



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2013: DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGHS IN THE BALANCE

by Arch Puddington

As the year 2012 drew to a close, events in the Middle East dramatized two competing trends: demands for change pushed forward by popular democratic movements, and an authoritarian response that combines intransigence with strategic adaptability.

The ambiguous nature of these developments, combined with either instability or authoritarian retrenchment in other regions, had a significant impact on the state of global freedom. The findings of *Freedom in the World 2013*, the latest edition of Freedom House's annual report on political rights and civil liberties, showed that more countries registered declines than exhibited gains over the course of 2012. This marks the seventh consecutive year in which countries with declines outnumbered those with improvements. Yet the number of countries ranked as Free increased by three, and now stands at 90, suggesting that the overall ferment includes a potential for progress as well as deterioration.

Developments in Egypt in particular encapsulated a pattern in which gains for freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were threatened by opposition from governments, security forces, ruling families, or religiously based political factions. In Egypt, the year was notable for a flawed but competitive presidential election, the withdrawal of the military from its self-appointed political supremacy, and a continued assertiveness by popular movements in the face of antidemocratic threats. Despite the energy of civil society and the shift to civilian rule, however, the country was confronted by daunting problems, experiencing at various times a campaign to hobble foreign and local nongovernmental organizations, the dissolution of an elected parliament by the judiciary, a faulty process to draft a new constitution, resistance to change by entrenched elites, and a power grab by newly elected president

Mohamed Morsi that was only partially thwarted by mass protests. Finally, at year's end the state prosecutor announced plans to investigate leading opposition figures on charges of treason, and political commentators for alleged defamation.

As in the world at large, more countries in the MENA region endured declines than made gains in their drive toward freedom in 2012. Aspirations for elections and accountable government were often fiercely suppressed through arrests, imprisonment, police violence, and in Syria, a murderous war waged by the state against its own people. However, there is reason to remain cautiously optimistic about the region's future. Events in Tunisia and Libya, where popular uprisings before and after Egypt's had also expelled longtime dictators in early 2011, were generally positive in 2012, even if each encountered challenges and setbacks. Moreover, the societal impulse to shake off autocratic rule, pervasive injustice, and rampant corruption has clearly spread from Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt to neighboring countries.

Much will depend on the commitment to democracy of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups that now or may soon find themselves in positions of power. But the past year has provided more evidence that Middle Eastern countries long subject to the dictator's heel are quickly developing resilient and informed civil societies willing to push back against attempts to curb freedom of expression and thought, distort the electoral process, or concentrate power in the hands of military or religious authorities. In this context, factions or governments that seek to reduce freedom could find it increasingly difficult to do so.

Meanwhile, the world's most powerful authoritarian leaders have watched events in the

Middle East with concern. The findings of *Freedom in the World* point to a stepped-up drive by authoritarian governments in other regions to weaken precisely the elements of democratic governance that pose the most serious threats to repressive and corrupt rule: independent civil society groups, a free press, and the rule of law. Indeed, a five-year set of comparative data show that while the indicators related to competitive elections and political pluralism declined slightly or actually improved on a global scale between 2008 and 2012, there were notable declines for freedom of the press and expression, freedom of assembly and the rights of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), an independent judiciary, and equal protection under the law. Of particular concern is the ongoing campaign in Russia, Venezuela, Iran, and elsewhere to thwart those NGOs whose work is deemed to be political in nature. This can include activism in a wide range of fields, including opposing censorship, environmental protection, women's rights, gay rights, anticorruption efforts, and fair treatment for minorities.

Such repressive campaigns were especially apparent in Eurasia, where a number of already grim settings grew even more constrained. Russia took a decided turn for the worse after Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency. Having already marginalized the formal political opposition, he pushed through a series of laws meant to squelch a burgeoning societal opposition. The measures imposed severe new penalties on unauthorized political demonstrations, restricted the ability of NGOs to raise funds and conduct their work, and placed new controls on the internet.

Among other Eurasian countries, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Ukraine were evaluated as less free than in the previous year, while Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Belarus remained some of the world's most repressive states. This dismal record was partially offset by peaceful, competitive elections in Armenia and Georgia. Yet even Georgia, which experienced its first orderly transfer of power to the opposition through democratic elections, finished the year on a less than satisfying note

after the new government quickly arrested some 30 officials of the previous government, raising concerns about politically motivated prosecutions.

In China, hopes for meaningful political reform were dealt a serious blow with the selection of a new Communist Party leadership team whose members have generally built their careers on hard-line policies. As if to emphasize the point that the new leaders are unlikely to usher in an era of political liberalization, the government has taken steps in the last two months to reinforce internet censorship and surveillance. As in the Middle East, developments in Africa reflected a combination of gains and declines, a great deal of volatility, and a disturbing escalation in armed conflicts. Rebel groups threatened to overrun government forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. Mali, a country with a reputation as a model African democracy, was battered by a reinvigorated Tuareg rebellion, a military coup that overthrew the elected government, and the seizure of its northern provinces by Islamist militants whose crude imitation of Islamic law helped to drive hundreds of thousands of inhabitants into neighboring countries. And in northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram sect has prosecuted a reign of terror that targets Christians, government officials, and security forces. Nevertheless, Africa also accounted for three of the four countries that moved from Partly Free to Free in 2012, highlighting the continent's remarkable diversity of political environments.

Freedom's Trajectory in 2012

The number of countries exhibiting gains for the past year, 16, lagged behind the number with declines, 28. The most noteworthy gains were in Egypt, Libya, Burma, and Côte d'Ivoire. While the Middle East experienced some of the most significant improvements, it also registered major declines, with a list of worsening countries that includes Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. Declines were also noted in a number of countries in Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa.

An assessment of the *Freedom in the World* indicators over the past five years shows the greatest gains in the Asia-Pacific and MENA regions, and the most pronounced declines in sub-Saharan Africa. The Eurasia subregion registered the lowest scores for political rights, while MENA had the worst scores for civil liberties categories. The Hispanic America subregion also saw declines in most indicators, especially in the civil liberties categories.

Major developments and trends include:

- **Volatility in West Africa:** This section of Africa saw major declines in Mali, which experienced both a military coup and the takeover of its northern section by Islamist militants, and Guinea-Bissau, which has increasingly come to resemble a military narcostate. At the same time, there were important gains. Côte d'Ivoire, which was only recently riven by internal conflict, moved from Not Free to Partly Free due to the peaceful inauguration of a new parliament and the adoption of laws on transparency and corruption. Guinea showed steady improvements in freedom of belief, freedom of association, and the right to own property or engage in private business. Senegal moved from Partly Free to Free owing to free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections that resulted in a peaceful rotation of power, as well as nascent efforts by the president to increase government accountability and transparency. Sierra Leone moved from Partly Free to Free as a result of a free, fair, and peaceful presidential election in November.
- **Gulf States Retreat:** The past several years, and the past year in particular, have featured a steady decline in democratic institutions and in some cases an increase in repressive policies among the Persian Gulf states. Kuwait's political rights rating declined due to a parliamentary crisis and the government's attempts to undermine the political opposition by revising the electoral law. Oman lost ground due to the ongoing arrests of human rights and reform activists, and the increased suppression of free

expression in online forums. The United Arab Emirates was downgraded due to stepped-up arrests of activists, lawyers, and judges calling for political reform; the passage of a highly restrictive internet law that punishes online activism and free expression; and the dismissal and deportation of academics who were critical of government policies. For a second year, Bahrain systematically persecuted opposition activists, handing out extremely lengthy prison sentences in some instances. In addition to continuing its domestic repression, Saudi Arabia has sent security forces to help quell protests in Bahrain and provided assistance to other governments and parties in the region to counter the influence of democratic countries.

- **Civil Liberties at Risk in Turkey:** During his early years in power, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pushed through important reforms that enshrined civilian rule, enhanced fairness at the polls, and made halting steps toward greater minority rights. More recently, however, his government has jailed hundreds of journalists, academics, opposition party officials, and military officers in a series of prosecutions aimed at alleged conspiracies against the state and Kurdish organizations. Turkey currently leads the world in the number of journalists behind bars, and democracy advocates are expressing deep concern for the state of press freedom and the rule of law.
- **Muslim-on-Muslim Violence:** The persecution and killing of Muslims by other Muslims on supposed religious grounds reached horrifying levels in Pakistan, and remained a serious problem in Iraq and elsewhere. Sufis and Shiites were the most frequent victims, but members of other sects, local medical workers, advocates for women and girls, and human rights defenders were also targeted. The growing presence in the Syrian opposition of fighters from radical Sunni groups may pose a serious obstacle to the creation of a democratic and pluralistic society after the end of the current conflict.

Results for 2012

The number of countries designated by *Freedom in the World* as Free in 2012 stood at 90, representing 46 percent of the world's 195 polities and 3,046,158,000 people—43 percent of the global population. The number of Free countries increased by three from the previous year's survey.

The number of countries qualifying as Partly Free stood at 58, or 30 percent of all countries assessed by the survey, and they were home to 1,613,858,500 people, or 23 percent of the world's total. The number of Partly Free countries declined by two from the previous year.

A total of 47 countries were deemed Not Free, representing 24 percent of the world's polities. The number of people living under Not Free conditions stood at 2,376,822,100, or 34 percent of the global population, though it is important to note that more than half of this number lives in just one country: China. The number of Not Free countries declined by one from 2011.

The number of electoral democracies stood at 117, the same as for 2011. Two countries, Georgia and Libya, achieved electoral democracy status, while two were dropped from the category, Mali and the Maldives.

Four countries moved from Partly Free to Free: Lesotho, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Tonga. Three countries rose from Not Free to Partly Free: Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, and Libya. Mali fell two tiers, from Free to Not Free, and Guinea-Bissau dropped from Partly Free to Not Free.

ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL TRENDS

Middle East and North Africa: Democratic Gains amid Intensified Repression

In a region notable for sectarian polarization, civil strife, and repressive autocracies, freedom scored some grudging but nonetheless impressive gains in 2012. Indeed, despite predictions that the initial accomplishments of the Arab Spring would fall victim to the Middle

East's perennial antidemocratic currents, Tunisia retained the gains of the previous year, which had transformed the country from a showcase for Arab autocracy into an electoral democracy whose leaders have pledged themselves to moderation, civil liberties, and the rule of law. There were, of course, challenges to the new order. The constitutional drafting process was delayed amid disagreement, a faltering economy and high unemployment threatened to undermine popular support for elected government, and Salafi Muslim forces demanded adherence to their beliefs, sometimes using violence to punish perceived vices. Nevertheless, the advances of the previous year by and large held firm.

FREE, PARTLY FREE, NOT FREE

Freedom in the World applies one of three broad category designations to each of the countries and territories included in the index: **Free, Partly Free, and Not Free.**

A **Free** country is one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media.

A **Partly Free** country is one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. Partly Free states frequently suffer from an environment of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and a political landscape in which a single party enjoys dominance despite a certain degree of pluralism.

A **Not Free** country is one where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied.

For more on how these designations are determined, see the Methodology section on page 32.

Another relative success story in the MENA region is Libya. Having ranked among the world's worst tyrannies for decades, the country scored major gains in 2012, especially in the political rights categories, and is now ranked as Partly Free. Libya continues to suffer from a lack of clear government control over many parts of its territory, a problem that is compounded by the actions of autonomous local militias and radical Islamists. But in defiance of forecasts of chaos and failure, the country held successful elections for a General National Congress that included candidates from a range of regional and political backgrounds, while free expression and civic activity continued to grow.

Egypt also moved from Not Free to Partly Free, though it experienced jarring setbacks at different points during the year. Thus while the presidential election was regarded as having met most international standards, it took place after a number of leading contenders had been disqualified. In November, President Morsi proclaimed his right to rule without judicial oversight as part of a bid to push through a new constitution, only to step back incrementally in the face of street protests. Critics warned that the constitution, which was ultimately approved in a flawed referendum process, included provisions that could be interpreted to justify restrictions on freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. While the media featured criticism of government policies that would have been unthinkable during the Mubarak period, there were efforts to prosecute journalists and commentators for insulting the president or other authorities. Clearly, the future of the Middle East will depend in significant ways on the success of Egypt's democratic experiment, which in turn rests at least in part on the ruling Islamists' commitment to democratic norms. In light of the past year's developments, the outcome remains very much an open question.

Syria has suffered by far the worst repercussions from the Arab Spring. In 2011, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad responded to peaceful demands for political change by waging war against his own people. In 2012, amid inaction by the international community, the bloody conflict developed starker sectarian overtones

and drew in fighters affiliated with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

Sectarian conflict also plagued Lebanon and Iraq during the year. Lebanon faced a deterioration in the security environment and increasing attacks and restrictions on journalists, activists, and refugees as different groups took sides in the Syrian conflict. Iraq's political rights rating declined due to the concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and growing pressure on the opposition, as exemplified by the arrest and death sentence in absentia of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, the country's most senior Sunni Arab politician. Separately, Jordan registered a decline in freedom of assembly due to the repression of protests against a new electoral law and the lack of meaningful political reform.

Iran's government stepped up its repression of journalists and bloggers, civil society activists, academics, and minorities in 2012, including through extrajudicial detentions. The number of executions continued to be among the highest in the world, with the death penalty applied for a range of political and social offenses. Among the most egregious cases, four Iranian Arab prisoners accused of terrorist activity were executed in June following a closed-door trial, and critical blogger Sattar Beheshti died in police custody in November. Parliamentary elections held in March, which fell far short of international standards, further entrenched supporters of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and ushered in a new generation of hard-liners, all of whom were considered opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Israel remains the region's only Free country. In recent years, controversies have surrounded proposed laws that threatened freedom of expression and the rights of civil society organizations. In most cases, however, these measures have either been quashed by the government or parliament, or struck down by the Supreme Court. Israeli politics have also been roiled by an escalating controversy over the role of ultra-Orthodox Jews and their positions on issues such as military service and gender equality.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Coups and Conflict Overshadow Electoral Successes

In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has ranked as the world's most politically volatile region, with major democratic breakthroughs in some countries and coups, civil strife, and authoritarian crackdowns in others. Over the past five years, scores for all seven topical categories measured in *Freedom in the World* showed decline, with substantial downgrades for those that fall under the umbrella of civil liberties. This pattern continued in 2012. While the region saw several significant gains, especially in West Africa, civil conflicts and the emergence in some countries of violent Islamist groups prevented an overall upgrade for political freedom.

Three countries moved from Partly Free to Free: Lesotho, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. Lesotho's political rights indicators improved because, despite preelection violence, it held free and fair parliamentary elections that resulted in a peaceful rotation of power. Senegal, after political tension and uncertainty in 2011, also experienced a peaceful power transfer through presidential and parliamentary elections, and benefited from nascent efforts by the new president to increase government accountability and transparency. Sierra Leone, 10 years after the end of a brutal civil war, successfully completed its own free and fair national elections, during which reformed electoral institutions operated with transparency and demonstrated the ability to function without undue influence from the international community.

Côte d'Ivoire showed substantial improvement just a year after a violent civil conflict, moving from Not Free to Partly Free. Two other countries, Guinea and Malawi, also showed gains. In Guinea there was evidence of steady improvements in religious freedom, the rights of local and international NGOs, and the climate for small businesses and private enterprise. Malawi underwent a peaceful power transfer to new president Joyce Banda, which was followed by an easing of repression, including improvements in academic freedom and freedom of assembly.

WORST OF THE WORST

Of the 47 countries designated as Not Free, nine have been given the survey's lowest possible rating of 7 for both political rights and civil liberties. These worst-rated countries represent a narrow range of systems and cultures. One—North Korea—is a one-party, Marxist-Leninist regime. Two—Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—are Central Asian countries ruled by dictators with roots in the Soviet period. Sudan is ruled by a leadership that has elements of both radical Islamism and a traditional military junta. The remaining worst-rated states are Equatorial Guinea, a highly corrupt regime with one of the worst human rights records in Africa; Eritrea, an increasingly repressive police state; Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with severe social controls; Syria, a dictatorship in the midst of a bloody civil war; and Somalia, a failed state. The two worst-rated territories in the survey are Tibet—under Chinese jurisdiction—and Western Sahara, which is controlled by Morocco.

An additional 6 countries and territories received scores that were slightly above those of the worst-ranked countries, with ratings of 6,7 or 7,6 for political rights and civil liberties: Belarus, Chad, China, Cuba, Laos, and South Ossetia.

Unfortunately, these impressive advances were more than offset by a series of declines, several of which derived from civil conflict. Mali suffered one of the greatest single-year declines in the history of *Freedom in the World*, dropping precipitously from Free to Not Free. Nigeria, another country plagued by Islamist militants, suffered a less dramatic decline, as did the Central African Republic, which at year's end risked being conquered by a rebel group. Guinea-Bissau's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to an April military coup, which entailed the removal of the interim president, the

suspension of the national legislature, the halting of the electoral process, and increased repression of civil liberties. The Gambia's civil liberties rating declined due to the absence of due process for defendants, as exhibited by the execution of nine prisoners who had no access to lawyers and without notification of their families.

In East and Southern Africa, notable declines were seen in Kenya, Uganda, and Madagascar. Kenya's civil liberties rating dropped as a result of increased ethnic and religious tensions and incidents of violence throughout the country in advance of the 2013 elections. These problems were driven in part by the heavy-handed counterterrorism efforts of the domestic security forces since Kenya's incursion into neighboring Somalia in late 2010. Uganda continued its recent downward trend, with increased harassment of the opposition and a campaign to obstruct and shut down NGOs that focus on sensitive issues such as gay rights, corruption, term limits, and land rights. Madagascar registered a decline due to increasing repression and both physical and economic insecurity caused by ongoing political instability that began with a 2009 coup. South Africa suffered a decline in freedom of association stemming from deadly police confrontations with striking mine workers, and the advancement of the Protection of State Information Bill through the parliament raised concerns about media freedom and access to information.

Central and Eastern Europe/Eurasia: Return of the Iron Fist in Russia

The return of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency ushered in a new period of accelerated repression. Since his inauguration in May, Putin has moved in a calculated way to stifle independent political and civic activity, pushing through a series of laws meant to restrict public protest, limit the work of NGOs, and inhibit free expression on the internet. The regime also forced the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to end its work in Russia, and has severely hampered the ability of foreign broadcasters to reach the Russian audience. At year's end, in retaliation for a U.S. law imposing visa and asset

restrictions on Russian human rights abusers, Putin signed a ban on the adoption of Russian orphans by families in the United States.

With Russia setting the tone, Eurasia (consisting of the countries of the former Soviet Union minus the Baltic states) now rivals the Middle East as one of the most repressive areas on the globe. Indeed, Eurasia is in many respects the world's least free subregion, given the entrenchment of autocrats in most of its 12 countries.

The authoritarian temptation poses a threat even in Eurasian countries with recent histories of dynamic, if erratic, democratic governance. Thus Ukraine suffered a decline for a second year due to the politically motivated imprisonment of opposition leaders, flawed legislative elections, and a new law favoring the Russian-speaking portion of the population. In Central Asia, Tajikistan's civil liberties rating declined due to a military operation in Gorno-Badakhshan, which resulted in scores of deaths, extrajudicial killings, and a media crackdown. Kazakhstan's media environment deteriorated in the wake of a crackdown on labor unrest in late 2011, with authorities banning opposition newspapers and blocking opposition websites and social media.

There were some positive developments in Eurasia. The most notable was in Georgia, which saw an improvement in its political rights rating after the opposition Georgian Dream party won competitive parliamentary elections. The vote led to an orderly and democratic transfer of power, the first in the nation's history, and the campaign featured more pluralistic media coverage. In the elections' aftermath, however, the new government detained some 30 officials from its predecessor, prompting claims of a political witch hunt. Armenia's political rights rating rose due to peaceful parliamentary elections in May, which rebalanced the decline stemming from the violent aftermath of the 2008 presidential vote.

Two of the region's breakaway territories also made gains. Abkhazia's political rights rating improved due to the competitiveness of

LARGEST NET CHANGES IN TOTAL AGGREGATE SCORE, 2008–2012

Declines		Improvements	
Mali	46	Libya	35
Madagascar	23	Tunisia	35
The Gambia	20	Burma	21
Guinea-Bissau	20	Tonga	18
Bahrain	18	Egypt	13
Ukraine	16	Zimbabwe	13
Ethiopia	15	Guinea	11
Eritrea	10	Moldova	10
Rwanda	10	Côte d'Ivoire	9
Yemen	10	Georgia	9
Burundi	9	Thailand	9
Ecuador	9	Tanzania	8
Honduras	9	Montenegro	6
Sri Lanka	9	Sierra Leone	6

This table shows the countries with the largest net gains or losses in total aggregate score (0–100) between *Freedom in the World 2009* and *Freedom in the World 2013*.

See page 14 for these countries' current status and ratings.

parliamentary elections held in March, which allowed a shift toward independent candidates and away from either government or traditional opposition parties. Nagorno-Karabakh's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to a competitive presidential vote in July.

For Central and Eastern Europe, the year brought few major political changes. Still, a number of countries in the subregion remained

highly vulnerable to economic difficulties, the corrupt merging of business and political interests, and government intolerance of checks and balances. Romania, for instance, was rocked by the prime minister's politicized but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to impeach the president. However, the only significant change was a gain in political rights for Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the long-delayed formation of a central government and the gradual reduction of international supervision.

Asia-Pacific: With Guarded Gains, Burma Leaves China Behind

For years ranked among the world's most repressive regimes, Burma continued to push ahead with a process of democratic reform that was launched in 2010. While it remains a Not Free country, it registered improvements in both its political rights and civil liberties ratings. Of particular importance in 2012 was the successful participation of the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, in parliamentary by-elections. The party was allowed to campaign with considerable freedom, and won nearly all of the seats at stake. Nevertheless, the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party retains an overwhelming majority in the legislature, and the military's outsized power is still entrenched in the constitution and in practice. Freedoms of expression and association have improved markedly in the last two years, but they depend more on current government policy than on deep institutional changes, and the authorities continue to employ repressive crowd-control measures at demonstrations, violate workers' rights, restrict the operations of NGOs, tolerate land grabbing, and hinder judicial independence.

Moreover, Burma is still plagued by conflicts between the military and ethnic minority guerrilla forces. And in 2012, communal violence flared between the Rohingya minority, which is largely Muslim, and the majority Buddhist population of Rakhine State.

For all its lingering problems, Burma has now surpassed China on both political rights and civil liberties. Facing a sensitive leadership transition

in November, an increasingly vocal citizenry, and political scandals that revealed high-level infighting and corruption, China's Communist Party rulers renewed their commitment in 2012 to censorship, suppression of minorities, and grassroots surveillance. Legal amendments reinforced the ability of security forces to arbitrarily detain activists, Tibetan regions were subjected to repeated communications blackouts, and almost daily censorship directives sought to restrict Chinese citizens' ability to circulate information on corruption, police brutality, and threats to public health. In the run-up to the 18th Party Congress, dozens of dissidents, activists, and religious believers were harassed, detained, or given long prison terms, and Beijing residents endured onerous restrictions on movement and expression. While some of these measures eased after the congress, it remains to be seen whether the new leadership will take meaningful steps to dismantle the world's most complex and sophisticated apparatus for political control. Indeed, despite prominent rhetoric about fighting corruption, the last weeks of the year were marked by official speeches, state media pronouncements, and practical measures designed to justify or implement increased control over online communications.

The bright spot in China was the determination of not only high-profile dissidents but also large numbers of ordinary citizens to assert their rights and challenge injustice. Public protests, online campaigns, and underground networks of activists scored many small victories during the year, ranging from the firing of corrupt officials and the abandonment of unpopular industrial projects to the daring escape of blind activist Chen Guangcheng from extralegal house arrest.

The most serious declines in the Asia-Pacific region for 2012 took place in the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The Maldives suffered a decline in its political rights rating due to the forcible removal of democratically elected president Mohamed Nasheed, the violence perpetrated against him and his party, the suspension of the parliament's summer session, and the role the military played in facilitating these events. Sri Lanka's scores deteriorated because of increasing corruption

and an attempt to impeach the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Among the region's notable improvements, Mongolia conducted parliamentary elections that were deemed more competitive and fair than in the past. Bhutan's political rights scores similarly rose due to the improved conduct of by-elections. Civil liberties advanced in Indian Kashmir after detention laws were relaxed. And Tonga's status was upgraded from Partly Free to Free due to expanded media freedom and the increased ability of NGOs to form and function without interference by ruling elites.

Americas: Looking Toward a Post-Chávez Era

As the year ended, Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez was in a Cuban hospital attempting to recover from surgery for an undisclosed form of cancer. The apparent gravity of his condition led him to name his vice president, Nicolás Maduro, as his successor should he be unable to serve the new presidential term he won in October.

For over a decade, Chávez has been a significant figure in regional politics and has aspired, with less success, to a leading role on the global stage. He spent his country's oil revenues lavishly at home and abroad, seeking to propagate a form of "21st-century socialism." Other left-populist governments emerged in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, but most countries in the region opted for social democratic models that included adherence to democratic norms, broad civil liberties, and market-based economies.

Chávez's reelection in 2012 typified the state of politics during his 12 years in power. On one hand, the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, was able to hold rallies and engage in traditional forms of campaigning. On the other hand, Chávez benefited from massive use of state resources that enabled him to dominate media time by a margin of 25-to-1, distribute household goods to constituents, and convince many voters that the state could punish them for casting a ballot for the opposition. In

other words, the electoral playing field was badly skewed in Chávez’s direction.

Three other countries in the region suffered notable declines in their democratic performance. Ecuador lost ground due to widespread irregularities in the constitutionally mandated registration process for political organizations, and a change to the seat-allocation formula for the national legislature that favors the ruling party. Paraguay experienced a setback due to the impeachment of President Fernando Lugo in a hurried process that deprived Paraguayans of any serious opportunity for debate. And Suriname declined because of a legal amendment that granted immunity to President Desiré Bouterse and 24 other suspects on trial for the 1982 murder of 15 political opponents. As a result, the trial was adjourned in May and had yet to reconvene by year’s end.

Western Europe and North America: Bearing the Strains of Economic Weakness

With the rise of the Golden Dawn party, Greece has become the latest country in Western Europe to face a surge in nationalist sentiment in response to an influx of immigrants and the impact of the financial crisis. The Greek party stands out in the region for its propensity to street violence and its disturbingly high level of support, including among police, who have failed to provide adequate protection to immigrants and those advocating for their rights. But there is evidence that the popularity of nationalist political movements may have reached its peak in much of Europe. Thus the Party for Freedom, the anti-immigrant group led by Geert Wilders, fared rather poorly in parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in

2012. Likewise, the National Front party of Marine Le Pen failed to increase its share of the vote in France’s presidential election, which was won by the Socialist candidate, François Hollande.

In general, the countries of the European Union have so far weathered the most serious economic downturn of the postwar period without a serious weakening of their traditionally high level of respect for democratic standards and civil liberties. The past year was marked by demonstrations against austerity measures, but most were peaceful, and the authorities by and large avoided heavy-handed responses. Greece was an exception; yet again, anarchist elements set fires and attacked police, and the authorities in turn used batons and tear gas to restore order.

While Europeans have shown a reluctance to elevate anti-immigrant parties to national leadership roles, most have evaded the responsibility to implement rational and humane policies to integrate newcomers from foreign cultures into their societies. Hostility to migrants is reflected in actions by parties of both right and left. While Hollande had criticized then president Nicolas Sarkozy for his abrupt expulsion of foreign Roma from France, his own Socialist government took similar measures once in power. These problems are likely to worsen in coming years given dislocations abroad and economic woes at home, the continued ambivalence of European societies toward ethnic minorities, and the unwillingness of European political leaders to advance policies that might meet the challenge.

Great Britain continued to grapple with the fallout from the “phone-hacking” scandal, in which journalists stand accused of colluding

REGIONAL PATTERNS			
	Free	Partly Free	Not Free
Americas	24 (69%)	10 (28%)	1 (3%)
Asia-Pacific	17 (43%)	14 (36%)	8 (21%)
Central and Eastern Europe/Eurasia	13 (45%)	9 (31%)	7 (24%)
Middle East and North Africa	1 (6%)	6 (33%)	11 (61%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	11 (22%)	18 (37%)	20 (41%)
Western Europe	24 (96%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)

with police and others to abuse privacy rights in pursuit of sensationalistic stories. The case has led to the arrest of a number of high-ranking editors from the newspaper empire owned by Rupert Murdoch, and a commission of inquiry has recommended the creation of a new, independent body to deal with allegations of press abuse. The plan, which would replace the current system of self-regulation, is sharply opposed by the press and media freedom organizations.

In the United States, President Barack Obama won a second term in elections that also saw gains for his Democratic Party in both houses of Congress. While the Republican Party still controls the lower chamber, its majority has shrunk, enhancing the prospects for Obama to overcome the legislative gridlock of recent years. The president won despite a disappointing economy, persistent unemployment, and a massive budget deficit. His calls for higher taxes on the rich and the protection of social programs, among other policies, garnered strong support from the country's growing ethnic minority populations, while his opponent, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, drew mostly white male voters with his program of tax and spending cuts. Romney was notably the first Mormon to win a major party's presidential nomination. The election was by far the most expensive in American history, with both sides spending billions of dollars raised largely through special committees designed to circumvent political contribution limits for candidates and political parties.

While the Obama administration has instituted changes in the country's antiterrorism effort, a number of controversial policies are still in place. The president has been criticized by civil libertarians for the United States' expansive use of unmanned aircraft to kill suspected terrorists and allied militants—including U.S. citizens—in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Nevertheless, Obama's approach to the war on terrorism generally enjoys bipartisan support from the American people and members of Congress.

The president endorsed the concept of same-sex marriage during the year, becoming the first in

his position to do so. And referendum voters in three more states approved equal marriage rights for gay men and lesbians in November. Nevertheless, most states continue to ban such rights, including a number that have enshrined a limited definition of marriage in their constitutions. The Supreme Court is scheduled to issue important rulings on gay marriage in the coming months.

CONCLUSION

Bringing Light to the Dark Corners of the World

Among the findings of this report, none is more surprising than the fact that Libya registered by far the most impressive gains in its level of freedom for 2012. Each spring, Freedom House publishes a supplemental report that shines a spotlight on the world's most repressive regimes—the worst of the worst. And until the uprising in 2011, Libya was a perennial member of that appalling group. Now, after months of civil war and over a year of tenuous nation building, Libya has an elected government, comparatively wide-ranging freedoms, and a leadership that seems committed to accountable rule and openness. Other postrevolutionary governments have begun well and ended poorly, and the Libyan experience with freedom could go awry. Clearly there are forces, both in Libya and in its neighborhood, that are hoping for failure. But for the time being, the country qualifies as a success story that deserves the support of freedom's advocates everywhere.

Overwhelming credit for Libya's achievements must go to those who risked and in many cases lost their lives by rebelling against the brutal rule of Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi. That the democratic world, including the United States, played a critical role in the country's liberation should also be recognized. Notwithstanding Libya's ongoing problems and events like the deadly assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in September, the overall outcome ranks among Obama's most notable foreign policy accomplishments. Yet the United States seems uncomfortable with acknowledging its

contribution to this important step forward for democratic values and the transformation of politics in the Middle East.

Such apparent ambivalence about vigorously supporting democratic change bodes ill for the region, which, as this report makes clear, remains very much in transition and turmoil. The old order of ossified dictatorships is giving way to something else, hopefully to governments based on humane principles and free institutions. But there are many other options available. Although the future of the Middle East will be determined by the people who live there, the United States and other established democracies have some part to play, as they had in major openings elsewhere in the world.

For example, the subregion consisting of Central Europe, the Baltics, and the Balkans now enjoys a level of political rights and civil liberties second only to that of Western Europe. These countries endured decades of communist domination, often preceded by some other variant of authoritarianism. Their free status today owes a great deal to the European Union's embrace of democratic standards, and its imposition of those standards as a requirement for good relations and eventual accession.

To be sure, Egypt is no Poland, and there is no regional equivalent of the EU to provide aid and encouragement to changing Arab societies. But in its time, the democratization of the postcommunist world was understood to be critical to a peaceful and cooperative global environment, and the same can certainly be said of the Middle East today.

Moreover, the Middle East is not the only part of the world where freedom is in the balance. In Russia, Putin has launched a new round of repression and heaped contempt on the values of open societies. He sets a disturbing example for other Eurasian autocrats, and provides diplomatic backing for dictators confronted by calls for reform. In China, the new leadership includes figures who have been instrumental in building the world's most sophisticated system of political control, and no one should expect

them to suddenly change course and disavow a lifetime of commitment to one-party rule. These countries—Russia and China—have consistently worked together to block international action that could, for example, help free the Syrian people. But even where such authoritarian powers do not throw up obstacles, the international community seems unable or unwilling to intervene in support of democracy. While there is general consensus that an international, principally African, coalition is needed in Mali, the political will to plan and carry out such a mission has been seriously wanting.

There is thus a critical need for leadership from the United States and other democracies. In the United States, the reluctance to provide that leadership represents a rare case of bipartisan agreement. President Obama has made clear his desire to focus on domestic concerns; the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party has fixated on across-the-board reductions in spending, including on foreign assistance; libertarians, also a growing influence in the GOP, are hostile to the very idea of American global leadership; and even the party's leaders now seem ambivalent about America's role in the world. In Europe, the leading states are weighed down by the financial crisis. Meanwhile, rising democratic powers like Brazil, South Africa, and India have shown a profound aversion to condemning governments in other developing countries, including those that routinely commit atrocities against their own people.

The retreat of the leading democracies is taking place, ironically, at a time of unprecedented popular resistance to oppression around the world. The dissidents who labored for human rights during the Cold War—isolated and often anonymous—have been replaced by movements that command the support of sizable constituencies. Some are focused on single issues; others seek broad democratic reform. Most are pragmatic and skilled in maneuvering in repressive settings.

The data from this report tell us that civil society is under duress in the countries where it could do the most good. Though disturbing, this is in fact

a tribute to the potency of civic movements. Many autocrats over the last few decades have offered a tacit social contract whereby they preserve political monopolies but abandon totalitarian control of society and promise economic development. As a result, these leaders often have little to fear from their battered formal opposition parties, but are hard pressed to staunch the energy and independence of citizen activists.

If the United States and other democracies are seeking strategies to foster reform in the world's despotisms, one place to start would be a commitment to bolster and protect thinkers and activists who are the likely agents for change in their societies. Among other things, this project would require the development of methods to provide assistance in settings where the leadership has sought to snuff out foreign aid, as Putin has done in Russia.

Furthermore, our leaders, including the president, should confer with leading regime critics and activists, and speak out on behalf of those who are the targets of persecution.

But by far the most important point is for our leaders, and President Obama in particular, to declare their determination to support people who aspire to democracy anywhere in the world. The administration has built an uneven record on support for freedom to date. There have been some positive initiatives, but there have also been occasions when the United States stood by while those who put their lives on the line for political change were crushed, as with Iran in 2009. More recently, the administration utterly failed to offer a credible response when the USAID mission in Russia was abruptly shuttered by the Putin regime, a step that will further weaken a civil society sector that is already under serious state pressure.

A program of support for civic movements would be just one aspect of a truly comprehensive effort by the major democracies to reassert global leadership. But even by itself, support for civil society would have the practical benefit of directing attention to those who are committed to making freedom a reality in the

world's dark corners. And it would send a critical message to the agents of repression that, no matter what our various domestic woes may be, the spread of freedom is still very much on the global agenda.

This report was prepared with the assistance of Jennifer Dunham, Bret Nelson, Aili Piano, and Tyler Roylance.