. In 2014, the government began to reassign thousands of police officers, judges, and prosecutors. Following a coup attempt two years later, due process rights deteriorated further, as the authorities brought a surge of new charges based on flimsy evidence or secret testimony, with defendants often held in lengthy pretrial detention. Since then, the imprisonment of political opponents, independent journalists, and activists has become routine, and Turkey has the worst possible score for the right to due process. In March 2025, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, who was widely seen as Erdoğan’s main political challenger, was arrested and placed in pretrial detention based on a raft of dubious charges. He faced up to 2,000 years in prison, and given the politicization of the judiciary, was unlikely to receive a fair trial.

Authorities tend to step up their persecution of political dissidents when those in power feel especially vulnerable. Due process rights in Hong Kong deteriorated in 2017 when the Court of Appeal, at the behest of the government, handed

down heavier penalties to protesters involved in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, which called for greater democracy and self-determination for the territory. Separately, police filed new charges against some of the movement's organizers. The score pertaining to due process rights dropped further after Beijing imposed the National Security Law on Hong Kong in 2020, as a response to fresh prodemocracy protests in 2019. Among other problematic provisions, the law allowed for closed trials and for cases to be adjudicated in mainland China.

Twenty Years Later: A Shift Among Democracies

The 20 consecutive years of decline in global freedom have been a boon for the world's autocracies, which have swelled in number and hardened their repression. In 2005, 45 countries were rated Not Free; today that number is 59. Within their borders, this growing cohort of authoritarian rulers has tried to eradicate ethnic and religious minority groups; eliminate political opponents, prodemocracy activists, and independent media; and unleash corruption. They have also increasingly threatened and disregarded the sovereignty of other countries. Through collaboration and influence, autocrats have tried to reshape the post–World War II international order that was created under US leadership to secure peace, protect rights, and ensure accountability. They have attacked or undermined civil society groups, journalists, international and regional organizations, and independent election observers because they see these actors and institutions as obstacles to kleptocracy and the unrestrained application of power.

Although democracies' foreign policy practices have not always matched their rhetoric, the world's democratic governments have tried for decades to resist the autocratic assault by supporting human rights defenders and independent journalists, working together through multilateral organizations, and calling out rigged elections. But recently, democracies have begun to pivot from these priorities. While remaining deeply dedicated to multilateralism, European governments have substantially reduced funding for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), moving away from long-standing commitments to support global civil society. In the United States, 2025 was a transformative year for foreign policy, as the new presidential administration suddenly cut funding for foreign assistance and international organizations, decided to end US commentary on the fairness of foreign elections, threatened the sovereignty of allies, and engaged in legally ambiguous unilateral military actions abroad.

Addressing complex problems like authoritarian collaboration, armed conflict, transnational crime, terrorism, and humanitarian crises requires principled leadership by democracies, adequate funding for frontline defenders of freedom, and cooperative solutions that raise the costs of repression and strengthen adherence to the norms of sovereignty and human rights. The experience of the post–Cold War era demonstrates that when democracies work together, they are far more likely to achieve security, prosperity, and freedom for themselves and others. But in a world where the most powerful and prosperous democracies no longer view



On March 23, 2025, a protester in Istanbul, Turkey, sits in front of riot police during a demonstration after the city's Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was arrested. (Photo by CTK Photo/Pavel Nemecek)

themselves as defenders and promoters of universal rights and freedoms, autocrats will continue to gain ground, spreading violence and repression wherever they advance.

Shrinking support for civil society and independent media

Authoritarians have targeted civil society groups and independent media for persecution because of their unique ability to shed light on human rights abuses and corruption. Russian authorities pioneered an ever-expanding web of laws that restrict the ability of civil society organizations to receive funding from abroad, to function independently, and to pursue accountability. Over time, similar laws mushroomed across the world, as more autocratic regimes—from Central Asia to Africa and the Americas—used the “foreign agent” label to discredit and defund civil society groups. Autocrats have also applied such laws to independent media, while subjecting individual journalists to physical violence, detention, and threats that force many to seek safety in exile.

For decades, democracies have systematically included support for human rights defenders and journalists in their annual foreign aid budgets, reflecting a shared view that such actors are crucial partners in the global struggle to uphold fundamental freedoms and democratic standards. However, last year marked a significant shift in approach in both the United States and Europe.

Until 2025, the United States was the single largest bilateral foreign assistance donor in the world, supporting civil society groups, independent media, anticorruption mechanisms, education, peacebuilding, health and nutrition, and humanitarian relief. Much of this work was implemented by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of State. Following a January 2025 executive order, USAID was shuttered; the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor was substantially downsized and moved into a newly created Office of the Coordinator for Foreign Assistance and Humanitarian Affairs; and approximately \$80.5 billion in aid previously administered by the two entities was canceled. The administration also issued an executive order directing the closure of the US Agency for Global Media, which oversees Voice of America as well as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia as grantees. These dramatic changes were made rapidly and outside the legislative process, meaning they lacked prior congressional approval. The impact of the aid cuts was immediate and devastating, affecting thousands of groups working in at least 129 countries.

The United States was not alone in its decision to reduce support for foreign aid. At the start of 2025, many other democracies were already in the process of shrinking their foreign commitments. The EU and its member states together were, until recently, the world’s leading ODA donors, but they have substantially reduced their support over the last three years. In 2024, for example, the Netherlands’ new coalition government announced plans to steadily cut ODA funding over the next three years. Since 2023, Germany has reduced its humanitarian and development budgets by more than €3.5 billion (\$4.1 billion). Some of the most drastic cuts were in the United Kingdom, where Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced in 2025 that the government would reduce spending on international aid by 40 percent, bringing it to its lowest level in 25 years.

In place of the previous systems of support, the United States and other democracies have begun to offer a different vision for foreign aid, with much less direct funding and an emphasis on a narrower set of health and economic programs. Reductions in funding have already harmed and will continue to diminish the capacity of human rights defenders to hold governments to account, and of independent media to deliver much-needed, accurate information into and from closed environments. The overall damage to freedom is unlikely to be contained within the borders of repressive states. Those living in democracies could feel the effects as emboldened autocrats seek to stifle basic rights, accelerate kleptocracy, and spread violence.

Undermining international organizations

Authoritarian leaders have often balked at any interference from international and regional organizations tasked with upholding democracy and human rights, and they have tried to influence and distort these organizations to suit their political goals. At the United Nations, member states of the so-called Like-Minded Group—which includes Belarus, China, Iran, Myanmar, Russia, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, among others—have collaborated to restrict the ability of human rights defenders and independent civil society activists to participate in official hearings and events, prevented the Security Council and the General Assembly from adopting country-specific resolutions about human rights violations, and coordinated to fill vacancies on the Human Rights Council. Beijing and Moscow have also tried to block or cut funding to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council.



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk walk together on May 10, 2025, in Kyiv, Ukraine. (Photo by the Presidential Office of Ukraine via Capital Pictures/Alamy Live News)

Authoritarians are promoting their own agendas at regional organizations as well. Examples include the Turkish government's effort to block Sweden's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a means of pressuring Stockholm to collaborate in Ankara's campaign of transnational repression, or the Hungarian government's attempts at the EU to oppose Ukraine's accession and any spending in support of Ukraine's defense against Moscow's war of aggression. In Africa, the military juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have not only withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States but also formed a new Alliance of Sahel States, which was implicated in supporting the attempted coup in Benin late last year.

The new US administration is also deeply skeptical of international and regional organizations, going well beyond previous administrations' periodic critiques. During his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2025, President Donald Trump painted the United Nations as an obstacle rather than a forum for addressing global challenges. The administration's National Security Strategy stated that some international institutions were driven by "outright anti-Americanism," echoing the president's own highly critical comments about the EU. These statements have been supported by concrete actions, including US withdrawal from multiple UN bodies, a sharp reduction in payments to the United Nations, and parallel pressure on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Criminal Court to alter their mandates or practices.

International and regional organizations have often been criticized for the size of their bureaucracies, the disproportionate influence they offer to certain countries, and their inability to address complex global problems. Nevertheless, these forums remain crucial spaces for multilateral action, including coordinated responses to humanitarian crises, conflict mitigation, and accountability for human rights violations. Without the active support and confidence of the United States and other democracies, they could be entirely dominated by autocrats or struggle to perform peacebuilding and lifesaving functions. In the end, the weakness of international and regional organizations will only serve the interests of the world's autocracies.

Disrupting election integrity

Elections are an essential feature of democracy. Unlike the dictatorships of the Cold War era, most modern authoritarian states hold regular if tightly controlled elections. To validate these sham contests among international and domestic audiences, they rely on so-called zombie monitors: pliant groups of international election observers that either praise or avoid criticizing obviously flawed elections. Zombie election monitors, sent by groups such as the Moscow-based Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, challenge or dilute negative assessments made by reputable international observers, like those deployed by the OSCE and the Organization of American States, among others. Researchers have documented a significant rise in the presence of zombie monitors over the last

two decades. These compromised observers help to prop up autocrats' narratives about their legitimacy and popularity and contribute to the endurance of their regimes.

To dispel any confusion about the unfairness of such elections, the United States, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, has long joined other democratic governments in routinely calling out examples of electoral manipulation and its corrosive effects. But a US State Department directive issued in July 2025 sharply curtailed this practice, asking American diplomats to instead focus on congratulating the winner and noting shared foreign policy interests. The US government also substantially revised the content of its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, and eliminated, among other sections, Section 3 of the reports, which documented problems with political participation, such as election irregularities, restrictions on political parties, and limits on women's political involvement. In November, despite clear indications that the planned December–January elections organized by the military junta in Myanmar would be deeply flawed—including the exclusion and disbanding of political parties, widespread surveillance and intimidation of voters, and the ongoing detention of thousands of perceived political opponents—the US government cited the announcement of the vote as one piece of evidence for why Myanmar nationals currently taking refuge in the United States were now safe to return to the war-torn country.

Abandoning the established practice of calling out electoral fraud in an era of manipulated elections and proliferating zombie observers could have the effect of isolating brave democratic opposition groups as they work to unseat autocrats through the political process. Even if some democracies have imperfect records of their own when it comes to elections, it is crucial for the entire community of free societies to maintain collective pressure in support of fair and competitive balloting. Their silence would create a void that autocrats would quickly fill, blurring any distinction between real and rigged votes, and diluting the world's basic understanding of democracy.

Democracy and Freedom Will Endure

It may be tempting to surrender to a pessimistic outlook when faced with the 20th consecutive year of decline in global freedom and a retreat by the world's democracies from their traditional role as defenders of fundamental rights. But even in this especially challenging moment, there are reasons for optimism. Democracies are durable systems, uniquely capable of self-correction, and they can take root and develop under

extremely difficult conditions, so long as there are people and organizations to protect them.

The global tally of consolidated democracies—countries where political rights and civil liberties have largely been secured—has grown substantially over the last 50 years. Today, 88 of the world's 195 countries are rated Free. That is more than double the number of Free countries in 1973, when *Freedom in the World* was first published and there was a total of 149 countries. Even during the last 20 years, democracies have proven remarkably stable. Seventy-six countries that were rated Free in 2005 remained Free in 2025. The average aggregate score of Free countries has also been stable during this period, declining by just 2 percent, while the average aggregate score of Not Free countries has plummeted by nearly 23 percent.

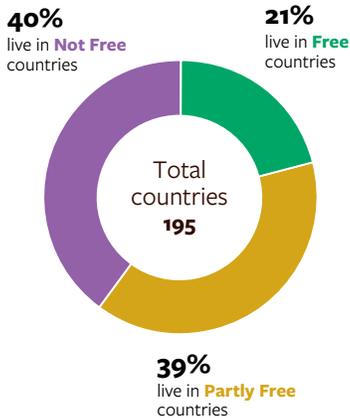
Democracies are resilient for a number of reasons. They perform better economically than their authoritarian counterparts, which makes them less prone to political breakdowns and the onset of violence. Democratic institutions are also better able than dictatorships to accommodate societal differences and policy disagreements, because they both safeguard individual rights, ensuring that members of minority groups are protected, and facilitate the peaceful transfer of power between rival forces, guaranteeing that political defeats are only temporary. Perhaps most importantly, while dictatorships breed resistance, research has shown that democracies nurture widespread commitment to their procedural norms, creating an environment in which the longer a democracy persists, the fewer actors who want to overturn the system remain.

In addition to being durable once established, democracies can be founded and built despite the global deterioration in freedom. Bhutan, for example, has successfully transitioned from absolute monarchy to full-fledged democracy, achieving the single largest score improvement over the last 20 years and becoming the only country in that period to move through all three categories, from Not Free and Partly Free to Free. Similarly, Fiji and Malawi have held several successful elections and peaceful transfers of power, earning improvements from Partly Free to Free in 2025. In Senegal, civil society, young people, and an independent court came together to push back on a president's attempt to postpone elections and exclude political opponents, which led that country to recover from Partly Free to Free in 2024.

While positive stories of countries successfully rebuilding their institutions after years of conflict are few and far between,

THE REAL-WORLD IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON FREEDOM

A majority of the world's people live in **Partly Free** and **Not Free** countries. However, Bolivia, Fiji, and Malawi all improved from **Partly Free** in 2025, lifting approximately 35.5 million residents into the **Free** category.

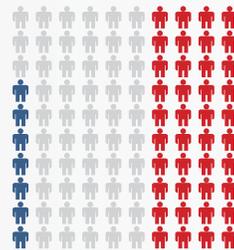


Population data are from the Population Reference Bureau's 2024 World Population Data Sheet.

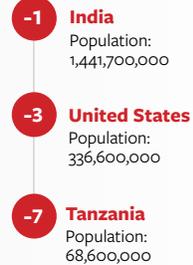


FREEDOM SCORES IMPROVED FOR 7% OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION

In 2025, the countries that **experienced an overall deterioration** in political rights and civil liberties were home to nearly six times as many people as those that **experienced an improvement**.



FREEDOM SCORES DECLINED FOR 40% OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION



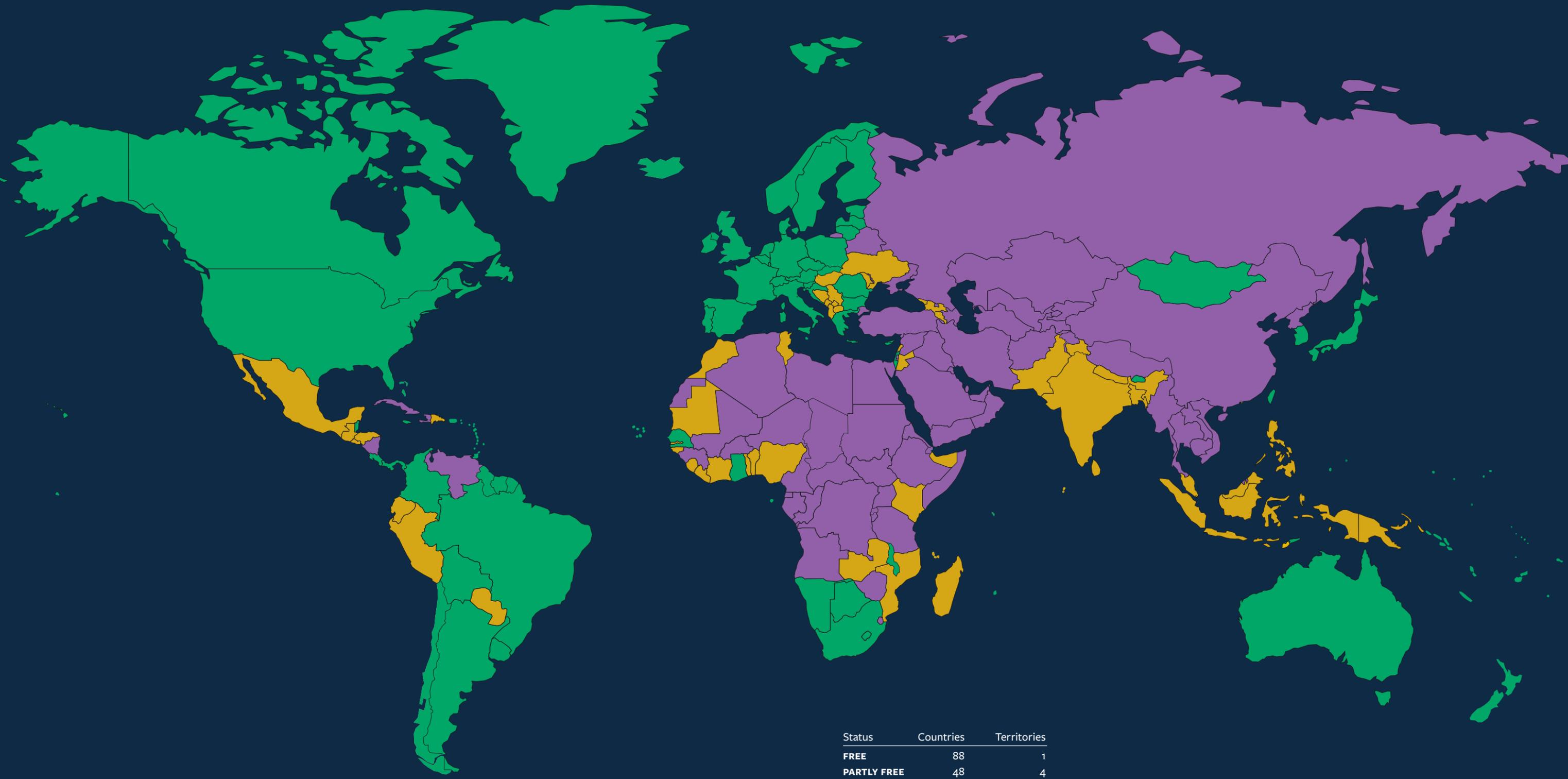
Lessons can be learned from Liberia, which suffered two consecutive civil wars that ended in 2003. It is one of the 52 countries that have seen an overall improvement in their scores over the last 20 years, having made considerable progress in restoring government capacity, reestablishing the rule of law, and ensuring citizens' political rights and civil liberties in the postwar period. Perhaps nowhere will these lessons be more relevant in 2026 than in Syria, where citizens and a transitional government face profound challenges in erecting a democratic system after more than half a century of dictatorship. The civil war that began in 2011 has devastated public institutions and infrastructure, while sectarian polarization and ongoing violence further complicate efforts to create credible transitional justice mechanisms and introduce the rule of law.

Democratic principles and freedoms are widely appealing and will always inspire advocates and champions. Despite increasing pressure from the government, independent media in Hungary have been able to survive by making use of digital tools, collaborations and partnerships, and innovative funding strategies. Serbian civil society groups are educating people on the ramifications of spyware

and offering practical guidance on digital security and data protection. Even in China, citizens have continued to find ways to publish independent reporting and express dissent. As the CCP intensified its censorship in recent years, journalists, activists, and internet users explored new methods for uncovering state abuses, accessing information, and commenting on sensitive topics even at considerable risk to their own safety. In the third quarter of 2025 alone, Freedom House's China Dissent Monitor registered nearly 1,400 protests and other acts of dissent, a 45 percent increase over the same period in 2024, and the sixth straight quarter of year-on-year increases.

The desire for freedom is inexhaustible. Democracies are stable and successful precisely because they address this and other fundamental needs, and people who have experienced dictatorship will continue their attempts to raise up new democracies, no matter how daunting the circumstances. But authoritarian regimes are still on the march around the world, and only the combined efforts of human rights defenders, civil society organizations, and democratic governments can hasten the day when all people are able to live in freedom.

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2026



■ FREE
 ■ PARTLY FREE
 ■ NOT FREE

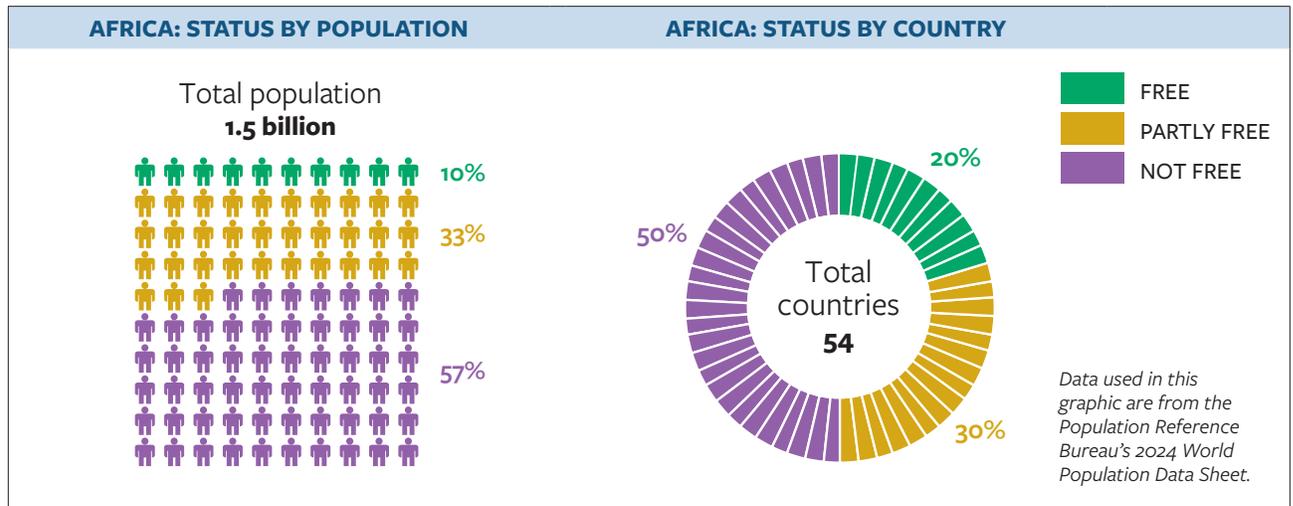
Status	Countries	Territories
FREE	88	1
PARTLY FREE	48	4
NOT FREE	59	8
Total	195	13

Freedom in the World 2026 assessed 208 countries and territories around the globe.

Regional Trends

AFRICA:

Military coups persisted, while noncompetitive elections and armed conflicts undermined freedoms.



Freedom declined in Africa in 2025, with political rights and civil liberties deteriorating in 18 of 54 countries and improving in just 11. Madagascar and Guinea-Bissau became the eighth and ninth countries in the region to succumb to military coups since 2019. Military juntas in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso tried to weaken multilateralism by formally leaving the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but the regional bloc was still able to play a key role in coordinating a military and political response to an attempted coup in Benin at the end of the year.

Noncompetitive elections cemented the political grip of coup leaders and their parties in Chad, Gabon, and Guinea. Brutal violence against protesters by security forces, the unfair disqualification of political opponents, and the evasion of term limits also produced victories for incumbents in Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Central African Republic. Meanwhile, in Tunisia, the administration of President Kais Saïed intensified its repression of dissent by using military courts to try civilian critics of the regime and prosecuting lawyers who defended human rights activists. By contrast, free and fair general elections in Malawi led to a peaceful transfer of power, lifting the country into the Free category for the first time since 1998.

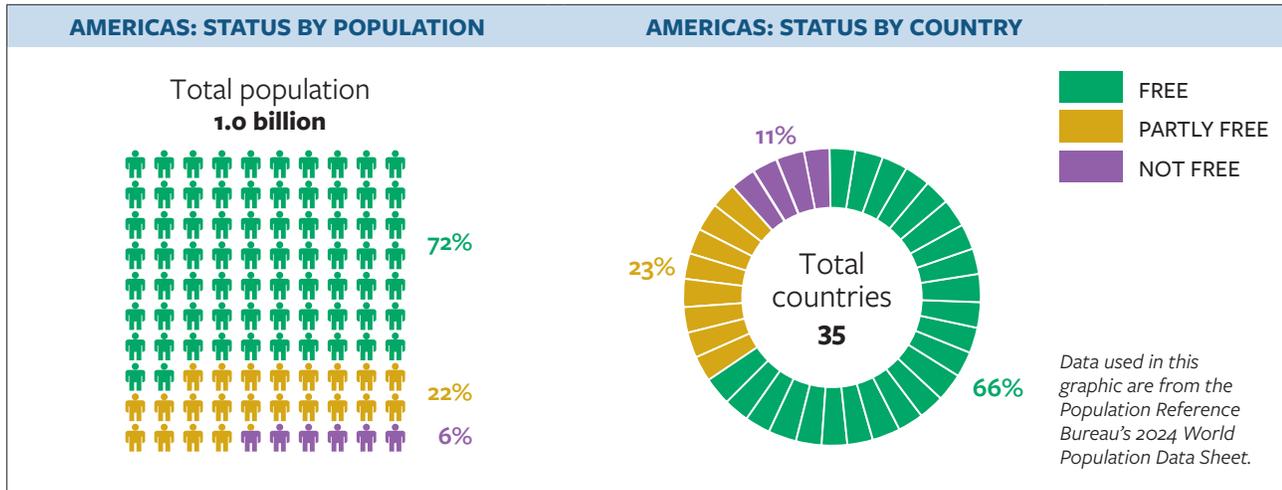
At age 92, President Paul Biya of Cameroon became the world's

oldest leader after securing a new term in an election marred by violence against protesters. Biya was one of a growing number of elderly presidents in Africa, where the median age is just 19. The generational mismatch could mean that more protests against corruption and youth unemployment, like those seen in Madagascar, Morocco, and Kenya in 2025, will erupt in the coming years. An alternative scenario was visible in Senegal, where 45-year-old President Bassirou Diomaye Faye continued to ease restrictions on rights after coming to office in breakthrough elections in 2024.

Ongoing armed conflicts put civilians at risk in several African countries. In Sudan, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces committed mass killings and sexual violence against civilians while seizing control of the city of El Fasher from the regular Sudanese Armed Forces. People living in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo—the scene of protracted fighting among the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel group, the Congolese military, and other armed groups—were subjected to lethal violence, displacement, sexual assault, and forced labor. Both countries' conflicts have produced immeasurable human suffering and involve a myriad of players, including foreign powers and nonstate groups, which has complicated efforts to forge durable ceasefires.

AMERICAS:

The region faced challenges to security as well as to freedoms of assembly and association, despite gains in electoral process.



Major threats to freedom in the Americas during 2025 included criminal violence and mounting restrictions on civic space. Although the region features some of the freest countries in the world, only six countries earned score improvements for the year, while 12 registered score declines. El Salvador recorded the region's largest score decline for the second consecutive year, due in part to the abolition of presidential term limits. In neighboring Honduras, infighting among members of the country's top electoral authority and vote-counting delays undermined the integrity of the November presidential election. Contested electoral processes, intensified repression, and the influence of armed groups and criminal networks continued to deepen authoritarian misrule in Venezuela and drive mass displacement.

Organized crime and violence plagued Free, Partly Free, and Not Free countries in the region. In Colombia, the collapse of President Gustavo Petro's Total Peace initiative and clashes among criminal organizations that operated along the border with Venezuela fueled a surge in kidnappings and homicides, including the murder of an opposition leader. Persistent strife in Haiti further delayed long-overdue elections and restricted the mobility of citizens, resulting in additional declines in Haiti's score. Even Costa Rica, which was once viewed as an exception to the insecurity among its neighbors, struggled to address rising criminal violence and the high-profile murder of an exiled Nicaraguan army major and dissident.

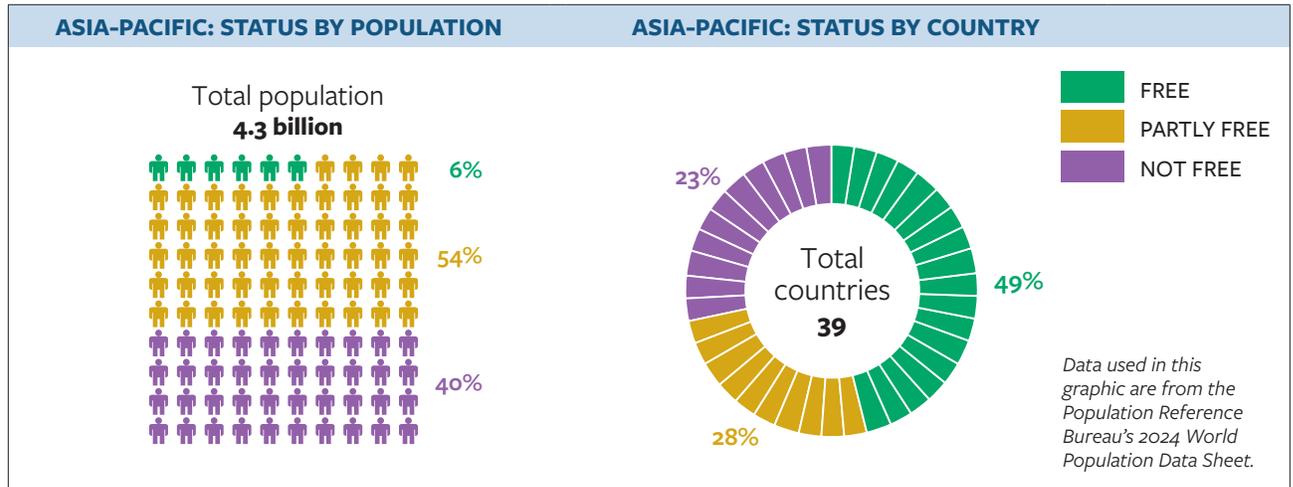
Freedoms of assembly and association also came under assault in 2025. Authorities in Argentina and Panama used enhanced security measures to quell pension-related protests. Meanwhile, legislation adopted in El Salvador, Paraguay, and Peru introduced greater government supervision of nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign funding, raising concerns about their ability to operate freely.

In the United States, an escalation in both legislative dysfunction and executive dominance, growing pressure on people's ability to engage in free expression, and efforts by the new administration to undermine anticorruption safeguards all contributed to a 3-point decline, bringing the country's score to 81 out of 100.

Despite these worrisome trends, several countries secured score improvements thanks to free and fair elections. After nearly 20 years in power, Bolivia's ruling Movement for Socialism party peacefully transferred control over the presidency and legislature to centrist candidate Rodrigo Paz and a group of opposition parties, playing a part in the country's improvement from Partly Free to Free status, which it last held in 2002. Elsewhere in the region, officials in Suriname implemented recent election reforms that established a one-person, one-vote system and allowed smaller parties to gain representation, and citizens in Jamaica faced less harassment and intimidation during the 2025 general elections than in some previous years' balloting.

ASIA-PACIFIC:

Some countries suffered from violent conflict and sham elections, while in others protesters demanded an end to government corruption.



Freedom declined slightly in the Asia-Pacific region, with 11 countries experiencing an overall deterioration in political rights and civil liberties and six registering gains. Fiji moved from Partly Free to Free status due to further improvements in the rule of law. The interim government of Bangladesh announced that parliamentary elections would take place in early 2026, though significant political turmoil persisted following the 2024 ouster of a repressive regime. Elsewhere, elections were engineered to shore up authoritarian control. In December, Myanmar's military junta conducted the first round of a sham vote across the limited territory that it controlled, adding to one of the largest score declines in the region. The balloting lacked any genuine opposition candidates and was marred by numerous arrests, violence, and intimidation of dissidents. The Chinese Communist Party's control over Hong Kong was reinforced through undemocratic Legislative Council elections that excluded candidates who were deemed disloyal to Beijing. Separately, major human rights violations related to scam centers in parts of Southeast Asia continued to be reported.

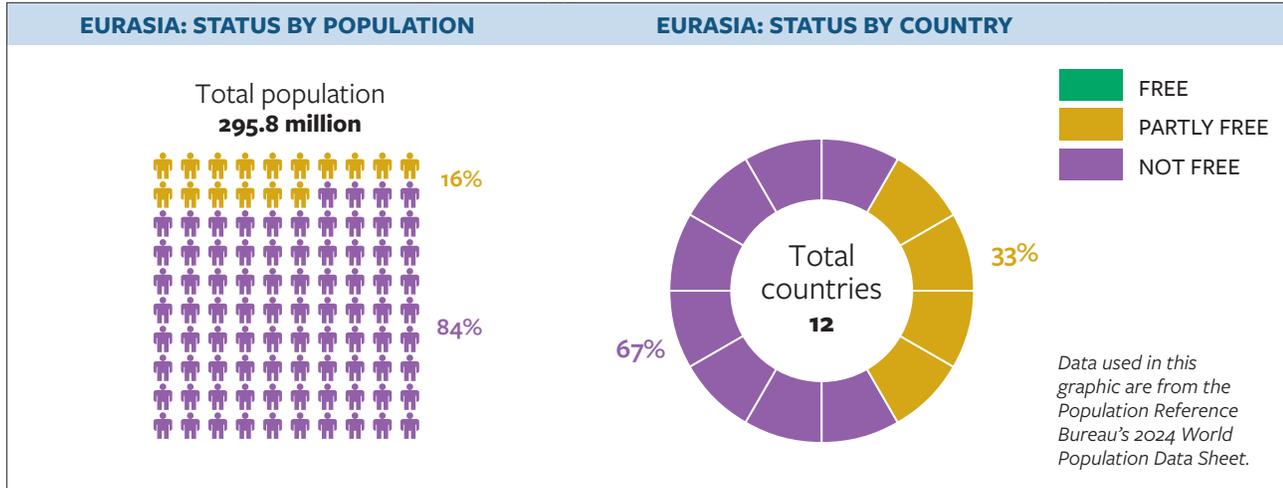
Concerns over corruption and inequality sparked major protests in the region, leading to harsh crackdowns and government shakeups in some cases. Sustained demonstrations in Mongolia over the extravagant lifestyle

of the prime minister's family culminated in his resignation following a no-confidence vote. Mass protests in Nepal, fueled in part by anger about political corruption, were met with lethal violence by security forces and then descended into significant unrest, contributing to a 3-point decline. The prime minister resigned, and his interim replacement was chosen by unconstitutional means, having been nominated through an informal poll on the messaging platform Discord. Widespread protests in Indonesia over grievances like parliament members' generous housing allowances resulted in thousands of arbitrary detentions, while numerous Filipinos rallied in response to a corruption scandal involving flood-control projects.

New bouts of armed conflict erupted during the year. A terrorist attack in April on a group of tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir sparked a brief but serious military clash between India and Pakistan, whose forces traded air strikes and artillery bombardments before declaring a fragile truce. Fighting over disputed territory also broke out between Cambodia and Thailand in July. Despite agreeing to a ceasefire, the two sides resumed combat at the end of the year, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people in both countries. Political instability persisted in Thailand in 2025, eventually prompting the dissolution of the parliament and the scheduling of fresh elections for 2026.

EURASIA:

No country recorded improvements in political rights and civil liberties as states asserted control over the media, academic freedom, and the opposition.



Restrictions on academic freedom, political opposition, and media freedom contributed to an overall decline in freedom in Eurasia, with three countries suffering losses in their scores. Eurasia was the only region in the world that had no countries register an improvement, though there was a minor gain in the separatist-led Georgian territory of Abkhazia. Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine continued to prevent that country from holding either legislative or executive elections due to safety and voter-access concerns as well as a constitutional prohibition on balloting under martial law. On a more positive note, an August 2025 law that allowed men between the ages of 18 and 22 to leave Ukraine led to increased freedom of movement. In Russia, the authorities ramped up pressure on independent media outlets and continued to arrest people for antiwar speech and activism as well as alleged participation in the “international LGBT movement,” which had previously been designated as an “extremist” organization.

In Azerbaijan, officials imprisoned two academics on fabricated charges of treason. Bahruz Samadov, a doctoral candidate who had advocated for improved relations with Armenia, and Igbal Abilov, a researcher who focused on the Talysh ethnic minority group, were sentenced to 15 years and 18 years in prison, respectively. In Georgia, professors who were critical of the government faced dismissal from their posts, amid

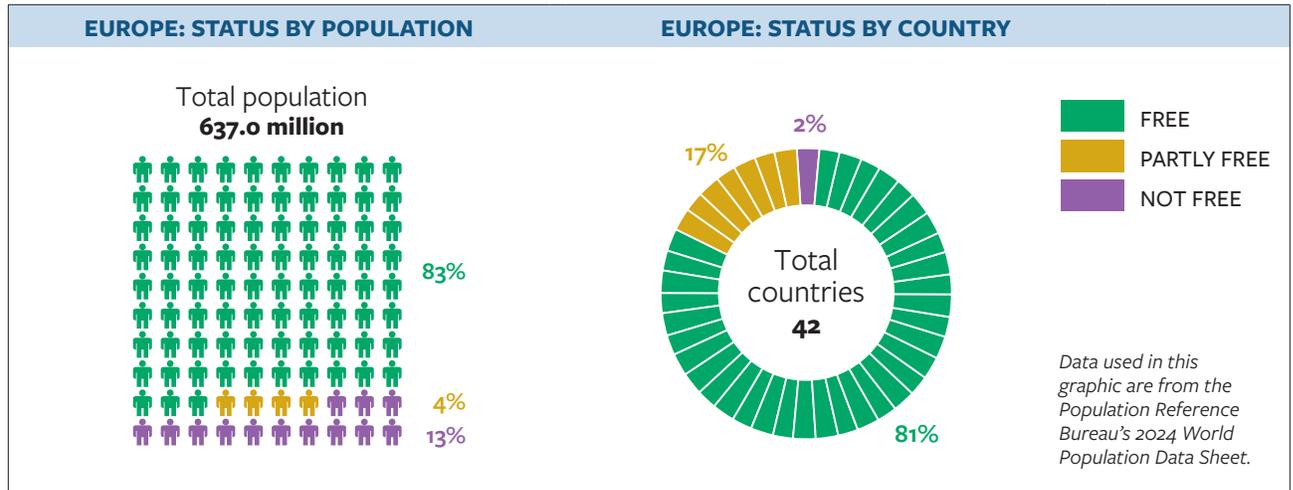
broader efforts by the ruling Georgian Dream party to expand its political control over the education system. In addition, the Georgian Dream government established a parliamentary commission to investigate members of the opposition, and arrested those who refused to participate, sentencing some to prison on trumped-up or fabricated charges. These measures contributed to Georgia’s 4-point score decline for the year, which was the largest in the Eurasia region.

Attempts to control or weaken the political opposition also led to score declines elsewhere. In Transnistria, a Moscow-backed territory of Moldova that has operated with de facto independence since a brief military conflict in 1992, all candidates who won in the November 2025 elections were affiliated with the ruling Renewal party, and genuine opposition candidates did not have the opportunity to run.

The media faced pressure from the state in a number of countries. In Kyrgyzstan, President Sadyr Japarov’s government declared that the prominent independent media outlets Kloop and Temirov Live were “extremist” organizations. The government also imprisoned several journalists affiliated with the outlets. In Moldova, an Amnesty International report noted an increase in self-censorship among journalists, citing a risk of legal repercussions or harassment by authorities.

EUROPE:

Gains in judicial independence were offset by the effects of political impasses on governance.



Respect for political rights and civil liberties was largely stable in Europe, which remained the freest region in the world. Ten countries experienced an overall improvement in freedom, while eight registered an overall decline. In Serbia, which tied Bulgaria for the largest decline in the region at 3 points, antigovernment protests were met with excessive force by police and violence by supporters of the ruling party.

Assertions of judicial independence fueled several improvements in the region. Lithuania and Spain each gained 1 point, as the former displayed increased transparency in its judicial appointments, and judicial vacancies were filled in the latter after a prolonged political deadlock. Despite facing significant political pressure, courts in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina issued rulings that demonstrated their independence. Bulgaria bucked the trend, however, as its Supreme Judicial Council, which is responsible for judicial and prosecutorial appointments and management, continued to act with an expired mandate.

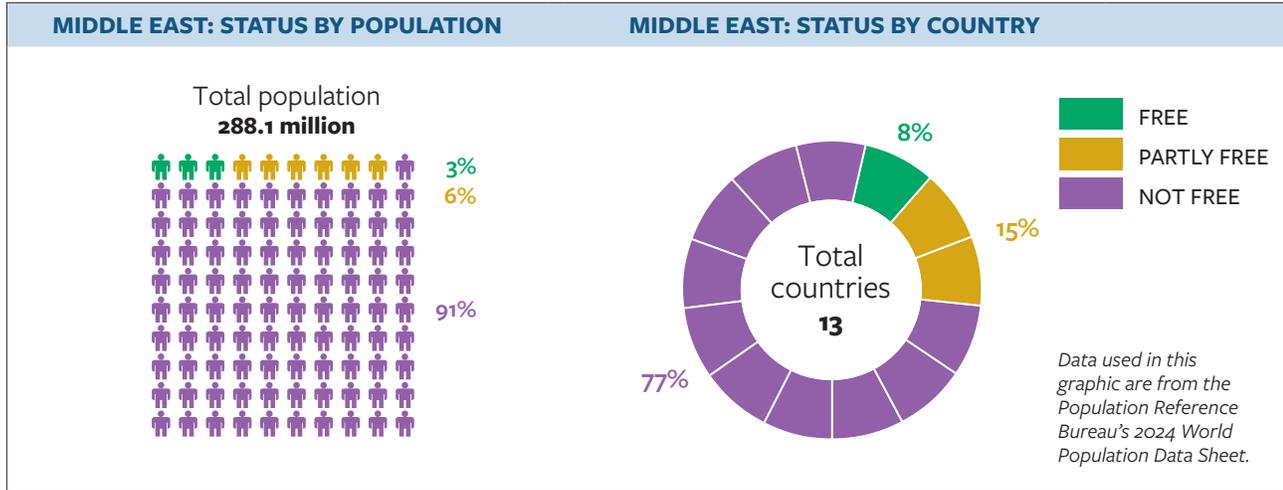
Political standoffs impeded other government functions throughout the region. In Kosovo, for example, newly elected legislators were unable to form a government for most of the year, while the caretaker government reportedly exceeded its technical mandate, resulting in snap elections; the impasse offset the country's gains on judicial independence and physical

security. Belgium lost 1 point as political parties failed to form a government in the Brussels region following June 2024 elections. Montenegro and Slovakia similarly declined by 1 point each, but in their cases the problem was undemocratic corner-cutting rather than gridlock: In Slovakia, the government has increasingly used fast-tracked legislative procedures for major legal and institutional changes, and numerous government-proposed laws passed in Montenegro through an expedited procedure and without legislative debate.

Migration continued to be a significant issue in Europe. Cypriot and Polish authorities were accused by the European Court of Human Rights and civil society groups of detaining asylum seekers in crowded and unsanitary conditions for lengthy periods of time, employing disproportionate force against migrants in border areas, and failing to examine asylum claims before expelling individuals. Nongovernmental organizations working on migration issues were also under pressure from authorities; Italian groups, for instance, faced fines, vessel seizures, and electronic surveillance of their leadership. In Turkey, which remained the only country rated Not Free in the region, authorities moved to phase out protections that had previously been provided to the roughly 2.4 million registered Syrian refugees living in the country; the changes followed the collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria in December 2024.

MIDDLE EAST:

Syria received the world's largest score improvement for the year, bringing cautious optimism to a region dominated by entrenched authoritarian rule.



Armed conflict, deepening repression, and changes in leadership contributed to a shifting landscape for political rights and civil liberties in the Middle East. Out of 13 countries, Syria and Lebanon earned score improvements, while Kuwait and Iran suffered further declines.

The region remained home to some of the least free places on earth, including the Gaza Strip, whose total score was just 2 points out of 100. The Israel-Hamas war raged on for most of the year, with Gaza's Palestinian population facing famine and a broader humanitarian catastrophe. Hamas continued to target Israeli troops and civilian areas with small arms and rocket attacks, and Israeli air strikes and ground attacks raised the death toll in Gaza to more than 70,000 people. Despite a ceasefire agreement in October that brought some relief to the people of Gaza and allowed the return of hostages to Israel, intermittent violence persisted from both sides. The conflict had also spread to Iran for 12 days in June, when Israeli air strikes killed more than 1,000 Iranians, including over 400 civilians, and Iranian missile attacks killed about 30 Israelis, nearly all of them civilians.

Freedom continued to decline in Kuwait, which had previously been seen as one of the most democratic of the Persian Gulf monarchies, following the emir's unilateral dissolution of the elected parliament in 2024. His

government ruled without a legislature throughout 2025, and eroded civil liberties by revoking the citizenship of tens of thousands of people, effectively rendering them stateless and preventing them from freely traveling outside the country. The security of citizenship was also weakened in Oman, where a law ratified in February threatened to strip Omanis of their citizenship for offenses including verbally insulting the sultan.

While new leadership brought minor improvements as well as cautious optimism to Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, people in these countries still faced threats to their civil liberties. In Lebanon, the parliament elected a president and designated a prime minister after nearly two years of political deadlock. However, a crippling economic crisis, cronyism, and political fragmentation remained stubborn obstacles to positive reform. Parliamentary elections in Iraq were generally well conducted and peaceful, though there were allegations of vote buying. Syria received the largest score improvement globally in 2025, as foreign and independent local media outlets were able to report critically from inside Syria, civil society organizations were able to register and operate more freely, and oppressive Assad-era legal restrictions started to be rolled back. Despite these gains, the new government's forces and other armed groups continued to engage in ethnic and sectarian violence during the year.

Policy Recommendations

After 20 consecutive years of deterioration, the struggle for global freedom has reached an ominous milestone. Erosion of democratic institutions in many countries over the past two decades has coincided with the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, which now possess both the confidence and the capacity to reshape the international order. Autocracies have clearly seized the initiative, increasing the broader threat to fundamental freedoms and the risk of instability and conflict if the democratic community fails to meet the challenge.

In the era following World War II and especially after the end of the Cold War, Washington and its allies worked to advance the tenets of the UN Charter and international law, including the central principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-determination. They understood that when these rules of the international system are applied selectively or set aside altogether, the result is a more dangerous and chaotic world, in which various powers jockey endlessly for dominance and resources, preying on smaller nations when they are not clashing with one another. However, democratic leadership has weakened in recent decades, and democratic governments themselves have resorted to the use of force outside clear legal constraints, effectively participating in authoritarian efforts to break down international safeguards against aggression and conquest.

The waning of democracies' traditional defense of the international order accelerated in 2025 under the second administration of US President Donald Trump, but no democracy is solely responsible. The democratic community as a whole has proven unwilling or unable to consistently uphold its values or act in a coordinated, sustained, and adequately scaled manner, as leaders prioritize short-term economic or security goals over principled and systematic engagement on freedom and democracy issues.

At the same time, multilateral institutions—most notably the United Nations—have faced mounting challenges in their efforts to prevent and manage conflict, as key bodies are increasingly distorted or obstructed by authoritarian powers such as China and Russia. The problem has been exacerbated by the US government's withdrawal of [funding](#) and political backing for international democracy assistance, [anticorruption projects](#), multilateral human rights mechanisms, and [international organizations](#). The [consequences](#) have been significant, and Washington's democratic allies have yet to fill the resulting leadership vacuum. Indeed, many have reduced their own spending on democracy and human rights programs as they divert resources to address urgent social and defense needs.

Although the postwar international order has always been imperfect, it set the conditions for an unusually long period of peace between great powers, enabling a large and growing share of humanity to live in security and prosperity. To uphold this framework and preserve hope that the benefits of democratic governance can reach an ever-greater number of people around the world, the democratic community must respond with urgency and resolve, and new champions of freedom must step forward.

If we fail to act, authoritarian models of governance will continue to gain traction, international institutions will continue to be hollowed out or repurposed to advance illiberal norms, and the use of military force and economic coercion will become increasingly common—transforming global politics, markets, and security conditions in ways that directly harm the interests and values of open societies.

As the democratic community adapts to the severe funding cuts and operational disruptions of 2025, this year's *Freedom in the World* recommendations urge policymakers, practitioners, and partners to come together to **strengthen democratic coordination and collective action in a contested global order, reimagine international democracy assistance, and prioritize engagement with younger generations.**

1. Strengthen democratic coordination and collective action in a contested global order.

Democratic resilience will increasingly depend on stronger coordination among countries that share a commitment to freedom, the rule of law, and accountable governance. As authoritarian states deepen their own cooperation across security, economic, and information domains, democracies must improve their capacity to act collectively, support one another economically and militarily, and resist coercion.

- Democracies should exert greater collective leadership at the regional level and within international organizations to defend democratic norms and the rules-based international order.** All democracies have a stake in sustaining respect for international law, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-determination, and democracies with smaller populations or shared borders with authoritarian powers are especially vulnerable when these rules are weakened or applied selectively. Democratic countries of all sizes should therefore engage actively in principled regional diplomacy, coalition building, and consistent bloc voting within international institutions. By coordinating their positions with like-minded partners; supporting the election of democratic states to leadership roles in relevant international and regional bodies; strengthening scrutiny of member-state compliance with charters and treaties; and jointly censuring coups, rigged elections, and violations of term limits, democratic governments can amplify their influence and reinforce both collaboration and credibility—not only within the multilateral and regional organizations in question, but also among their partners and allies in general. The experience of many countries demonstrates that democracy and national security are deeply intertwined, and that defending democratic norms is not an abstract moral stance, but rather a practical strategy for safeguarding stability, independence, and resilience in an increasingly hostile environment.
- Reduce strategic vulnerabilities created by economic dependence on authoritarian regimes.** Democracies should take steps to reduce their reliance on technologies, natural resources, critical industrial inputs, and manufactured goods from authoritarian states that use economic leverage to coerce or undermine democratic decision-making, and that enforce exploitative and repressive labor practices to maintain unfair competitive advantages. Governments should encourage responsible supply-chain practices and align trade, investment, and procurement policies with democratic values and human rights standards, including the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#). Democracies should also work together to shape international standards for emerging sectors of global trade, technology, and commerce—such as artificial intelligence—so that authoritarian governments cannot set the rules in ways that erode freedom or distort open markets. Greater transparency and coordination can help limit authoritarian influence while protecting democratic resilience and economic security.
- Confront corruption and close financial pathways that sustain authoritarian rule.** Democracies should work together to shut down the loopholes that allow authoritarian elites to launder stolen assets, hide wealth in opaque structures, or exploit democratic financial systems. The effort must include fortifying anticorruption institutions, strengthening financial regulations, investing in innovative enforcement tools, and supporting independent investigative journalists and civil society watchdogs. Democratic partners with the capacity to exert diplomatic pressure should help sustain political will for reforms in countries vulnerable to backsliding, while coordinated initiatives—such as [joint task forces](#) targeting international bribery and cross-border corruption—demonstrate the kind of collective action that is needed. The international community must expand domestic and transnational enforcement, root out illicit finance, and ensure that no jurisdiction becomes a haven for enablers of corruption.
- Withhold legitimacy from authoritarian leaders and undemocratic power grabs.** Democratic governments should avoid actions that confer symbolic or political validation on repressive regimes, in part because treating authoritarian rulers as diplomatic equals alters their incentives and reduces pressure to reform. While engagement with undemocratic counterparts is sometimes necessary, it should not come with the honors or recognition afforded to freely elected officials. Democratic leaders should refrain from congratulating the “winners” of rigged elections and should work with partners and allies to swiftly denounce coups, fraudulent electoral processes, and violations of term limits—restricting foreign assistance where appropriate. Significant international sporting and cultural events should not be hosted by authoritarian regimes, and coordinated diplomatic responses can help ensure that such governments are not granted the legitimacy or adulation they seek.

2. Reimagine international democracy assistance to help reverse the global decline in freedom.

International support for democratic institutions, civil society, and independent media has been associated with modest but meaningful improvements in democratic governance, and it is far less costly than the military outlays necessitated by rising authoritarian aggression. [Research](#) indicates that targeted democracy assistance can contribute to incremental gains even if it cannot, on its own, counter broader authoritarian pressures. Freedom House's emergency assistance programs, for example, have helped protect more than 14,000 human rights defenders over the past decade—an illustration of how vital such support can be. But assistance alone cannot succeed if democratic donor governments fail to uphold the same values in their diplomacy, or if they apply them inconsistently. Even before the defunding and dismantling of major democracy assistance mechanisms in 2025, global freedom had been in decline for nearly two decades, and existing international efforts were not sufficient to match the scale and coordination of today's authoritarian challenge. Meeting this moment will require new ideas, sharper prioritization, and far greater flexibility in how democratic support is designed and delivered.

- **Democracy assistance cannot survive on shrinking public budgets alone; it requires a broader, more diversified, and more coordinated financing ecosystem, including public-private partnerships that draw on governments, philanthropy, and the private sector.** Public funding cuts in the United States and other democracies have exposed the dangers of relying on any single government or funding stream, especially as urgent defense needs and political skepticism toward foreign aid reshape official budgets. The private sector has a direct interest in the rule of law, transparency, and accountable governance, which underpin long-term stability and predictable markets; organized labor similarly has an interest in upholding freedom of association and related rights abroad, rather than attempting to compete with severely mistreated counterparts in authoritarian states. **Philanthropy, meanwhile, remains an underutilized partner:** [Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) show that less than 1 percent of cross-border private giving goes to governance, human rights, and democracy work, despite growing recognition that democratic backsliding threatens many of the social and rights-based priorities that philanthropic foundations support. Existing models already demonstrate how a more distributed approach can function, including emergency assistance portfolios backed by multiple governments and complemented by philanthropic and private-sector contributions. To scale up these models, Freedom House has called for the creation of a [Global Freedom Fund](#) that would mobilize public, sovereign, institutional, and philanthropic capital in a sustained, strategic manner to strengthen democratic institutions, combat corruption, protect civic space, and support independent media. An investment in freedom is an investment in the operating system that enables security, prosperity, stability, and open markets. Different stakeholders will approach this work with different incentives, but the ultimate purpose of democracy assistance is to uphold human dignity, fundamental rights, and economic and national security.

Among these stakeholders, the United States plays a uniquely powerful role. As the largest historical contributor to global democracy support, the country has an outsized influence on whether democratic institutions worldwide can withstand coordinated authoritarian pressure. Sustaining that leadership will require renewed bipartisan commitment, as well as deeper engagement from all the components of American society—including philanthropic foundations, the private sector, and organized labor—whose long-term interests in stability, transparency, open markets, and fair competition align closely with continued US support for the health of global freedom. This is a moment when democratic norms are under strain, and those in the United States who value freedom, security, and prosperity have a critical part to play in reinforcing the broader global ecosystem that enables democratic institutions to succeed.

- **In an era of constrained resources, stronger donor coordination and alignment on priority issues is essential, and each effort must be customized to the needs on the ground.** Coordination is improving in some areas, but donors must do more to avoid duplication and establish complementary priorities that reflect where limited resources can most effectively counter democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation. This requires more rigorous measurement of results, so that funding decisions are grounded in evidence about what works and where support can have the greatest impact. Amid myriad challenges to global freedom, our analysis of the last 20 years offers

a clear indication of where collective action is urgently needed: [media freedom](#), [freedom of personal expression](#), and [due process](#) rights have suffered the steepest deterioration, and democracy assistance can play a critical role in helping to bolster these fundamental liberties. Freedom House has written extensively on such rights in previous reports, but greater attention should now be focused on the diverse tactics that governments from across the democracy–autocracy spectrum have adopted—including heavy-handed media regulation, overt censorship, digital surveillance, and politicized prosecution—to chip away at each of them. It is also important to emphasize that the pattern of attacks on fundamental freedoms has intensified pressure on the individuals and organizations working to defend them.

- Strengthen protection and long-term support for at-risk human rights defenders and embattled civil society organizations.** Repression against journalists, activists, lawyers, and community leaders continues unabated in countries ruled by authoritarian governments, and international programs that historically helped protect and empower these rights defenders have been weakened by funding cuts. In the face of shrinking resources and escalating risk, donors and implementing partners should move toward [more sustainable, locally grounded protection systems](#) that reinforce the resilience of civil society and individual activists on the front lines of freedom. This should include supporting decentralized networks of local and regional partners, ensuring rapid and flexible access to emergency resources, and investing in longer-term capacity building so that rights defenders can withstand ongoing pressure without relying solely on external assistance. International actors should also strengthen partnerships that connect global reach with local legitimacy, reinforcing protection mechanisms that will endure even amid geopolitical and financial headwinds.

3. Prioritize engagement with younger generations in the digital spaces where civic identity is now formed.

Young people are increasingly [dissatisfied](#) with democracy—not because they reject its principles, but because they see institutions failing to deliver on them. Programmatic work should create clear pathways for meaningful political participation, from voting and policy engagement to community organizing and public leadership, so that young people can translate their expectations into agency. Investment in younger generations is an essential part of any long-term strategy to ensure that democratic norms remain relevant, resilient, and capable of renewal in the decades ahead.

At the same time, young people’s political identities and awareness are shaped primarily online, where they rely more on content creators and peer networks than on traditional information sources. Democracy assistance programs should respond by expanding digital civic education and media literacy campaigns that emphasize democratic values and rights. Support should include intergenerational initiatives that foster mentorship between experienced leaders and young people. It is critical to incorporate independent journalists, content creators, educators, and civil society actors who can engage young audiences authentically, as well as initiatives that strengthen open, safe, and [rights-respecting digital ecosystems](#).

In particular, policymakers and donors should prioritize efforts to counter manipulation of the online environment, including state-backed influence operations and the use of fraudulent or fabricated content for deceptive purposes in electoral campaigns. Laws aimed at increasing platform responsibility, such as those that boost transparency, provide platform data to vetted researchers, and protect free expression, are needed to ensure that reliable information can flourish online. Governments should avoid mandating that platforms implement age-verification or age-assurance systems, which may unintentionally inhibit young people’s participation in political discussions.

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