

Introduction

Freedom House has prepared this overview report as a companion to our annual survey on the state of global political rights and civil liberties, *Freedom in the World*. We are publishing this report to assist policymakers, human rights organizations, democracy advocates, and others who are working to advance freedom around the world. We also hope that the report will be useful to the work of the new United Nations Human Rights Council.

The reports are excerpted from *Freedom in the World 2006*, which surveys the state of freedom in 192 countries and 14 select territories. The ratings and accompanying essays are based on events from December 1, 2004 through November 30, 2005. The 17 countries and 3 territories profiled in this report are drawn from the total of 45 countries and 8 territories that are considered to be Not Free and whose citizens endure systematic and pervasive human rights violations.

Included in this report are eight countries judged to have the worst records: Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Also included are two territories, Chechnya and Tibet, whose inhabitants suffer intense repression. These states and regions received the Freedom House survey's lowest rating: 7 for political rights and 7 for civil liberties. Within these entities, state control over daily life is pervasive and wide-ranging, independent organizations and political opposition are banned or suppressed, and fear of retribution for independent thought and action is part of daily life. In the case of Chechnya, the rating in large measure reflects the fallout of a vicious conflict that in the last 12 years has disrupted normal life and resulted in some 200,000 deaths.

The report also includes nine further countries near the bottom of Freedom House's list of the most repressive: Belarus, China, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Laos, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. The territory of Western Sahara is also included in this group. While these states scored slightly better than the "worst of the worst," they offer very limited scope for private discussion while severely suppressing opposition political activity, impeding independent organizing, and censoring or punishing criticism of the state.

Massive human rights violations take place in nearly every part of the world. This year's roster of the "most repressive" includes countries from the Americas, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and East Asia; they represent a wide array of cultures and levels of economic development. This report from Freedom House to the United Nations focuses on states and regions that have seen some of the world's most severe repression and most systematic and brutal violations of human dignity. Our report seeks to focus the attention of the United Nations Human Rights Council on states and territories that deserve investigation and condemnation for their widespread violations.

The fundamental violations of rights presented in this report are all the more alarming because they stand in sharp contrast to the significant expansion of human liberty over the last three decades. In that period, dozens of states have shed tyranny and embraced democratic rule and respect for basic civil liberties. There has also been growing public support around the world for the values of liberal democracy including multiparty competition, the rule of law, freedom of

association, freedom of speech, the rights of minorities, and other fundamental, universally valid human rights. According to our global survey *Freedom in the World*, (whose findings can be accessed online at www.freedomhouse.org) at the beginning of 2006, of the 192 countries in the world, 89 (46 percent) are Free and can be said to respect a broad array of basic human rights and political freedoms. An additional 58 (30 percent) are Partly Free, with some abridgments of basic rights and weak enforcement of the rule of law. In all, nearly 3 billion people—46 percent of the world's population—live in Free states in which a broad array of political rights are protected.

There is also growing evidence that most countries that have made measured and sustainable progress in long-term economic development are also states that respect democratic practices. This should hardly be surprising as competitive, multiparty democracy provides for the rotation of power, government transparency, independent civic monitoring, and free media. These in turn promote improved governance and impede massive corruption and cronyism, conditions that are prevalent in settings where political power is not subject to civic and political checks and balances.

The expansion of democratic governance over the last several decades has important implications for the United Nations and other international organizations. Today, states that respect basic freedoms and the rule of law have greater potential than ever before to positively influence global and regional institutions. But they can only achieve that potential within international bodies by working cooperatively and cohesively on issues of democracy and human rights. Nowhere is the need for international democratic cooperation more essential than in Geneva at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Although democracy has scored impressive gains in recent times, we have also begun to experience a new drive to prevent the further spread of democracy and, where possible, roll back some of the achievements that have already been registered. A number of the countries featured in this report are prominent in this effort. The strategy of those involved in this campaign to roll back democracy has many facets: dismantling independent media, marginalizing the political opposition, and preventing independent think tanks and NGOs from obtaining necessary resources. In addition, many of the world's worst violators of human rights and democratic standards have joined in loose coalitions at the United Nations to deflect attention from their records of repression. The failure of the United Nations to effectively address human rights problems played an important role in the decision to replace the old Human Rights Commission with the new Human Rights Council. The Council is functioning under a set of procedures that will hopefully enable that body to deal with the core human rights problems in the world. We offer this report in the hope that it will assist the democratic world in pressing the case for freedom at the United Nations and in other forums.

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