

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025

The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights



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

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025

February 2025

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Freedom House is committed to editorial independence and is solely responsible for this report's content.

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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2025 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

Students gather in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to protest the police and the ruling party, the Awami League. More than 1,000 people were killed and thousands more were injured as a result of crackdowns on the 2024 antigovernment protests that swept across Bangladesh. (Photo Credit: Suvra Kanti Das/Alamy Live News)

Key Findings

Global freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024.

Sixty countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, and only 34 secured improvements. El Salvador, Haiti, Kuwait, and Tunisia were the countries with the largest score declines for the year, while Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Syria recorded the largest gains.

During an unprecedented year of elections, many contests were marred by violence and authoritarian efforts to restrict voters' choices.

In over 40 percent of the countries and territories that held national elections in 2024, candidates were targeted with assassination attempts or assaults, polling places were attacked, or postelection protests were suppressed with disproportionate force. Elections in authoritarian countries were manipulated to prevent genuine opposition candidates from participating.

Conflicts spread instability and thwarted democratic progress around the world. Ongoing civil wars and interstate conflict as well as violence perpetrated by armed militias, mercenaries, and criminal organizations undermined security and prevented the exercise of fundamental rights, making the world not only less safe but also less free in 2024.

Positive developments demonstrated the potential for democratic breakthroughs.

Despite the overall global decline in freedom, bright spots emerged around the world as a result of competitive elections or following the collapse of long-standing authoritarian regimes. New governments will now face the difficult task of building and strengthening democratic institutions while also protecting individual rights.

Democratic solidarity will be crucial in the coming year.

Global freedom faces serious challenges in 2025, including security threats from multiple armed conflicts, deepening repression in both entrenched and emerging autocracies, and democratically elected leaders who seek to advance their goals by overriding institutional checks on their power. It is in the vital interest of all those who believe in democracy to invest in democratic institutions at home, call out attacks on rights abroad, work together to promote lasting peace, and support human rights defenders wherever they operate. Only sustained and coordinated action can reverse the nearly two decades of decline in global freedom and ensure that more countries enjoy security, prosperity, and all the other benefits of democratic rule.

Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights

By Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe

The Year in Brief

Freedom declined around the world for the 19th consecutive year in 2024. People experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties in 60 countries, and secured improvements in only 34 countries. In settings where conditions worsened, key factors driving the degradation in rights and liberties included violence and the repression of political opponents during elections, ongoing armed conflicts, and the spread of authoritarian practices.

Global elections brought mixed results for freedom

Violence emerged as a major theme during the year of global elections, affecting 27 of the 66 countries and territories where national voting took place in 2024. The most common form of election violence was attacks on candidates, which occurred in 20 countries. In Mexico and South Africa, the violence was perpetrated by criminal groups trying to wield political influence and control territory. In France, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others, extremism or partisan grievances motivated physical assaults on individuals campaigning for office. Voters too were exposed directly to violence: voting places were attacked during elections in 14 countries and territories, making it dangerous or impossible for people to cast their ballots. Violence during election-related protests was widespread, taking place in 11 countries, including Georgia and Mozambique, where security forces used disproportionate force against protesters.

While elections in countries rated Free were largely competitive and conducted fairly, voters in authoritarian countries and territories had little genuine choice. From Azerbaijan and Algeria to Russia and Rwanda, authoritarian incumbents had their political opponents arrested, imprisoned, or disqualified to eliminate even the slightest possibility of defeat. In Tunisia, which received one of the year's two largest score declines, President Kaïs Saïed oversaw an escalating crackdown that included arbitrary prosecutions of journalists, trade union leaders, and other perceived critics of his regime. He was reelected in October

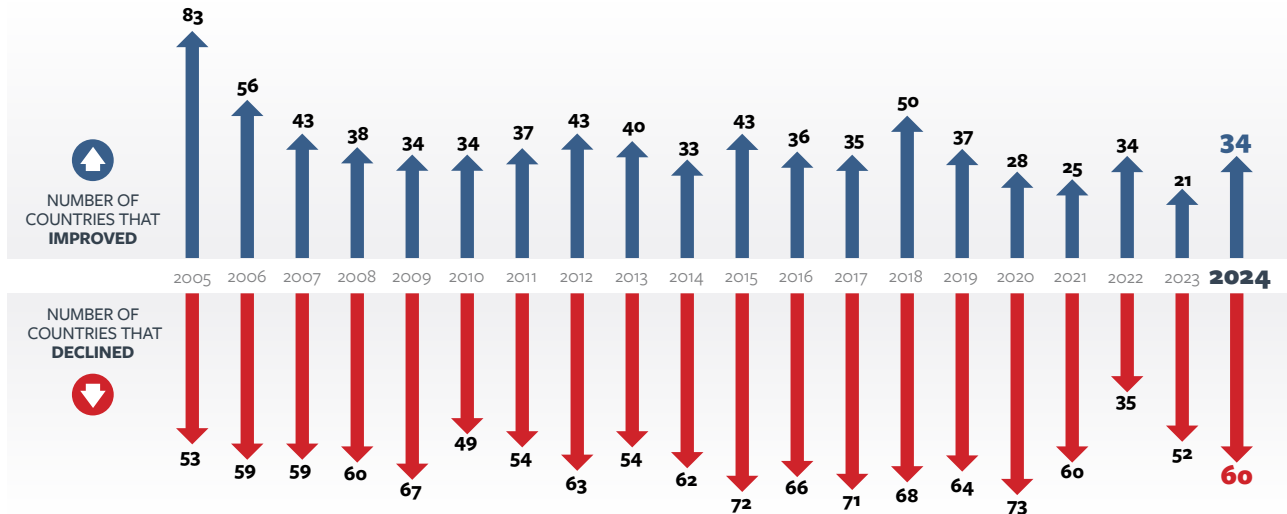
after the regime-controlled electoral commission disqualified most of his opponents and refused to reverse its decision even after being ordered to do so by a court.

Attempts to ban opposition candidates did not always go according to plan for autocrats. In Venezuela, where freedoms have declined precipitously over the last 12 years under Nicolás Maduro, authorities disqualified the country's most popular opposition leader, María Corina Machado, from July's presidential poll and threatened those who participated in an opposition primary with criminal prosecution. After the disqualification, Machado encouraged her supporters to rally around another, lesser-known opposition candidate: Edmundo González Urrutia. On election night, the National Electoral Council declared Maduro the winner without publishing any supporting evidence. Unable to quash the opposition before and during the election, the regime used armed gangs and security forces to identify, intimidate, and arbitrarily arrest thousands of citizens who rejected the baseless official results.

Despite these negative trends, which drove scores down globally, a handful of elections produced improvements in rights. Bhutan, which joined Senegal in moving from Partly Free to Free status in 2024, held elections that helped consolidate a long democratic reform process whereby political power and influence has shifted from the king to an elected parliament. The return of elections to Indian Kashmir, which is assessed separately from India, resulted in a status change from Not Free to Partly Free. The long-delayed elections did not fully undo the damage to rights caused by the Indian government's 2019 reorganization of the territory and revocation of its special autonomous status, but they did restore some political representation for the local population, which had been under direct federal rule for over five years. Another territory, Somaliland, also had a large score improvement because authorities finally held the long-delayed presidential election, which was both peaceful and competitive. Jordan improved from Not Free to Partly Free. Its September elections featured the implementation of reforms meant to increase the representation of political parties in the kingdom's parliament.

19 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 19 years. The declines in 2024 affected more than 40 percent of the global population.



Note: Countries whose scores were unchanged are not included in this comparison.

Ongoing armed conflicts compromised both safety and rights

Years-long armed conflicts—including civil wars, clashes between states, and fighting that involved nonstate armed groups—had a detrimental impact on security and freedom and formed the second major theme of 2024. By the end of the year, 20 percent of the world's countries and territories scored a 0 out of 4 on *Freedom in the World's* indicator for physical security and freedom from the illegitimate use of force. Beyond their direct impact on local civilian populations, these conflicts pose a clear threat to the safety and sovereignty of democratic nations specifically and all nations in general. They fuel the spread of illicit trades in arms and other contraband, provide safe havens for criminal organizations that target foreigners online, create opportunities for the growth of terrorist and other extremist groups, disrupt global shipping and commerce, and—in the worst cases—enable authoritarian regimes to seize territory from or outright destroy democratic governments.

For example, the civil war in Myanmar continued to take a deadly toll in 2024 after years of fighting. Originally sparked by a military coup against an elected government in 2021, the conflict has resulted in thousands of civilian

deaths, the arrests of tens of thousands of people, and the displacement of 2.7 million others, according to the United Nations. In February 2024, the military junta began forced conscription of men and women in an effort to bolster the army's ranks, which led many young people to attempt to flee the country. Targeting the most vulnerable, the military reportedly abducted as many as 1,000 members of the Rohingya ethnic minority group during nighttime raids in Rakhine State, shortly after forced conscription was introduced. The Rohingya have long been persecuted by Myanmar's government and were stripped of citizenship in

By the end of the year, 20 percent of the world's countries and territories scored a 0 out of 4 on *Freedom in the World's* indicator for physical security and freedom from the illegitimate use of force.

MANIPULATION AND VIOLENCE DURING THE YEAR OF ELECTIONS

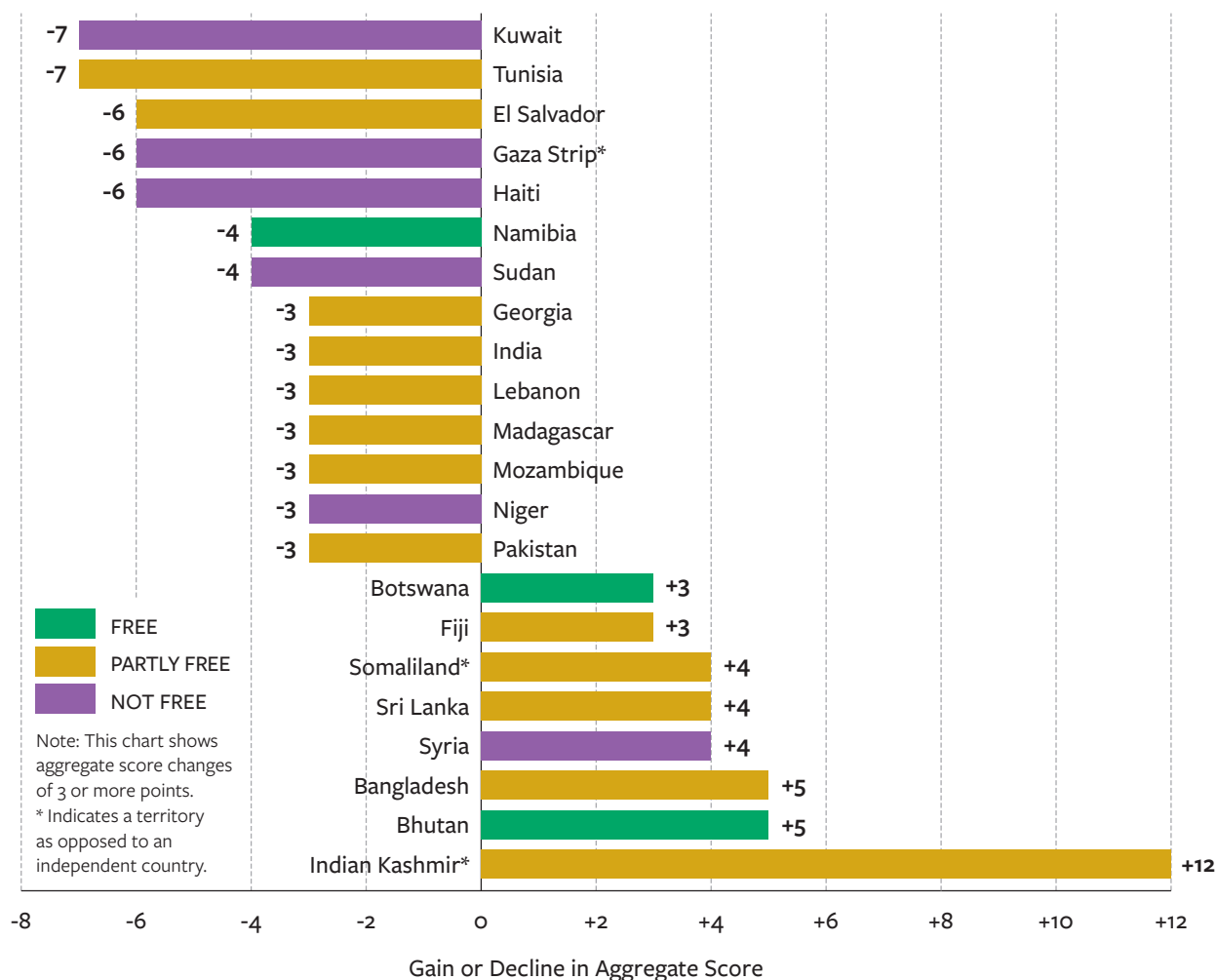
Over 65 countries and territories held elections in 2024. Over half of these contests were marred by some form of electoral manipulation, while violence occurred in nearly 40 percent of these votes. Elections (or the postponement of elections) led to score declines in 20 countries and territories.

		Points gained or lost	Candidate control	Changing election rules	Abuse of state resources	Administrative fraud	Violence against candidates, election workers, or elected officials	Protest crackdown	Attacks on voting places
* Indicates a territory		Country	Manipulation			Violence			
Free		AUSTRIA	–						
		BELGIUM	–						
		BHUTAN	2						
		BOTSWANA	3						
		BULGARIA	–		●				
		CROATIA	–						
		CZECHIA	–						
		FINLAND	–						
		FRANCE	–				●		
		GHANA	–			●			●
		ICELAND	–						
		IRELAND	–						
		JAPAN	–				●		
		KIRIBATI	–1						
		LITHUANIA	–						
		MAURITIUS	–		●				
		MONGOLIA	–		●		●		
		NAMIBIA	–3						
		PALAU	–						
		PANAMA	–						
		PORTUGAL	–						
		ROMANIA (presidential)	–1	●	●				
		ROMANIA (parliamentary)	–						
		SAN MARINO	–						
		SENEGAL (presidential)	–	●	●	●		●	
		SENEGAL (parliamentary)	2	●			●		
		SLOVAKIA	–						
		SOLOMON ISLANDS	1		●				
		SOUTH AFRICA	1				●		
		SOUTH KOREA	–				●		
		TAIWAN	–						
		TUVALU	–						
		UNITED KINGDOM	–				●		
		UNITED STATES	1				●		
		URUGUAY	–						
Partly Free		BANGLADESH	–	●		●	●	●	●
		COMOROS	–			●	●		
		DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	–			●			
		EL SALVADOR	–5		●	●	●		

		Points gained or lost	Candidate control	Changing election rules	Abuse of state resources	Administrative fraud	Violence against candidates, election workers, or elected officials	Protest crackdown	Attacks on voting places
* Indicates a territory		Country	Manipulation			Violence			
Partly Free		GEORGIA	–2			●	●	●	●
		INDIA	–2			●	●	●	●
		INDIAN KASHMIR*	12	●	●	●			●
		INDONESIA	–1		●	●		●	●
		JORDAN	1	●					
		MADAGASCAR	–3	●		●	●		●
		MALDIVES	–1			●			
		MAURITANIA	–					●	
		MEXICO	–1				●		●
		MOLDOVA	–	●					
		MOZAMBIQUE	–3			●	●	●	
		NORTH MACEDONIA	–		●	●			
		PAKISTAN	–3	●	●	●	●	●	●
		SOMALILAND*	4		●				
		SRI LANKA (presidential)	2			●	●		
		SRI LANKA (parliamentary)	2						
		TOGO	–1	●	●		●	●	
		TUNISIA	–6	●	●	●			
		GUINEA BISSAU	–2						
		UKRAINE	–1						
Not Free		ALGERIA	–	●	●	●	●		
		AZERBAIJAN (presidential)	–	●		●	●		
		AZERBAIJAN (parliamentary)	–	●	●	●	●		
		BELARUS	–1	●	●	●			
		CHAD (presidential)	–	●	●	●	●		●
		CHAD (parliamentary)	–	●	●	●	●		
		IRAN (parliamentary)	–	●	●	●	●	●	
		IRAN (presidential)	–	●	●	●	●	●	●
		KUWAIT	–7	●					
		RUSSIA	–	●	●	●	●	●	●
		RWANDA	–	●					
		SOUTH OSSETIA*	–	●	●		●		●
		SYRIA	–	●		●		●	●
		UZBEKISTAN	–	●	●	●			
		VENEZUELA	–2	●	●	●	●	●	●
		HAITI	–2						
		MALI	–						
		NORTH KOREA	–						
		SOUTH SUDAN	–						

LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2024

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



1982; hundreds of thousands fled the country to escape a wave of military-led massacres that began in 2017. As the war drags on, some of the belligerents have an incentive to raise revenue from illicit sources, hosting transnational criminal groups that manufacture and export synthetic drugs or operate sprawling cybercrime centers, which undermines the security of other countries inside and outside the region.

Sudan's civil war also ground on during the year. Mass displacement and targeted attacks on media workers, women, and ethnic minorities caused egregious suffering and degraded freedoms even further in the country, making it one of the least free places in the world. More than 26,000 people have died as a direct result of the ongoing conflict and over half of the population faces extreme food insecurity. As many

as eight million have been displaced internally and externally, with millions fleeing to already overcrowded refugee camps in Chad, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Both sides in the fighting have received support from foreign governments, which has weakened the efficacy of international sanctions, stalled peace talks, and stimulated the illegal trading of weapons and natural resources.

The Kremlin's war on Ukraine continued, and for the first time featured the deployment of thousands of troops sent by the North Korean regime to aid the Russian military. Within the Russian-occupied portions of Ukraine, Moscow's efforts to eliminate Ukrainian identity intensified. The campaign included forcing residents to adopt Russian passports and, with the help of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime in

Belarus, removing and indoctrinating Ukrainian children in a bid to “Russify” them and even train them for Russian military service.

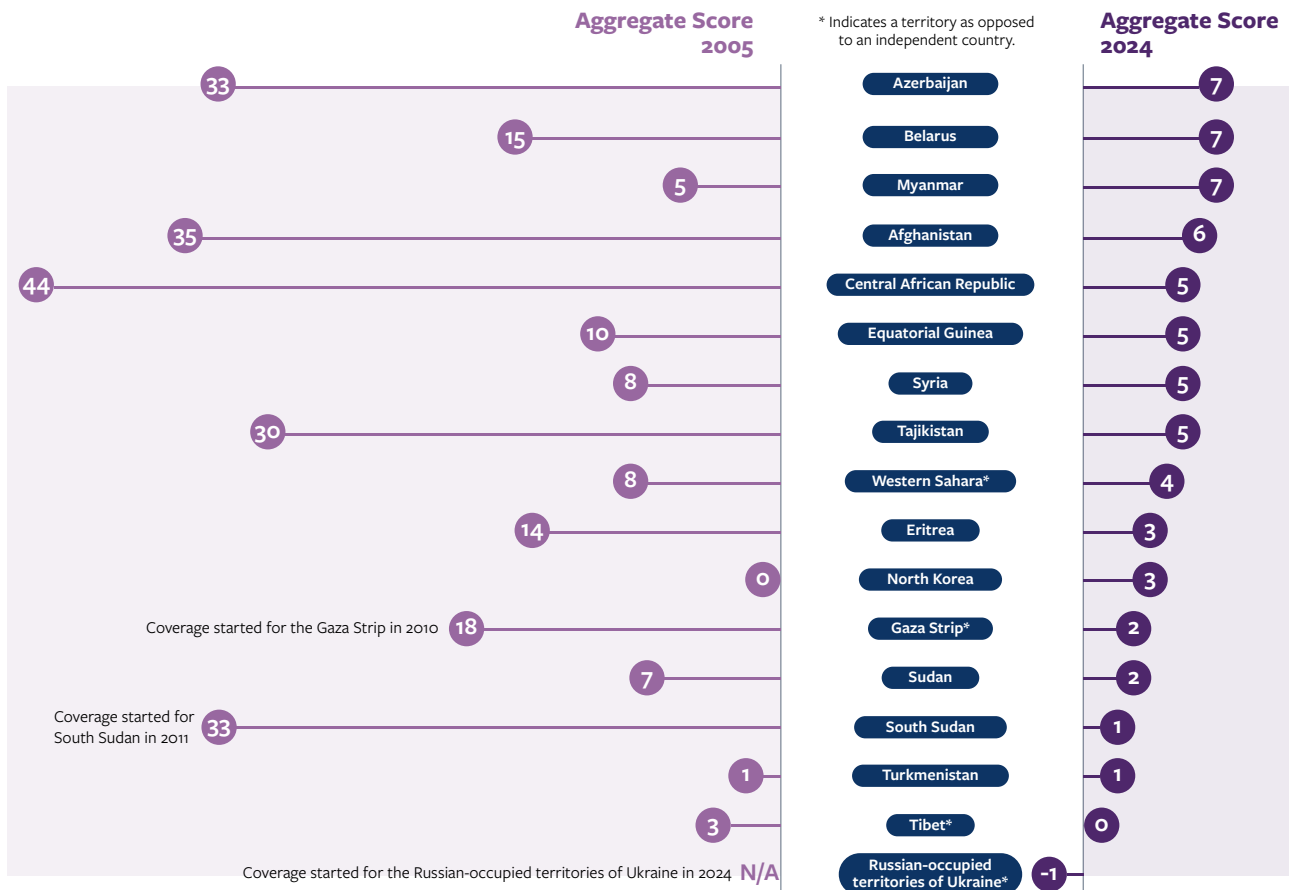
The war in the Gaza Strip passed the one-year mark in 2024. Following the deadly October 7, 2023, terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas, the Israeli military undertook a campaign in Gaza that killed and forcibly displaced Palestinians on a massive scale, systematically obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid, and destroyed most farmland and life-sustaining civilian infrastructure. Armed violence not only exacerbated suffering but also obliterated the few rights and liberties that had remained to residents of the territory. As a result of this extreme pressure on the Palestinian population, the Gaza Strip, which is assessed separately from both Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, joined the small group of

settings that receive score downgrades for deliberate actions by a government or occupying power that forcibly change the ethnic composition of the country or territory through tactics including violence, displacement, and resettlement.

The Israel-Hamas conflict also reverberated across the Middle East, involving Hamas allies in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Hezbollah began launching rockets from Lebanon into Israel in support of Hamas shortly after the October 2023 attack, forcing some 60,000 Israelis to flee their homes in the north of the country. The Israeli military responded by increasing air strikes on Lebanon and eventually mounted a ground invasion in October 2024, during which thousands of Lebanese people were killed or wounded and 1.2 million others were displaced. Some violence continued at year’s end despite a cease-fire agreement in late November.

WORST OF THE WORST

Of the 67 countries and territories designated as Not Free, the following 17 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties. Some have remained among *Freedom in the World’s* worst-scoring countries and territories since 2005, while others experienced major declines that drove them to the bottom.



Repression deepened and spread

Efforts by authoritarian governments to extinguish opposition to their rule drove four countries to decline from Partly Free to Not Free in 2024. In Thailand, the Constitutional Court disbanded the Move Forward Party, an opposition group that won the most votes in the 2023 parliamentary elections, and separately toppled a prime minister from the second-ranked party. The country's status was downgraded as a result of these actions, which amounted to a reassertion of power by the kingdom's unelected establishment following voters' endorsement of democratic forces a year earlier. A similar situation unfolded in Kuwait, where the emir, Sheikh Meshaal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, responded to the election of an opposition-controlled parliament in April by indefinitely dissolving the body and ruling alone through his appointed cabinet, eliminating the people's chosen representatives from government. Both countries declined from Partly Free to Not Free.

Niger, where the elected government was ousted by a military junta in 2023, declined to Not Free because General Abdourahamane Tchiani's regime dissolved local councils, suspended media outlets, and denied due process to supporters of the deposed civilian leadership. Tanzania accounted for the fourth decline from Partly Free to Not Free, which came after years of deterioration in rights and liberties under President Samia Suluhu Hassan. In 2024, Tanzanian authorities used mass detention against protesters and continued efforts to forcibly evict Indigenous Maasai communities from a planned game reserve.

According to *Freedom in the World* data, judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers have been imprisoned, detained, or charged for politically motivated reasons in at least 78 countries over the last decade.

These negative status changes were in keeping with a broader trend that has affected *Freedom in the World* data for over a decade: further attacks on rights, especially freedom of expression and the rule of law, in countries where people already lacked access to many fundamental freedoms.

Of the civil liberties tracked by *Freedom in the World*, freedom of expression has declined the most over the last 19 years. The number of countries and territories where the indicator for freedom of the media is scored at 0 out of 4—meaning there is virtually no space for independent media to operate—has almost tripled between 2005 and 2024, rising from 13 to 34. Last year, attacks on the media in the form of censorship, arrests and imprisonment of journalists, physical and legal harassment, or violence were recorded in over 120 countries and territories.

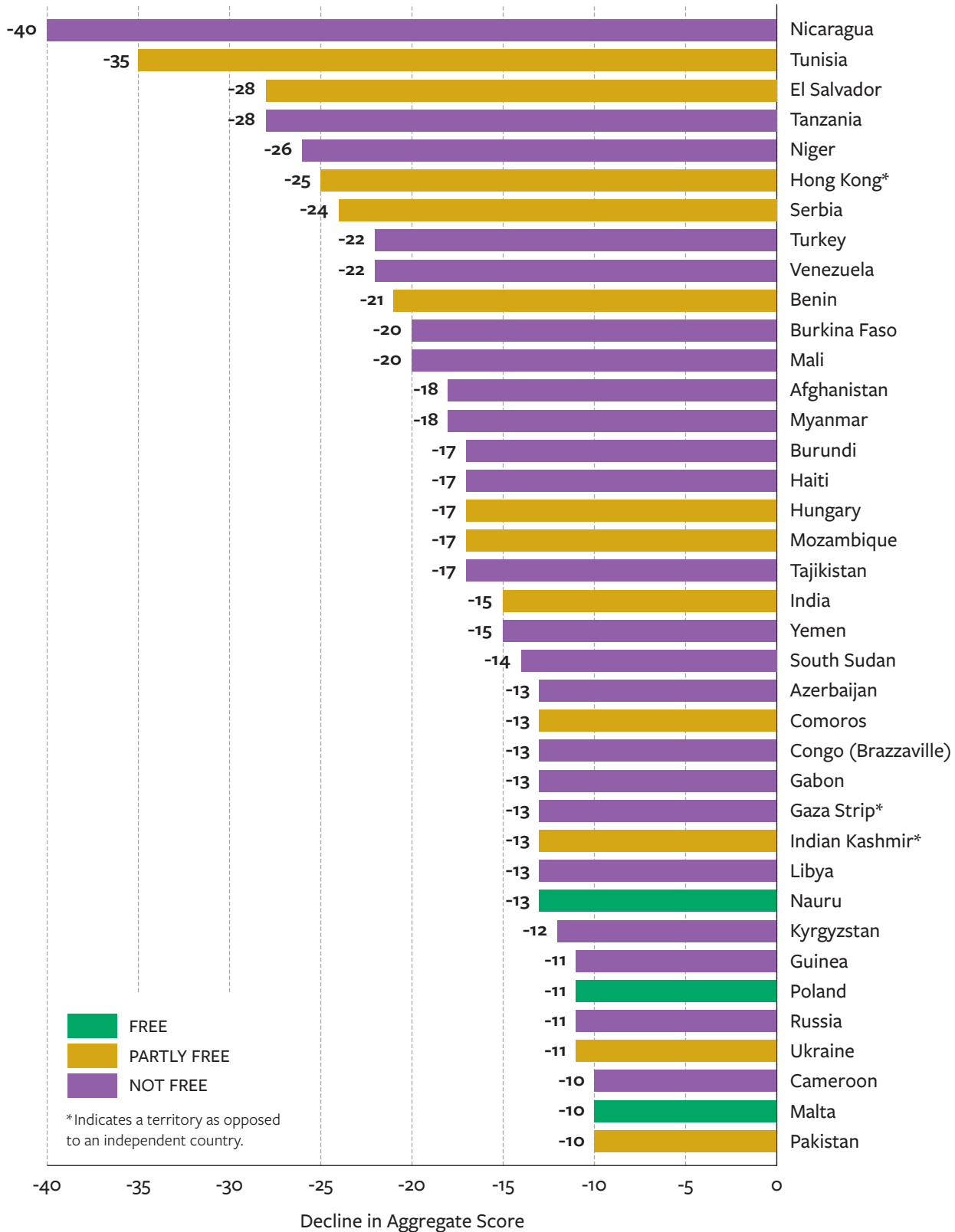
In Hong Kong, where Beijing has tightened its control in recent years, most acts of perceived dissent, including independent journalism, have been criminalized under the repressive National Security Law (NSL). The NSL trial of Jimmy Lai, former publisher of the *Apple Daily*, for reports on the 2019 prodemocracy protest movement continued last year. Forty-five prodemocracy activists were also sentenced for conspiracy to commit subversion under the NSL, having helped to organize a semiformal opposition primary for legislative candidates in 2020. A foreign judge who resigned from Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal noted that local judges are under immense pressure to conform to the government's repressive goals, which has “profoundly compromised” the rule of law in the territory.

One striking example of the way in which two harmful phenomena—attacks on the media and transnational repression—are increasingly intersecting came from Vietnam, where a Hanoi court sentenced blogger Duong Van Thai to 12 years in prison in October for social media posts and videos that criticized the Communist Party government. He had become a victim of transnational repression in 2023, when he was kidnapped from Thailand and returned to Vietnam to face charges.

Like the silencing of media workers, pressure on members of the legal profession is an increasingly common authoritarian tactic around the globe. According to *Freedom in the World* data, judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers have been imprisoned, detained, or charged for politically motivated reasons in at least 78 countries over the last decade. In 2024, some of the most extreme cases of such repression occurred in Russia and Belarus. In Russia, criminal trials began for the lawyers who had represented the slain opposition leader Aleksey Navalny and the journalist Ivan Safronov. In Belarus, lawyers representing political prisoners became prisoners themselves, charged with “extremism” based solely on their work.

LARGEST 10-YEAR DECLINES

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





A large number of people gather in Umayyad Square in Damascus, Syria to celebrate the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime. (Photo Credit: Juma Muhammad/Alamy Live News)

To recognize that authoritarianism has deepened in many countries is not to say that all hope is lost. The sudden fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, more than 13 years after he touched off a civil war by brutally crushing peaceful prodemocracy protests, reminded the world that despotic control is often more fragile than it appears. Syria's score had been among the lowest in the world, but it was tied for the second-largest improvement among countries last year as political prisoners were freed en masse and the regime's restrictions on freedoms of movement and assembly were eased. While there are still many obstacles to a democratic future for the Syrian people, they now have an opportunity for progress that seemed unimaginable just a year earlier.

Challenges on the horizon

Three issues will likely exert an important influence on global freedom in 2025 and beyond. First, countries where new leaders emerged from contested elections last year, as in Senegal and Sri Lanka, or who took office after the collapse of authoritarian regimes, as in Bangladesh, may prove to be bright spots for democracy. But much will depend on how these governments pursue reforms, and whether they ensure that individual freedoms and the rule of law are protected and expanded in the process. Second, among a small but growing group of democracies, including Slovakia and Mexico, elected leaders are trying to undermine institutions that are meant to serve as a check on their powers, such as the media, anticorruption bodies, and the judiciary. Over time, these

attacks have the potential to erode political rights and civil liberties. Finally, from Sudan to Haiti and Honduras, people are living amid extreme violence perpetrated by nonstate armed groups. These lawless forces are not only imperiling physical safety, but also undercutting freedom and serving authoritarian interests. A plan to deal with such groups will have to be part of any domestic or international effort to establish peace and security in the world's most dangerous places.

New Governments Bring New Hope

Despite the continued global decline in freedom, a number of countries proved to be democratic bright spots last year, experiencing a significant opening for political change or positive momentum for reforms. Beyond providing a much-needed ray of hope, developments in such countries can offer useful lessons on how to initiate and sustain democratic progress. Much of the reporting on these bright spots simply describes the competitive elections or other events that unseated authoritarian or illiberal leaders. But a change in leadership is only the beginning. As new governments embark on promised reforms that have the potential to meaningfully expand freedom and strengthen democratic institutions, they must also confront long-standing socioeconomic problems and the entrenched remnants of the former regimes. Experience shows that while lasting democratic improvements are possible, the process can be extremely challenging.

Bright spots of 2024

Political reform in Bangladesh, which emerged abruptly from a decade and a half of deepening repression under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, will be a daunting task. Unlike in the world's other bright spots in 2024, change in Bangladesh arrived as a result of mass protests rather than an election. In July, students launched peaceful demonstrations against an unpopular system of quotas for government jobs. Police and security services responded with disproportionate force, leading to the deaths of more than 1,500 people. After the protest movement intensified and leaders of the military and police refused to continue the lethal crackdown, Hasina resigned and fled the country. An interim government, led by economist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, was established shortly thereafter.

The ouster of Hasina's Awami League government swiftly eased long-standing state pressure on other political parties, the media, labor unions, judges, university students, and faculty members, causing Bangladesh to tie with Bhutan for the year's largest score improvement. But much remains to be done. The new government's agenda includes ambitious political, economic, and legal reforms. It aims to amend or redraft the constitution, ensure accountability for last year's violence as well as other human rights abuses, increase judicial independence, and reestablish anticorruption institutions. The government is also facing demands to hold elections, reduce emerging religious tensions, stabilize the economy, and decide

Experience shows that while lasting democratic improvements are possible, the process can be extremely challenging.

what to do about Hasina, who is now decrying the country's political situation from neighboring India.

In Sri Lanka, newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who campaigned on an anticorruption platform, will have to address the state's heavy foreign debt burden and deep economic inequality. Constitutional reforms intended to shift power from the presidency to the parliament are also on the new government's agenda. These reforms have the potential to reinforce the improvements in political participation already seen during the country's peaceful and competitive presidential and parliamentary elections. The contests, the first since protests toppled the last elected government amid a severe economic crisis in 2022, were a remarkable step forward from previous votes, which had been marred by problems including violence and intimidation. A record 38 candidates ran in the presidential election, which for the first time featured regulations on campaign spending, a serious concern in a country plagued by corruption.



A voter shows their painted finger near a polling station in Colombo, Sri Lanka after voting in the 2024 elections. (Photo Credit: Ruwan Walpola/Pacific Press/Alamy Live News)

Senegal is poised to potentially reverse an erosion of rights overseen by former President Macky Sall. The 2024 presidential election represented an especially impressive victory for democratic norms and helped to elevate the country from Partly Free to Free—a status it had lost in the 2019 edition of this report. The voting took place in March despite outgoing President Sall’s attempts to delay balloting and his pattern of targeting opponents with politically motivated criminal prosecutions. In the end, the Constitutional Court, supported by popular protests and other democratic forces, ensured that the election proceeded. Opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye was elected president a mere 10 days after being released from prison. Faye’s political party then won a majority in snap parliamentary elections in November, paving the way for his reform agenda. One promised reform would restore balance among the branches of government and reduce the powers of the presidency. This is especially important given Senegal’s history of presidents attempting to remain in office after their constitutionally limited terms have expired. But the new leadership must also deal with other urgent issues, including high youth unemployment and the continued underrepresentation of women in politics.

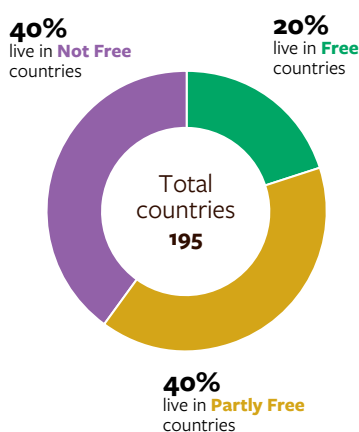
Botswana’s October general elections marked a historic change for the country, as it brought the first defeat of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) since the country gained independence in 1966. While elections in Botswana have typically been free and fair, the peaceful transfer of power between rival political parties was an important achievement for democracy in Southern Africa. Botswana’s new leaders will face economic and political challenges, including rising unemployment among young people and dwindling profits from diamond exports. Another pressing issue, after decades of rule by one party, is the need to limit the influence of patronage networks and increase transparency within public procurement procedures.

Lessons learned

The experiences of other newly elected reformist governments may hold lessons for those that rose to power in 2024. In 2023, despite antidemocratic headwinds, elections in Guatemala and Poland resulted in transfers of power from illiberal incumbents to opposition figures who espoused explicitly democratic goals. Some progress has been made

THE REAL-WORLD IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON FREEDOM

A majority of the world’s population live in **Partly Free** and **Not Free** countries. Over 170 million people live in countries that declined from **Partly Free** to **Not Free** in 2024.



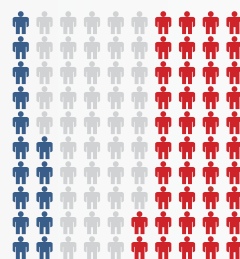
Bangladesh +5
Population: 173,600,000

Syria +4
Population: 24,700,000

South Africa +2
Population: 63,000,000

FREEDOM
IMPROVED FOR
15%
OF THE WORLD'S
POPULATION

In 2024, the countries that **experienced an overall deterioration** in political rights and civil liberties were home to nearly three times as many people as those that **experienced an improvement**.



FREEDOM
DECLINED FOR
42%
OF THE WORLD'S
POPULATION

-3 India
Population: 1,441,700,000

-4 Sudan
Population: 50,400,000

-6 Haiti
Population: 11,800,000

in the year since, but reform continues to be inhibited by vestiges of the former governments and powerful elites who have benefited from corruption, suggesting that while damage to democratic institutions accumulates quickly, repair efforts can be slow.

In Guatemala, President Bernardo Arévalo, who faced sustained pressure from incumbent authorities while campaigning and even after winning the election in 2023, has tried to make good on his promises to combat corruption since taking office in January 2024. To date, his government has filed over 169 complaints of corruption with prosecutors and worked to increase government transparency by establishing the National Commission Against Corruption. Arévalo has also tried to lead by example, making a public declaration of his assets in July and dismissing members of his own government for misuse of state resources. In addition, his administration has been able to attract new economic investment in the country.

Arévalo's agenda has faced major obstacles. His party, Movimiento Semilla, controls only 23 of 160 seats in Congress, hampering legislative progress. After surviving one politically motivated attempt to suspend it in 2023, the party faced a similar effort at the end of 2024. The greatest challenge to the government has come from the public prosecutor's office, headed by Attorney General María Consuelo Porras, which has hindered anticorruption investigations, targeted members of Semilla with arrest, opened new criminal investigations into Arévalo himself, and continued to prosecute judges and human rights defenders who worked on corruption cases. Under current law, Arévalo is prohibited from unilaterally dismissing Porras, who is subject to US and European Union (EU) sanctions for obstructing justice. Although he made repeated proposals to change the law in 2024, these have been ignored by Congress.

Poland's parliamentary elections in October 2023 were a pivotal moment for the country's political trajectory. Voter turnout was the highest since 1989, and the outcome, in which a centrist opposition coalition defeated the incumbent right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, was hailed by democracy scholars as an opportunity for recovery after eight years of illiberal rule and democratic erosion. But the postelection path to reform has been bumpy.

The new government, headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, made organizational and personnel changes at three public media outlets. The moves were meant to counteract

what researchers and civil society groups have characterized as the propagandistic use of these networks to promote the interests of PiS and denigrate its political opponents. However, the government's decisions drew objections from President Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, and prompted a legal review at the Constitutional Tribunal, as they were seen by some as an inappropriate application of powers under a law on commercial ownership to reorganize public broadcasters. The case was ultimately resolved in the government's favor, and the reforms were described in positive terms in a 2024 report on the rule of law from the European Commission. The government is also pursuing much-needed legislation to protect editorial independence and reforms to media regulations, but these may face similar political and legal resistance from PiS and its allies within state institutions. A presidential election is scheduled for 2025, and its results could either facilitate reform efforts or stall them further.

Elected Leaders Are Undermining Democratic Institutions

Late last year, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared martial law in an attempt to circumvent the opposition-controlled parliament and suppress its investigations of his wife and cabinet, throwing the country into a dramatic constitutional crisis. The move highlighted one of the biggest threats faced by democracies around the world: elected leaders who attack democratic institutions.

The declaration of martial law was quickly nullified in South Korea, as legislators, civil society, and ordinary people came together to defend their freedoms. But other countries have not been as lucky. Elected leaders in democracies are increasingly seeking to undermine checks on their power, focusing their assaults on the media, anticorruption authorities, and the courts. These attacks endanger both democracy and basic freedoms.

Persecuting the media

Independent media are increasingly coming under pressure in Free and Partly Free countries. Before President Yoon tried to seize control by declaring martial law, South Korean authorities had routinely targeted individual journalists and news organizations that produced critical or embarrassing coverage of Yoon's administration, launching civil and criminal defamation investigations and police raids against them. Rather than imprisoning or killing journalists, powerful figures within democracies have employed more nuanced forms of



Protesters with placards that say “Insurrection, Yoon Suk-yeol, Impeachment” gather outside the National Assembly building in Seoul, South Korea. Demonstrators called for President Yoon Suk-yeol’s resignation after he declared martial law. (Photo Credit: Viola Kam/Sipa USA/Alamy Live News)

control and intimidation, including threats, smear campaigns, and legal harassment that hinder the ability of journalists to do their work.

Serbia under the leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) provides an informative example of the ways in which elected leaders have undermined the media. The country declined from Free to Partly Free in the 2019 edition of *Freedom in the World* and has lost a further 11 points since then, as rights and liberties have steadily deteriorated. Attacks on journalists and tightening control of the media environment have been among the most prominent features of this erosion. Investigative journalists have faced smear campaigns, punitive tax inspections, threats from leading politicians, and arrests. Authorities have used their control over regulation and licensing to aid progovernment media outlets. A lack of transparency in media ownership, indirect government subsidies for media, and the politicized allocation of advertising have also helped progovernment media dominate the market. More recently, members of the ruling party have used strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) to intimidate independent outlets and journalists. All of this manipulation has created an environment in which positive coverage of Vučić and the SNS swamps the information landscape, especially ahead of elections, and critical voices are increasingly silenced.

Unleashing corruption

Corruption is an incredibly powerful antidemocratic force. In the most extreme cases, corruption has hollowed out the state and public services, and governments exist to distribute ill-gotten wealth among a small group of cronies. In democracies, while corruption scandals can be shocking, the revelation and eventual punishment of graft usually signals that safeguards might be working well. However, a growing number of leaders in democracies have sought to dismantle anticorruption mechanisms and roll back related laws, enabling the diversion of public resources for private gain.

Nowhere was this trend more apparent in 2024 than in Slovakia, where the government of Prime Minister Robert Fico and his Direction–Slovak Social Democracy (Smer) party undermined anticorruption institutions that had previously investigated Fico and prosecuted his allies. A series of legislative changes—which were adopted outside the regular process on a shortened timeline that allowed for less debate or consultation with stakeholders—reduced protections for whistleblowers, cut sentences and reduced the statute of limitations for financial crimes, and abolished the Special Prosecutor’s Office.

The impact of many of these reforms has been immediate. Citing the newly truncated statute of limitations, a prosecutor dropped charges against the deputy speaker of parliament, Peter Žiga, a former Smer member who was accused of bribing



Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić answering media questions at the International Business Fair in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Photo Credit: Denis Kapetanovic/Alamy Live News)

a Supreme Court judge. The interior minister suspended several police officers who had been investigating high-profile corruption cases linked to Smer members, despite the fact that the officers were legally protected as whistleblowers. The government also disbanded the National Crime Agency, which examined cases of corruption and terrorism and had investigated Fico in the past.

Subduing the rule of law

The rule of law is a fundamental feature of democracy, ensuring that independent courts and trained legal professionals can protect individual rights and serve as a check on the actions of political authorities. But elected leaders have increasingly used three key tactics to weaken judicial independence: taking control of how judges are disciplined, changing the remit of judicial oversight, and controlling court appointments.

In 2024, Mexican lawmakers adopted a major constitutional reform that replaced judicial appointments with direct elections, reduced the number and tenure of Supreme Court judges, and replaced the Federal Judiciary Council with a new administrative body that will oversee disciplinary matters. The five members of the new Judicial Disciplinary Tribunal will be elected by popular vote, and they will have broad powers to investigate, dismiss, or impeach judges, including those on the Supreme Court. The decisions of the tribunal will be final and not subject to appeal.

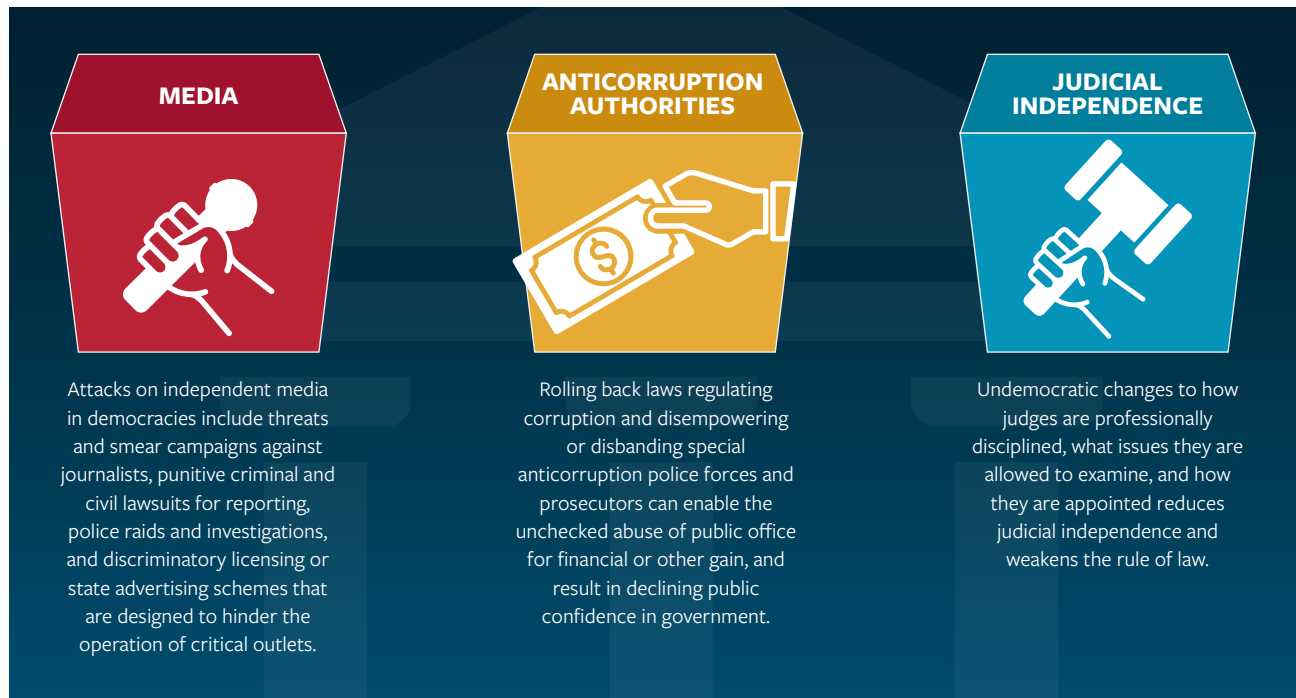
Legal scholars have argued that the popular election of members of the disciplinary tribunal, from a list of candidates approved by the executive and legislative branches, could compromise the independence of judges by subjecting them to partisan oversight and thus make it more difficult for judges to render decisions against the government. The reform was opposed by tens of thousands of Mexico's legal professionals as well as the United Nations' special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

Limiting the jurisdiction of the courts remains a common method used by political forces to weaken judicial checks on their authority. In 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government pursued legal reforms that, among other things, would have prevented the country's Supreme Court from using the standard of "reasonableness" to assess government decisions. In the past, the Supreme Court had used this standard to reverse government policies and to prevent Netanyahu from appointing a minister with a criminal conviction. The Israeli parliament adopted a bill that eliminated this form of review in July 2023, despite persistent mass protests against the government's judicial agenda, but the Supreme Court itself struck down the legislation in January 2024.

Having failed to circumscribe the power of the courts by getting rid of the reasonableness standard, the Israeli government tried to employ one of the other common tactics for undermining the independence of the judiciary: controlling

ATTACKING DEMOCRACY'S FUNDAMENTAL INSTITUTIONS

In a growing number of democracies, elected leaders are undermining the media, anticorruption authorities, and the independence of judges—threatening fundamental freedoms and democracy.



appointments. As of January 2025, Justice Minister Yariv Levin had stalled the appointment of a new president of the Supreme Court for over a year. The president of the Supreme Court is chosen from among the members of the court and appointed by the president of Israel on the recommendation of the Judicial Selection Committee, over which Levin exercises statutory authority. Traditionally, the most senior judge serving on the court is appointed. However, Levin has tried to change the composition of the committee, in which a majority of seats are filled by Supreme Court justices and members of the Israel Bar Association. Failing that, Levin simply refused to convene the committee, leaving the Supreme Court without a permanent president since September 2023. These efforts prevented the current most senior justice, who has been critical of the government, from becoming the new president of the Supreme Court at a time when many of the government's decisions about the conduct of the war in the Gaza Strip could come under judicial review, and when Netanyahu himself faced corruption charges.

In India, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has similarly sought to gain more influence over judicial appointments. In 2014, it tried to replace the Collegium system,

whereby new judges are nominated by their colleagues, with a new commission that would include members of the government in addition to sitting judges. The Supreme Court struck down the law in 2015, but since then the Modi government has delayed appointments and rejected nominations made by the Collegium without explanation. Judicial vacancies have increased as a result, contributing to a backlog of cases at every level of the court system. The 34-seat Supreme Court, which hears cases in small panels, now has seven vacancies and over 70,000 pending cases.

For the time being, courts in Israel and India have continued to push back against government overreach, but they remain vulnerable, and political rights and civil liberties have deteriorated substantially in both countries over the past 10 years.

Checks and balances at risk

Democratic systems protect individual rights and liberties because they operate with checks and balances, meaning those in positions of power, including elected leaders, are constrained by legislatures, independent agencies, the courts, and

nongovernmental institutions like a free press. Such constraints prevent both deliberate abuse and inadvertent error, ensuring that major decisions and policies can be properly reviewed both before and after implementation. But as the world has increasingly witnessed, these checks and balances can be weakened over time, threatening fundamental democratic norms and raising the risk of harmful outcomes for ordinary people. Leaders who harness political populism are especially prone to disregarding or undermining institutional checks as they seek to deliver quickly on their promises to upend the status quo.

One pivotal country to watch will be the United States. The country held free, fair, and credible elections in 2024, and its score improved because, unlike in the two previous presidential contests, there were no significant efforts to interfere with, question, or overturn the outcome. As with elections in other democracies during the year, however, the US campaign was tarnished by threats against candidates in both major parties, as well as some election workers. Donald Trump, the Republican Party nominee and eventual winner of the vote, was targeted in two assassination attempts, one of which injured him and killed a rallygoer in July.

During the campaign, Trump made a number of promises with regard to domestic and foreign policy that could substantially impact freedoms at home and abroad. He warned that he would prosecute his political opponents and reduce the independence of institutions—including federal law enforcement agencies, the civil service, and the media—that have traditionally protected the rule of law, ensured transparency, and served as beneficial checks on presidential discretion. Trump also expressed an interest in quickly ending ongoing foreign wars, which could help bring peace and security to affected regions of the world. It is important, however, that any solutions uphold national sovereignty, protect and expand democratic progress, and strengthen respect for fundamental rights. Both democratic and autocratic countries look to the United States to justify their own actions, so the course charted by President Trump over the next four years will have global reverberations.

Armed Nonstate Actors Are Contributing to a Less Free, Less Safe World

Just as the world has become less free over the last 19 years, it has also become less safe. According to this year's *Freedom in*

the World data, a total of 41 countries and territories received a score of 0 out of 4 on the report's indicator for physical security, meaning people lacked even minimal protections from the violence of war, insurgency, crime, and police brutality. In 2005, the number of such countries and territories was 25. Nonstate armed groups—which include militias, terrorist groups, criminal organizations, and mercenaries—are responsible for an increasing share of this lawless violence.

Nonstate armed groups are partly or fully external to state or intergovernmental military structures, and they use violence to achieve political, ideological, or economic goals. They degrade not only general safety and security, but also freedom of movement, property rights, and the right to equal treatment for different ethnic and religious communities. When nonstate armed groups infiltrate state institutions, they erode elected civilian rule, anticorruption mechanisms, due process, and judicial independence. While they can wield considerable power in practice, they lack legal standing in the international system and are largely unrecognized by the world's governments. Complicating matters even further, nonstate armed groups are often deeply intertwined with the populations under their control and take part in violence in both densely populated areas and across national borders. The involvement of these groups in conflicts and crises around the world has narrowed the range of viable domestic and international policy solutions to armed violence.

When nonstate armed groups infiltrate state institutions, they erode elected civilian rule, anticorruption mechanisms, due process, and judicial independence.

In Africa over the past year, nonstate armed groups fueled Sudan's brutal civil war, while Russian state-backed mercenary forces used violence to prop up authoritarian regimes in the Sahel. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, criminal organizations perpetuated devastating violence while protecting their stakes in the illegal drug trade and other rackets. In Haiti, for example, heavily armed gangs contributed to the collapse of the country's state institutions. In Ecuador and Mexico, criminal groups attacked politicians and

A LESS FREE, LESS SAFE WORLD

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disrupted democratic processes. Leaders in some countries, including El Salvador and Honduras, adopted repressive measures in response to gang-related violence, further damaging the rights of civilians.

Challenging international efforts to restore freedom and security in the Sahel

Nonstate armed groups—including mercenaries, extremist militias, and paramilitary groups, each with a different background and goals—played a prominent part in gutting physical security and perpetuating violence across the Sahel region of Africa in 2024. Their involvement has simultaneously propped up military regimes, weakened states' control over their own territories, and frustrated efforts by the international community to restore peace and elected civilian rule.

Several coups in recent years have fueled instability in the region, with military juntas often citing civilian governments'

failure to suppress jihadist insurgencies. These conditions have been exacerbated by Russian state-backed mercenary groups, such as Africa Corps (a successor of Wagner Group), which peddle brutality and regime defense to autocrats and military leaders in the region under the guise of counterterrorism. In 2024, Russian mercenaries supported government security forces in the Central African Republic as they carried out lethal attacks against the country's Muslim and ethnic Fulani population in an attempt to suppress local rebel groups. In return for its services, the government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has allowed companies affiliated with Africa Corps to dominate the country's gold mines.

Even as these mercenaries have bolstered harmful authoritarian practices, they have been decidedly ineffective in their efforts to curb violent insurgencies. In Mali, Russian mercenaries working with Malian security forces suffered major setbacks during the year, and the security situation continued to deteriorate as Islamist militant groups carried out attacks in

the country's northern and central areas. Niger moved from Partly Free to Not Free in 2024, as insurgent activity intensified in the southwest despite a 2023 military coup that was meant to address insecurity. The arrival of Russian mercenaries in April aided Niger's junta in consolidating its hold on power and contributed to the closure of a US counterterrorism facility in the country.

Conflicts involving nonstate armed groups are exceptionally detrimental to human rights and freedoms, and they are also extremely difficult for the international community to address. In Sudan, the civil war between the regular Sudanese Armed Forces and the rebellious paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which began in April 2023, has led to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. Nearly 20 percent of the population has been internally displaced, and more than 26,000 people have been killed. The conflict has been characterized by shocking levels of violence on both sides, though the RSF has been widely condemned for engaging in systematic sexual violence, forced disappearances, and atrocities against non-Arab ethnic groups in the Darfur region especially.

Efforts by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Switzerland to broker a cease-fire in Sudan have been unsuccessful. The effectiveness of US sanctions against the RSF has been limited because the United Arab Emirates, which has an interest in Sudan's mineral wealth and other material assets, continues to provide the paramilitary group with financial support and weaponry. These failures illustrate the challenges associated with addressing violent conflicts involving nonstate armed actors: the groups typically operate in defiance of national and international law, have no formal diplomatic representation, pursue murky or extreme political goals, and have access to illicit economies or clandestine support from external authoritarian powers.

Organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean

In many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, countries are facing a triple threat to freedom: violence caused by criminal organizations, the corruption and hollowing out of democratic institutions by these groups, and the

VIOLENT NONSTATE ACTORS POSE A TRIPLE THREAT TO FREEDOM

Around the world, freedom has declined because of violence committed by militias, terrorist groups, criminal organizations, and mercenaries; the corruption and hollowing out of democratic institutions by these groups; and the normalization of repressive tactics as states attempt to respond.



normalization of repressive tactics as states attempt to respond. Some criminal groups have also managed to develop or join much larger and more sophisticated transnational networks that not only expand their illicit activities across borders but also pose further challenges to any localized efforts to contain them.

Criminal violence continued to drag down political rights and civil liberties in Haiti, which experienced one of the year's largest score declines. Escalating attacks by a complex array of heavily armed gangs have driven the country into a state of political disorder and severely undermined the basic safety of civilians. In April, after gangs swept through the capital and forced the closure of its airport, Prime Minister Ariel Henry resigned in favor of an internationally backed transitional council, which has yet to restore control. There are some 20 different gangs in Port-au-Prince alone, and they hold around 85 percent of the city, according to the United Nations. In December, nearly 200 people were killed in a vicious gang attack that overwhelmingly targeted elderly people who were believed to be Vodou practitioners. Over the course of 2024, more than 4,500 people were killed and over 700,000 were displaced as a direct result of gang-related violence.

Efforts by the international community to alleviate the suffering of ordinary residents have faced significant challenges. Past international peacekeeping interventions in Haiti have at times led to increased harms for Haitians without providing a lasting solution to gang-related violence.

A mission that ended in 2017 was marred by allegations of sexual assault at the hands of peacekeepers, who also inadvertently caused a cholera outbreak that killed some 10,000 Haitians. More recently, a US-led resolution to create a new UN peacekeeping mission faced pushback at the UN Security Council. A more limited police mission led by Kenya is currently operating in the country, but it has lacked sufficient funding and is widely viewed as ineffective.

The situation in Haiti, where armed gangs have contributed to near-total state collapse, is an extreme case. Yet elsewhere in the region, criminal groups are also chipping away at the integrity of democratic institutions. In Mexico, criminal organizations and cartels have managed to secure relative impunity by co-opting law enforcement agencies and government officials. In some instances, they have financed political campaigns or galvanized voter support in exchange for access to state resources or protection from prosecution. These groups also regularly use violence to eliminate political threats to their interests, and as a result, the 2024 general elections featured historically high levels of political violence.

In Ecuador, organized crime has become deeply entrenched in the country's political and legal system, including its judiciary, complicating efforts to quell recent spikes in criminal violence. Investigations by the attorney general in early 2024 found massive levels of collusion between public servants, including those in the justice department, and criminal gangs. A study by the Ecuadorian Organized Crime



A group of Kenyan police arrive in Haiti to help local police restore law and order amid worsening gang violence. (Photo Credit: Patrice Noel/ ZUMA Press, Inc./ Alamy Live News)

Observatory found that only 10 percent of narcotrafficking investigations resulted in convictions between 2019 and 2022.

While remedial action is clearly needed, many leaders in the region have failed to strengthen safeguards against government corruption and collusion, instead pursuing broad crackdowns on gang-related violence that have led to further deterioration in citizens' rights and liberties. In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa declared a state of "internal armed conflict" in January, applying military means and special authorities in an effort to stem rising criminal violence. In June, Honduran President Xiomara Castro announced sweeping measures to reduce organized crime, including terrorist designations for criminal groups and collective trials for gang members. Many of these approaches were inspired by the example of President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, whose heavy-handed strategy to crush that country's gangs has become widely popular both there and elsewhere in the region despite its serious implications for human rights and the rule of law.

While the official homicide rate in El Salvador has dropped significantly since President Bukele came to power in 2019, increased security has come at the cost of many basic rights and freedoms in the country. El Salvador has experienced the third-largest score decline globally over the last 10 years. The rule of law has been demolished as authorities, under a "state of exception," have carried out extrajudicial killings and jailed tens of thousands of people without due process. Bukele has also consolidated power by purging the judiciary, installing loyalists in the highest courts, and changing electoral rules to favor his political party. Manipulated elections in February 2024 further strengthened his hold on power, and as a result, El Salvador recorded the year's second-largest decline in freedom globally.

Violence by nonstate armed groups continues to pose a major threat to safety and freedom around the world, yet few of the solutions implemented to date have been able to sustainably reduce this violence without degrading political rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law. Moreover, the increasing prominence of transnational criminal organizations has elevated the problem from a national to a regional or global one. The challenges posed by such groups are multifold, but without basic physical security, citizens are unable to exercise any other freedoms, and they will be tempted to hand unchecked power to leaders who promise to restore order. Elected leaders must demonstrate that democracy can deliver both safety and liberty, and remind the public that one cannot long endure without the other.

The World Needs New Approaches to Old Problems

Armed conflict, attacks on democratic institutions by elected leaders, and deepening authoritarianism drove a large part of the decline in global freedom in 2024. Though serious, these phenomena are not new. Some of the largest score declines over the past 19 years have occurred in El Salvador, Serbia, and Venezuela, where leaders' steady dismantling of democratic institutions progressed into an entrenchment of authoritarian rule. Other countries that have experienced major declines since 2005 include the Central African Republic, Haiti, and Mali, where endemic violence and insecurity have long impeded people's ability to live in peace and access their fundamental rights. As the world approaches two full decades of declining freedom, it is clear that new solutions—and far more vigorous and comprehensive efforts—are needed to address these persistently expanding threats to the security and survival of democracy. Should the current global trends continue, not even the most powerful democratic states will be able to guarantee the freedom and prosperity of their people.

There are many encouraging examples around the world from which to draw inspiration. Events in Bangladesh, Senegal, and South Korea over the past year showed, not for the first time, that ordinary citizens have the power to reject authoritarianism, protect free institutions, and hold their leaders to account. Sustained democratic reform efforts in Guatemala and Poland highlighted the fact that rebuilding damaged institutions is arduous, yet possible. While Syria's future remains uncertain, the sudden fall of the Assad regime proved once again that even the most extreme authoritarian systems are not immutable.

In the year to come, all those who understand the value of political rights and civil liberties must work together in the defense of democracy and be prepared to exploit opportunities for progress when they arise. Democratic governments, international organizations, civil society groups, the private sector, and ordinary people have critical roles to play in safeguarding institutions at home, supporting democracy advocates and human rights defenders abroad, and finding durable resolutions to armed conflicts that give the affected populations an opportunity to live in freedom.

Freedom in the World 2025 Status Changes

Bhutan



Bhutan's status improved from Partly Free to Free because free and fair legislative elections and the formation of a new government further consolidated a long democratic reform process in the kingdom, and because physical security and the environment for civil liberties have steadily improved in recent years.

Senegal



Senegal's status improved from Partly Free to Free because the country's democratic institutions resisted an attempt to unduly delay the presidential election, and an opposition coalition overcame significant barriers to win both the presidency and a majority in free and fair parliamentary elections.

Indian Kashmir



Indian Kashmir's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free because peaceful and competitive legislative elections were conducted after a long delay, and a partially elected local government was installed for the first time since the territory's 2019 reorganization.

Jordan



Jordan's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free because a recently reformed electoral system led to more competitive legislative elections and greater representation for political parties.

Kuwait



Kuwait's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because the emir unilaterally dissolved the elected parliament and unconstitutionally suspended any new elections, leaving the country without a functioning legislature and citizens without political representation.

Niger



Niger's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because the ruling military junta restricted media freedom, weakened due process, and dissolved local councils, which had been among the country's few remaining elected institutions.

Tanzania



Tanzania's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because the authorities altered the voter registrations of ethnic Maasai citizens as part of a repressive campaign to expel their communities from a planned game reserve.

Thailand



Thailand's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because the leading opposition party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court, and authorities repatriated activists, refugees, and asylum seekers to countries where they faced ill-treatment.

Freedom in the World Methodology

Freedom in the World 2025 evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 13 territories during calendar year 2024. 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.

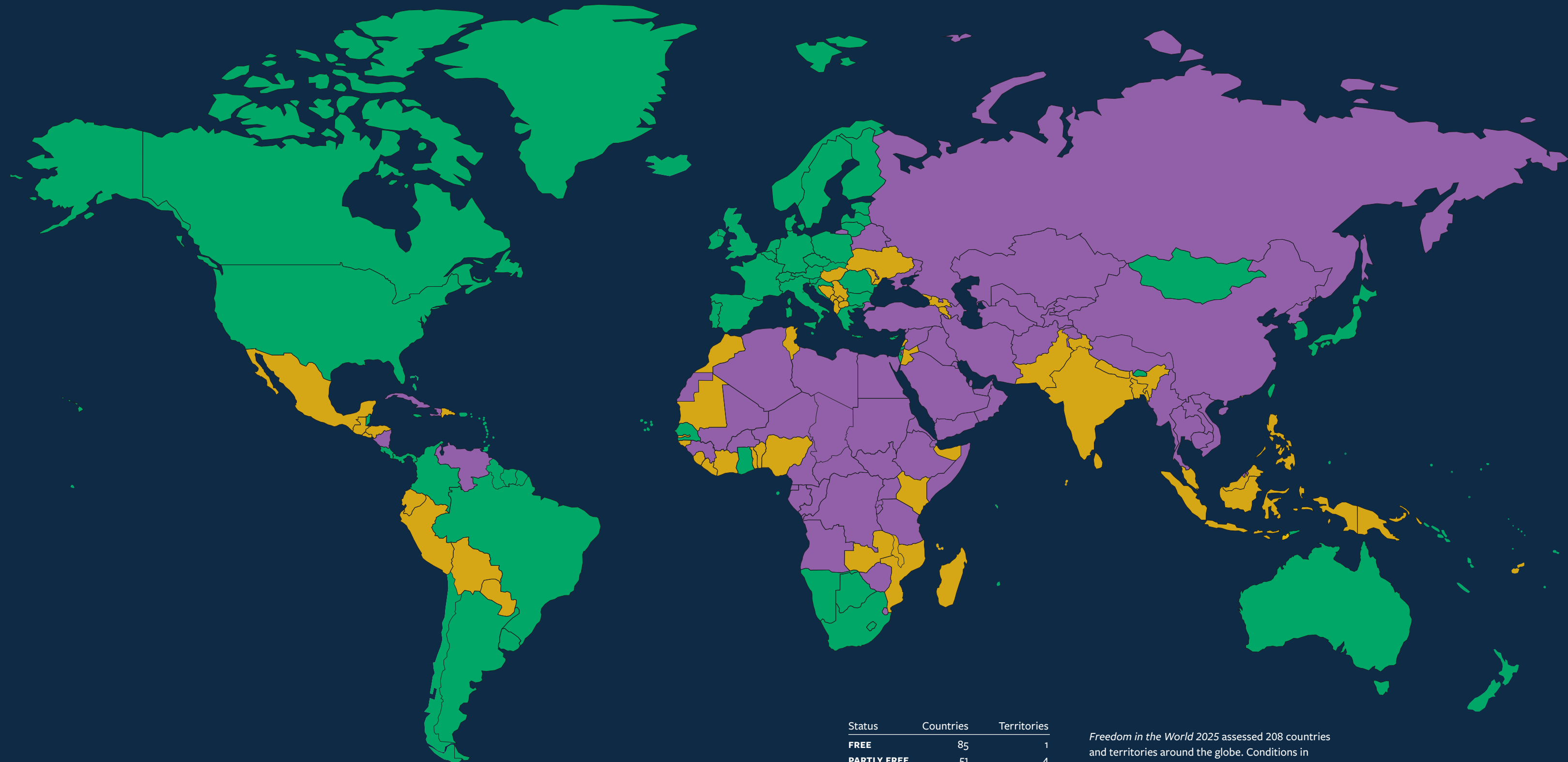
The methodology, which is derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is applied to all countries and territories, irrespective of geographic location,

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**](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/research-methodology).

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025



FREE PARTLY FREE NOT FREE

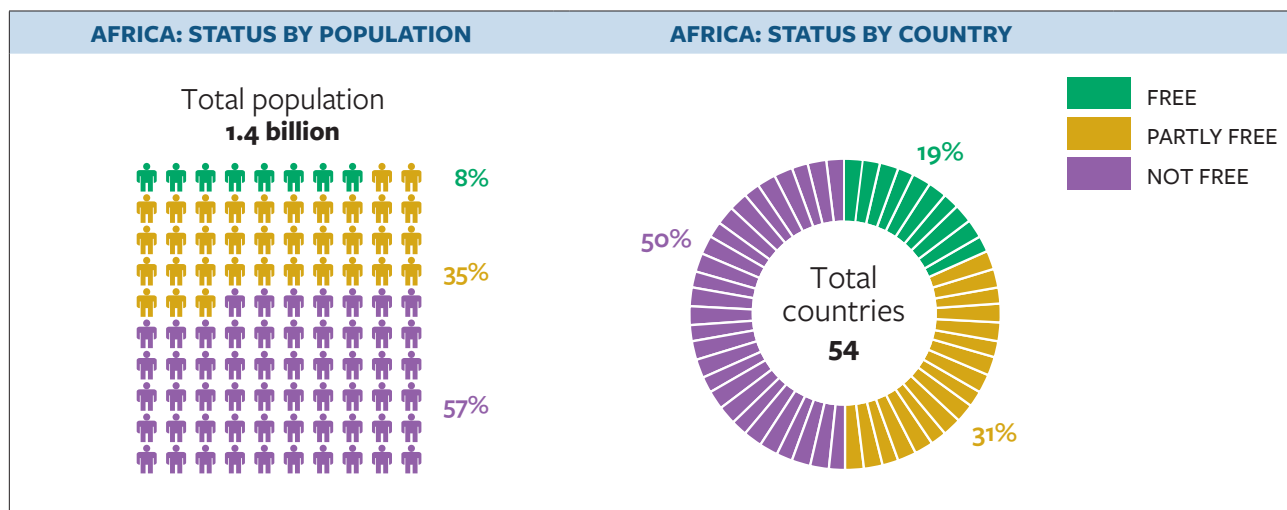
Status	Countries	Territories
FREE	85	1
PARTLY FREE	51	4
NOT FREE	59	8
Total	195	13

Freedom in the World 2025 assessed 208 countries and territories around the globe. Conditions in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine were assessed in a single, separate report for the first time in this edition.

Regional Trends

AFRICA:

The region's elections presented a mixed picture of credible contests, democratic breakthroughs, and authoritarian manipulation.



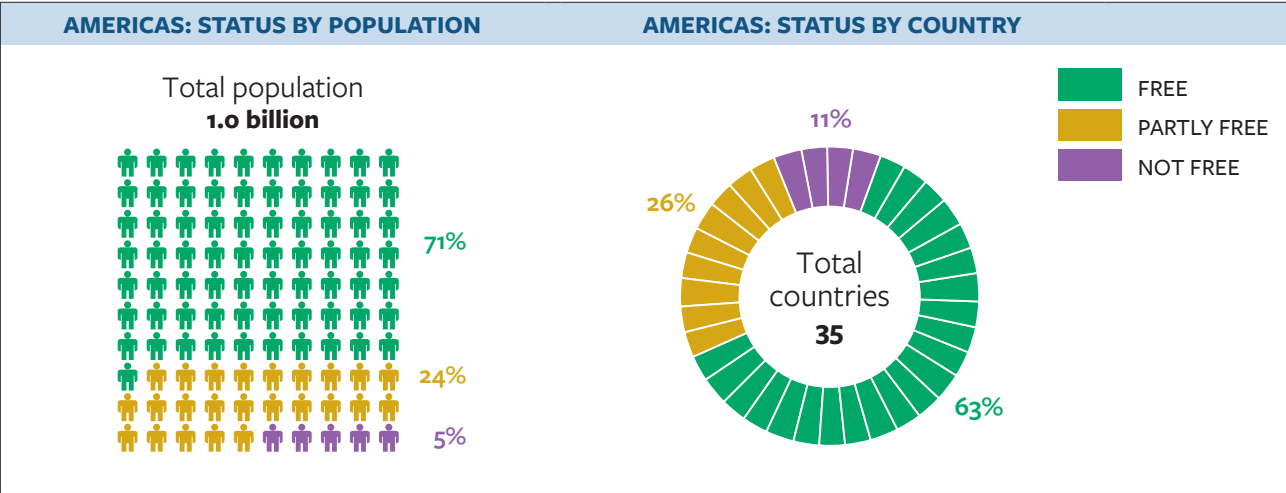
Freedom continued to decline in Africa in 2024, with political rights and civil liberties deteriorating in 21 out of 54 countries, while only 8 registered improvements. Sudan's score declined by 4 points on *Freedom in the World's* 100-point scale due to the ongoing civil war, which has resulted in massive human suffering, extensive displacement and destruction, and the disruption of schooling for millions of students. Two countries, Tanzania and Niger, fell from Partly Free to Not Free status. In Tanzania, members of the ethnic Maasai population faced forced evictions and voter deregistration, and broader attacks against the country's political opposition also dragged down political rights. In Niger, the military junta that took control in a 2023 coup offered no plans to return to civilian rule and continued to govern in a repressive manner, arresting journalists and arbitrarily detaining members of the political opposition.

Antidemocratic leaders across the continent consolidated their power through manipulated elections. Tunisia tied for the year's largest score decline as President Kaïs Saïed's regime arrested candidates and changed electoral laws ahead of the October presidential election, resulting in a lopsided victory for the incumbent. The electoral laws were also changed in

Madagascar, hindering the opposition's ability to gain power through competitive balloting. Togo's repressive leadership used a constitutional revision to shift the country from a presidential to a parliamentary system, potentially allowing President Faure Gnassingbé to remain in power indefinitely.

Despite the overall degradation in political rights, Africa featured several election-related bright spots where leaders and citizens alike actively participated in upholding democracy. The territory of Somaliland earned the region's largest score improvement after an overdue presidential election went forward and proved both peaceful and competitive. Free and fair elections in Botswana led to its first transfer of power from one party to another, and hotly contested balloting in South Africa cost the ruling African National Congress party its majority for the first time in decades, forcing it to build a broader coalition. In Senegal, civil society was instrumental in pushing back against the incumbent president's efforts to delay the presidential election in February, and snap parliamentary elections in November were well conducted, contributing to the country's improvement from Partly Free to Free status.

AMERICAS:
*Freedom waned in the shadow of criminal violence
and state repression.*



Despite retaining its status as one of the world’s freest regions, the Americas suffered further erosion to political rights and civil liberties in 2024. Twelve out of 35 countries recorded overall score declines, while only 7 registered improvements. El Salvador, which tied with Haiti for the region’s largest score decline, continued its slide toward authoritarian rule under President Nayib Bukele, who secured a constitutionally prohibited second consecutive term in a flawed February election. In Venezuela, incumbent Nicolás Maduro unleashed a brutal wave of repression to defend his illegitimate claim to victory in the country’s July presidential contest, denying Venezuelans’ vote for change at the ballot box and leading to a further decline in freedom.

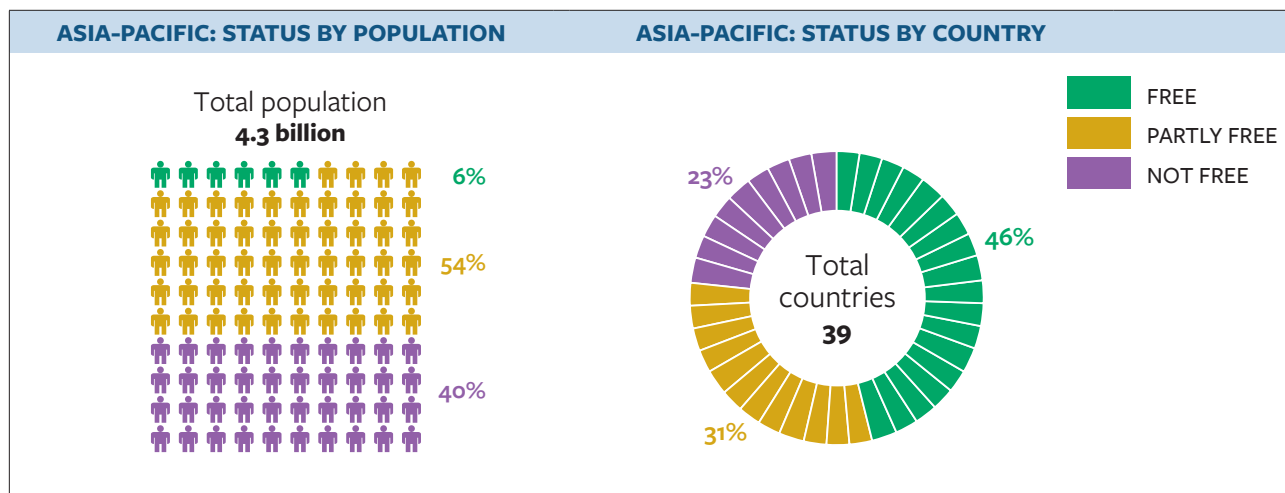
Elsewhere in the Americas, political crises complicated state-led efforts to address the region’s most pressing challenges, particularly the acute threat posed by organized criminal violence and insecurity. Haiti endured a succession of unelected prime ministers as the transitional government and

an international police mission struggled to contain spiraling gang violence, which killed more than 5,600 people in 2024 and contributed to a 6-point decline in the country’s score. In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa’s militarized response to organized crime failed to meaningfully reduce the homicide rate as the year progressed. Meanwhile, Bolivia’s political environment, already fraught with confrontations between President Luis Arce’s government and supporters of former President Evo Morales, was unsettled further by a short-lived coup attempt in June.

Political dysfunction did not forestall progress everywhere, however. In Guatemala, which experienced the region’s largest score improvement, President Bernardo Arévalo successfully implemented measures to improve government transparency, even as he contended with deeply rooted corruption in the country’s judicial system. Other countries, including Panama and the United States, overcame political fractures to hold peaceful, well-administered elections.

ASIA-PACIFIC:

Amid crackdowns on political opposition and dissent, voters and protesters pushed for democratic progress.



Freedom declined overall in the Asia-Pacific region, where 11 out of 39 countries registered an overall score decline for 2024, and just 5 improved. Several key elections were marred by violence or manipulation. In India and Pakistan, which both suffered 3-point declines, opposition candidates faced uneven playing fields that favored incumbents. The Indian opposition raised concerns about selective enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct for parties and candidates, while the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party was barred from fielding official candidates or using its symbol on the ballot, meaning candidates had to run as independents. Bangladesh held deeply flawed elections in February, but mass protests later in the year drove Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her repressive government from power, creating a critical opening for democratic reform and contributing to a 5-point improvement in the country's score.

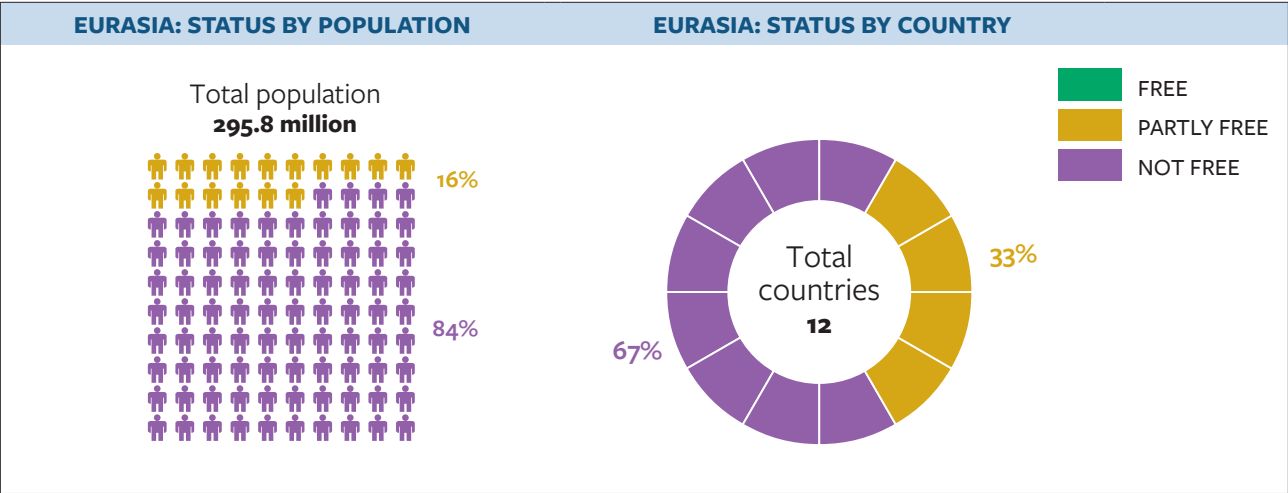
Clampdowns on dissent deepened elsewhere in the region. In Hong Kong, the Beijing-controlled legislature implemented vague new laws designed to further suppress any activities or speech related to “external interference” or “state secrets.” In Myanmar, the vicious military junta that seized power in a 2021 coup exacerbated a climate of fear in the country through more aggressive forced conscription efforts, a ban

on virtual private networks (VPNs), and a new census and electronic identification system for the population—though it continued to lose territory to rebel groups calling for a decentralized, multiethnic democracy. These repressive measures were part of a worrying downward trend in conditions for human rights defenders, journalists, and the political opposition in a range of countries and territories where civil liberties were already tightly constricted.

Defying the negative trajectory, some countries hosted free and fair elections that led to notable score improvements. Bhutan's status was upgraded from Partly Free to Free due in part to competitive elections and a peaceful transfer of power. Sri Lanka's elections were less violent than past contests and resulted in a 4-point score improvement for the island nation. Indian Kashmir received the largest score improvement in *Freedom in the World 2025* after long-overdue legislative elections were finally held in the territory. The balloting helped to raise its status from Not Free to Partly Free and resulted in victory for local opposition parties, though a lieutenant governor appointed by the Indian government continued to wield considerable authority, circumscribing the influence of locally elected leaders.

EURASIA:

Flawed elections and encroaching authoritarianism could not extinguish a steadfast struggle for freedom.

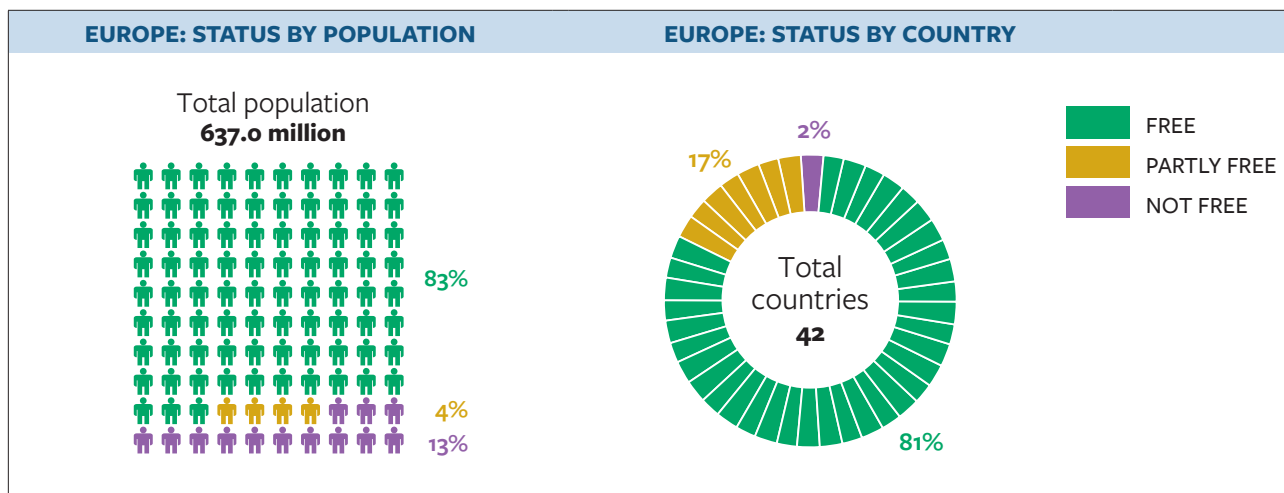


Freedom in Eurasia declined for the fifth consecutive year in 2024, as 6 out of 12 countries suffered deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, and just 1 experienced improvement. Across the region, authoritarian regimes used sham elections to consolidate their power and further suppress democratic principles. In several countries, including Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan, elections were held despite the exclusion of any genuine opposition. External pressures stifled other countries’ democratic aspirations—as in Moldova, where a presidential election and European Union (EU) referendum were marred by allegations of Russian interference. In Georgia, international observers identified several significant issues affecting the integrity of parliamentary elections, contributing to a 3-point score decline. Meanwhile, the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine, which entered its third year in 2024, made it all but impossible for the country to hold a presidential election that would normally have been scheduled for March.

In defiance of the deepening repression against political opposition and civil society in much of the region, human rights defenders and ordinary citizens mobilized to protect democratic rights throughout the year. Georgian citizens launched widespread protests against the government’s antidemocratic turn and demanded the withdrawal of restrictive legislation targeting nongovernmental organizations, persisting even after the authorities responded with excessive violence. Lawmakers also passed a measure that curbed LGBT+ rights. In Georgia’s breakaway territory of Abkhazia, demonstrations against the detention of local opposition politicians and a highly unpopular investment deal with Russia led to the release of detained leaders and the resignation of the territory’s de facto president. In Armenia, authorities responded to growing popular support for further democratization and EU integration by reducing security dependence on Russia and moving the country toward closer cooperation with the EU. In a region dominated by authoritarian regimes, civil society has continued to demonstrate its resilience and commitment to protecting democratic principles.

EUROPE:

In the world's freest region, migration crackdowns and political violence undermined basic rights.



Europe retained its status as the freest region in the world following a politically tumultuous year that featured rising political violence and growing restrictions on migration. The status quo largely prevailed in 2024, with 9 out of 42 countries registering improvements in their political rights and civil liberties, and 7 suffering declines. Germany and Poland each improved by 2 points after German authorities reduced barriers to citizenship and assembly and Poland made progress toward long-awaited legislative and judicial reforms. In contrast, leaders in Slovakia weakened anticorruption institutions through a rapid series of reforms to the justice system. Meanwhile in Romania, the annulment of December's presidential election due to claims of foreign interference left the country mired in political uncertainty at year's end. Turkey remained the only country rated Not Free in the region.

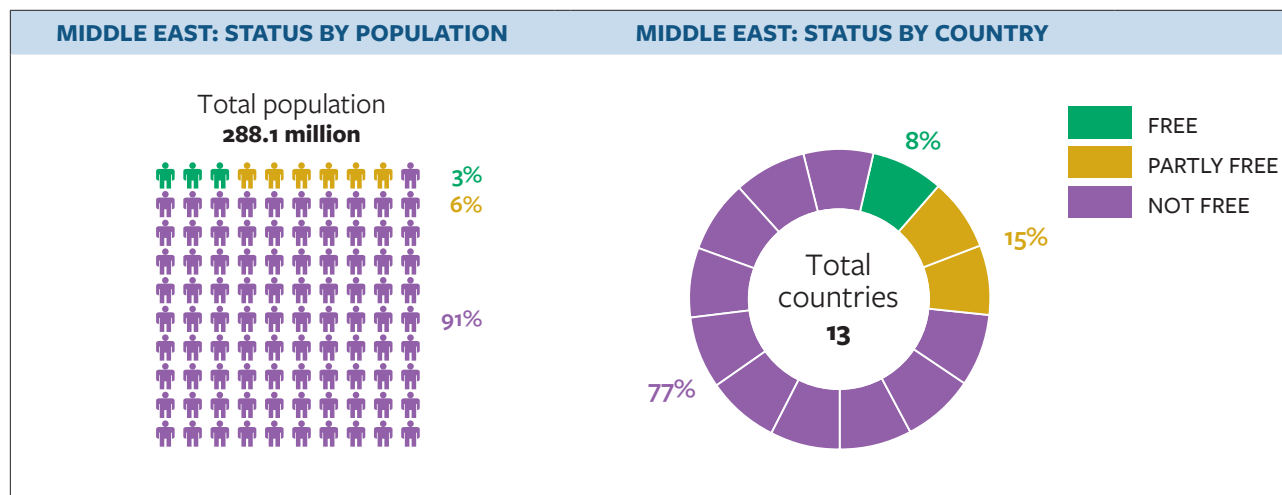
Europe's upward trajectory was checked in part by an undercurrent of political violence and extremism, even in consolidated democracies. Slovakia's prime minister narrowly survived an assassination attempt in May, and lawmakers, diplomats, and political candidates were physically attacked or

assaulted in countries including Denmark, France, Germany, and Spain. In the Netherlands, more than 60 people were arrested for antisemitic and Islamophobic violence and vandalism surrounding a soccer match. And in the United Kingdom, disinformation about a recent stabbing spurred a series of far-right, anti-immigrant riots.

Migration was a particularly salient issue in many European countries, as authorities adopted increasingly restrictive approaches, undermining democratic guarantees of equal treatment, due process, and protection from refoulement. In Serbia and the territory of Northern Cyprus, reports emerged of human rights activists being denied entry or impeded at the border, ostensibly as a result of their beliefs and work. Pushbacks escalated during the year in the southern Republic of Cyprus, as around 70 asylum seekers were reportedly forced back into the buffer zone that divides the island without due process. In Europe's northeastern corner, concerns about the Kremlin's use of migration as a form of "hybrid warfare" have led authorities to suspend asylum rights or close crossings at strategic borders, such as in Poland and Finland.

MIDDLE EAST:

Syria provides hope for democratic openings at a time of deepening repression and conflict.



Freedom in the Middle East underwent substantial changes in 2024 due to the vicissitudes of war and autocratic rule. Three out of 13 countries recorded declines in political rights and civil liberties, and 4 registered improvements. Despite the continued dominance of Not Free countries, both extraordinary and modest democratic improvements offered hope in a region typically plagued by democratic setbacks.

After a half-century of brutal repression and a decade of civil war, the sudden overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria and the formation of a new, rebel-led provisional government resulted in a 4-point improvement in the country's civil liberties score and created opportunities for expanded political participation. The collapse of the former regime's notorious prison system, alongside eased restrictions on the media and public gatherings, drove Syria's score to its highest point in 12 years. Neighboring Jordan implemented a new mixed electoral system that increased the representation of political parties in the parliament, which contributed to more competitive elections in 2024 and prompted the country—often poised near the threshold—to improve from Not Free to Partly Free status.

In other parts of the region, political rights and civil liberties significantly deteriorated due to a sprawling, highly destabilizing conflict centered on the Gaza Strip. Israel's war with the militant group Hamas entered its second year and

further diminished basic freedoms for Palestinians in Gaza, which recorded the report's second-largest score decline. The Israeli military's related invasion of Lebanon to stop cross-border attacks by Hezbollah, another Iranian-backed militant group, resulted in a steep degradation of physical security in Lebanon, even as Israelis remained displaced from their homes near the border. Indeed, the conflict fueled mass displacement, loss of life, and destruction of property across the affected areas, which at times extended to Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. Amid this regional war, civil society organizations in Lebanon and Yemen encountered increasing operational obstacles or domestic hostility due to their human rights work.

Freedom also remained restricted in the Middle East because of democratic backsliding and deepening authoritarianism. Kuwait tied for the largest score decline globally in *Freedom in the World 2025*, and its status fell from Partly Free to Not Free, after the emir dissolved the traditionally outspoken parliament and suspended new elections indefinitely. Qatar similarly discontinued its limited elections for the country's legislative advisory body, leaving citizens without the opportunity to choose their representatives. While Qatar was already rated Not Free, Kuwait's fall from Partly Free status is especially concerning in a region where nearly 80 percent of countries are Not Free and credible elections are increasingly rare.

NOTABLE THREATS TO FREEDOM IN 2024

In addition to attacks on democratic institutions and violent armed conflict, the following threats frequently affected specific freedoms—or the freedoms of specific groups—over the course of the year.



Forced conscription and recruitment in conflict zones endangered children and other vulnerable groups.

In Sudan, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) forcibly recruited men, women, and children to fight in its civil war against the regular Sudanese military—a conflict that has claimed thousands of lives and displaced millions of people. Forcibly recruited individuals and their families experienced looting, intimidation, torture, and sexual exploitation by the RSF. The military junta in Myanmar restricted the movement of young men and women who tried to flee the country after it began forcibly conscripting them to fight against a coalition of insurgent groups. Vulnerable populations like the Rohingya ethnic minority faced disproportionate risks of being forcibly conscripted. In Russia, ethnic minority groups from Siberia and the Caucasus as well as recently naturalized citizens and men in occupied regions of Ukraine continued to be targeted for recruitment into the Kremlin's invasion force in Ukraine, minimizing the war's impact on ethnic Russians living in major cities like Moscow.



Failures to investigate corruption eroded government transparency and accountability. Civil society organizations and the public questioned the Malawian government's avowed commitment to anticorruption efforts after charges against then-Vice President Saulos Chilima were arbitrarily dropped by the state prosecutor. Similarly, authorities in Rwanda failed to investigate high-level corruption allegations involving businesses with ties to the presidential family. In Nauru, allegations of corruption and bribery by politicians, including President David Adeang, resurfaced in 2024, yet there have been no documented attempts by authorities to investigate such cases. In Nicaragua, endemic corruption has strained the resources of ordinary people, who spend on average 5 percent of their income on extortion or bribery costs.



Freedom of belief, especially for religious minorities, continued to come under assault. Iran's largest unrecognized religious minority group, the Baha'is, have faced decades of systematic persecution and discrimination. In 2024, the regime escalated its crackdown by arbitrarily arresting Baha'i women because of their faith. Violent attacks against Christian worshippers by Islamist militants and other armed groups in Nigeria increased during the year. In Austria, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, far-right parties have fanned the flames of Islamophobia. According to a 2024 study from the European Union (EU) Agency for Fundamental Rights, one in two Muslims in the EU have reported facing daily racism and discrimination. In Cuba, Communist Party authorities continued their practice of raiding places of worship and persecuting religious believers and clergy through surveillance, harassment, and onerous registration requirements.



Attacks on media freedom—including arrests, violence, legal harassment, and censorship—occurred in over 120 countries and territories in 2024.

Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip made 2024 one of the deadliest years for journalists on record; at least 78 journalists and media workers were killed in Gaza or related fighting that affected the West Bank, Lebanon, and Israel itself. Censorship increased in Kyrgyzstan, where the Culture Ministry ordered the blocking of Kloop, an independent news website, and several media outlets were raided during the year. In Pakistan, journalist Matiullah Jan was arrested and later charged under the Anti-Terrorism Act following his reporting on a violent crackdown by security forces against protesters who were calling for the release of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Policy Recommendations

With each year of global decline in freedom, it has become more urgent for democracies to work together to halt and roll back the deterioration. The events of this period have demonstrated, again and again, that the harmful effects of authoritarian repression and misrule regularly spill across national borders. And just as tyranny fuels the spread of instability, armed conflict, terrorism, mass displacement, and corruption around the world, it is the protection of democratic rights and the rule of law that ultimately ensure freedom, security, and prosperity.

Democracies, as a matter of their own survival, must demonstrate basic solidarity and prevent the outright conquest of other free societies by authoritarian powers. This means [helping Ukraine](#) to defeat Moscow's invasion and [standing with Taiwan](#) in the face of Beijing's military intimidation.

But democratic governments must do more than merely survive if they hope to reverse 19 years of setbacks in the rest of the world and subdue the threats posed by the expansion of authoritarian practices. They should organize a coordinated and sustained campaign to **support and protect human rights defenders**, secure the **release of political prisoners**, and more generally **strengthen democracy worldwide**, for example by upholding free and fair elections wherever they occur and responding consistently to coups and other assaults on elected governments.

This year's *Freedom in the World* findings in particular underscore the need to reform or rebuild democratic institutions after periods of antidemocratic leadership, to guard against democratic erosion, and to address violence stemming from both armed conflict and organized crime. Democratic governments, civil society organizations, business leaders, and others hoping to protect democracy and expand freedom all have a critical role to play in such efforts.

1. Prioritize strengthening the rule of law and delivering economic dividends in the aftermath of political transitions.

In countries where democratic forces have come to power after periods of antidemocratic rule, the new governments should pursue an agenda that protects and expands freedoms even as it delivers tangible economic and social benefits to citizens. Reforms should be undertaken without undue delay, but they should still be based on respect for fundamental rights and meaningful consultation with the affected groups. Other democratic governments, donors, and the private sector can do a great deal to help these transitions succeed. Responsive funding frameworks allow the international community to offer rapid and targeted support to countries at critical junctures, and they should be sustained or expanded.

- **The rule of law is essential to addressing past abuses and securing the gains of any positive transition.**

All people and entities must remain equally accountable under the same laws, and legal proceedings must be free of improper political or economic influence. The rule of law is a prerequisite for the defense of fundamental freedoms, including the rights of minority groups, and for the creation of a fair economic and political playing field. A transparent and consistent legal system serves as a safeguard against corruption and nepotism, reduces risks for foreign investors, contributes to long-term economic growth, and ensures government accountability. By contrast, politically captured or corrupted courts can serve as a barrier to further democratic reforms. In the short to medium term, domestic reformers, with support and technical assistance from donors and the democratic community, should repair and strengthen the nomination processes for future judges, revise or repeal any existing laws that unduly constrain the formation of and operating environment for independent civil society organizations, and establish requirements for income and asset disclosures by public officials. Donors can work in tandem with national governments to build the capacities of the judiciary, the legislative branch, independent auditing and anticorruption bodies, and civil society groups, effectively bolstering legal reforms and strengthening the institutions that provide checks on executive authority.

- **Domestic reformers and the international community must help newly elected governments deliver tangible social benefits and economic opportunities.** When governments fail to deliver on material expectations, dissatisfied or excluded groups of citizens are more likely to lose faith in their elected leaders and embrace authoritarian alternatives. New leaders should promote small-business entrepreneurship and investment policies that strengthen the middle class, and the democratic community should reinforce positive reforms through development grants and loans, sovereign loan guarantees, and debt forgiveness. A longer-term effort to shift significant tax-and-spend authority to regional and local governments can also serve as a critical means of preventing future concentrations of political power. Especially when bolstered by fiscal transparency, integrity, and accountability mechanisms and support from donors and the private sector, such decentralization also brings governance closer to ordinary citizens, thereby improving public goods and services and deepening democratic culture.

2. In countries emerging from war or the collapse of authoritarian regimes, focus on reducing violence, undertaking reconciliation efforts, and reforming security services.

There is no simple policy playbook for recovery after years of armed conflict or authoritarian rule. That said, countries emerging from such devastation must act swiftly to release all political prisoners, build or revitalize democratic institutions (including through constitutional reform if necessary), reform police and other security forces, organize and hold competitive multiparty elections, and ensure accountability for past human rights violations. To the greatest extent possible, democratic forces should remain united and committed to reforms that respect fundamental freedoms and pluralism, as well as to careful prevention of any further violence.

- **Reconciling with the past is crucial for a peaceful and democratic future.** Any crimes committed by the preceding authoritarian regime or during a related war or revolution should be investigated in a transparent and impartial manner, whether by reformed domestic institutions, international entities, or a combination thereof. Those found guilty of human rights abuses must be held accountable in accordance with the rule of law. Any path to reconciliation cannot be imposed from the outside and must be agreed upon by local actors in accordance with the country's political context, history, and culture. Recognizing that accountability efforts can take years, if not decades, donors and democratic governments should be prepared to provide multiyear technical assistance and support to local civil society and legal experts during this delicate process. Democratic governments and donors should also partner with the new government and civil society groups to provide necessary rehabilitation and support to victims of past abuses.
- **Policy priorities should include reforms to security forces, dismantling of units involved in systematic rights violations, and accountability for individual perpetrators.** These steps will mitigate the chance of future violence and help address the grievances of victims. The remaining security and law enforcement bodies should receive clear instructions and training on the use of force against civilians, in line with international human rights standards. Officers must also protect populations at risk, including religious and ethnic minority groups, against any retaliatory violence. Security forces should ensure that recruitment and promotions are based on merit, rather than affiliation with previous elites, and that their ranks represent a cross-section of society. Democratic governments, donors, and multinational bodies can help provide guidance, oversight, and technical assistance.

3. Bolster checks and balances to mitigate the threat of democratic backsliding.

Significant erosion of political rights and civil liberties within established democracies remains rare globally. But in countries where it has happened, elected leaders have driven the decline by undermining institutions that act as checks on their power, such as independent media, anticorruption authorities, and the judiciary, among others. To guard against future democratic backsliding, policymakers, legislators, jurists, civic activists, and donor communities should work to strengthen institutional guardrails and norms that serve to constrain elected leaders with antidemocratic or illiberal aims.

- **Free media should be protected, and leaders' attempts to silence their critics or unfairly promote friendly outlets should be called out and resisted.** Common methods for subverting media freedom in democratic

countries include government-backed ownership changes at critical outlets, regulatory and financial pressure, exertion of political influence over independent public media and regulatory bodies, and harassment of or threats against individual journalists. Whole-of-society responses, including solidarity among media outlets, are essential for raising public awareness of such political pressure and marking it as unacceptable in a democracy. Democratic governments and civil society must call out any use of SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation) and the targeting of journalists and media outlets with arbitrary and punitive administrative or criminal investigations. Donor initiatives meant to guard against those practices, such as Reporters Shield, should receive additional investment. Violence against journalists should also be met with zero tolerance and swift condemnation, and where appropriate, donors should provide emergency assistance to the affected individuals and their families. Authorities' failure to identify and prosecute attackers, restrictions on media access, blocking of websites, and censorship on particular topics must all be publicly condemned. Business leaders should rally behind targeted outlets with advertising purchases and sponsorships. Government partiality toward politically loyal outlets—through boons such as lucrative state contracts, favorable regulatory decisions, and preferential access to state information—must be exposed and denounced. The international democratic community can reinforce domestic norms on media freedom with press statements, phone calls, meetings, letters, and the imposition of targeted sanctions on violators.

- **Successful anticorruption enforcement and accountability requires a comprehensive, coordinated effort, both within and across democracies.** Democracies should invest in prevention as well as enforcement, and strengthen both state and nonstate oversight mechanisms. They should ensure that anticorruption authorities are independent of political leaders and parties, and have sufficient resources to fulfill their mandate. Democratic governments should adopt and enforce strong regulations requiring public officials' asset disclosures, preventing abuse of state resources, combating financial crime, ensuring the transparency and integrity of political financing, and advancing other key goals in accordance with international standards. Donors can provide technical assistance to legislative, judicial, and other institutional oversight efforts; civil society watchdog groups; and investigative journalists working to expose and prevent corruption. And since corruption has become globalized through the international financial system, democracies should backstop other countries' anticorruption efforts by adopting and enforcing their own anti-money laundering policies, preventing foreign kleptocrats from using their banks, real estate, and legal jurisdictions to launder stolen money. Democracies should also impose targeted sanctions, including visa bans and travel restrictions, on corrupt foreign officials in a way that maximizes their impact.
- **Competent, independent, and adequately resourced judicial bodies can rebuff political interference and maintain public trust in the courts.** Judicial independence is a prerequisite for democratic longevity and the defense of fundamental freedoms. Any reform of the judiciary should therefore be carried out in line with international obligations and best practices, and in a manner that ensures the judiciary's future strength and autonomy. Democratic governments should ensure that the appointment of judges is based on merit and qualifications, not political affiliation; that judicial salaries are adequate and cannot be reduced as a means of political pressure or augmented with excessive gifts and other forms of bribery; and that clear and enforceable codes of ethical conduct are established to guide judicial behavior and mitigate conflicts of interest. To supplement these measures, civil society, with support from donors as necessary, should work to educate the public on the importance of judicial independence in preserving the rule of law. Attempts to politically influence the judiciary, for example through bribes or attacks against judges, should be swiftly and publicly condemned, both domestically and by other democratic governments.

4. Address the root causes of conflict in fragile states, and coordinate efforts to cut financial and material support for nonstate armed groups.

Nonstate armed groups—including rebel or partisan militias, terrorists, and criminal organizations—are responsible for much of the violence around the world, often fueling brutal wars, propping up authoritarian regimes, and co-opting democratic institutions. Because traditional diplomatic solutions to armed conflict are ill-suited to such groups, the democratic community must think creatively about how to increase security in the places where they operate.

- **Multilateral sanctions should be imposed on individuals and entities affiliated with nonstate armed groups, and democracies should work to counter any attempts to evade the restrictions.** More proactive collaboration among democratic allies is needed to dismantle the networks that sustain armed groups, whether through direct financial, material, or technological support or through illicit markets for goods and services. Because these groups often create shell corporations, stash money in accounts belonging to associates, and collaborate with authoritarian regimes, democratic governments and the private sector should work together with civil society and independent journalists to map their political and business contacts and close legal loopholes to improve compliance and enforcement. In addition to limiting nonstate armed groups' resources, coordinated and targeted public sanctions can be a powerful tool for deterrence and accountability, particularly in conflict-affected countries where the local legal system is unlikely to provide justice. Democratic governments and donors should also continue to support avenues for accountability and independent fact-finding missions to document human rights abuses perpetrated by nonstate armed groups and other actors.
- **International partners can help prevent violence and shrink the operating space for nonstate armed groups by mitigating the economic and political drivers of instability.** Too often, the international community is merely reacting to violent conflicts and extremism and working to limit their humanitarian impacts. Once these problems have erupted, the costs of containment and de-escalation can be significant. Democratic governments and donors should therefore seek to address the root causes of instability in fragile states. Long-term stabilization efforts will require improvements in the relationship between state and society, investment in anticorruption mechanisms, more effective service delivery, professionalization of security forces, reformed judicial institutions that are able to deliver justice for conflict-related abuses, support for civil society organizations and their inclusion in public decision-making, and backing for independent media in the face of false information that can threaten peace and security. Such measures will allow state authorities to more readily fill gaps in governance that might otherwise be exploited by nonstate armed groups.
- **All actors must uphold and abide by international law when responding to violence and conflict.** States have a right to defend themselves and a duty to respond to violence by nonstate armed groups, but they also have good reasons to adhere to international law when doing so. The rule of law is essential to democracy and forms the foundation of international peace. War crimes and human rights violations only provoke further violence, in part by alienating the civilian populations from which nonstate armed groups seek to recruit. Democratic governments should hold state and nonstate perpetrators accountable for abuses through national and international courts, sanctions, and other punitive measures. International partners that provide military and security assistance to state armed forces should assess, as part of their ethical due diligence efforts, whether such resources are being used to carry out human rights abuses. Similarly, all parties to a conflict—whether state or nonstate actors—should allow for the safe delivery of humanitarian aid directly to civilians in need. Humanitarian aid saves lives and is vital for stabilizing conflict-affected environments, but it is often captured by authoritarian or nonstate combatants and used to serve their narrow interests. Any improper obstruction, diversion, or theft of aid should be met with strong condemnation and punitive sanctions by democratic governments. Under international law, neither foreign nor local aid workers should ever be targets in a conflict, and their rights must be respected. Donors should support and engage with local civil society organizations, as they are often the first to provide help to residents, have deep experience distributing aid in their countries, and are best positioned to understand the unique needs of vulnerable local populations.

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