

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2018



This report was made possible by the generous support of the Smith Richardson Foundation and the Lilly Endowment. Freedom House also gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the Reed Foundation, the Achelis & Bodman Foundation, David L. Fogel, and additional private contributors who wish to remain anonymous.

# Freedom in the World 2018

## Table of Contents

<b>Democracy in Crisis</b>	<b>1</b>
Methodology	2
The United States in decline	3
Mugabe’s fall from power in Zimbabwe	4
Ethnic cleansing in Myanmar	5
Worst of the Worst	6
Turkey moves to ‘Not Free’	7
International pressure helps end decades of oppression in The Gambia	7
An Arab success story founders in Tunisia	8
Countries to Watch in 2018	9
<b>Regional Trends</b>	<b>11</b>
<b><i>Freedom in the World 2018 Map</i></b>	<b>12</b>
<b><i>Freedom in the World 2018 Status Changes</i></b>	<b>18</b>
<b><i>Freedom in the World 2018 Trend Arrows</i></b>	<b>19</b>

The following people were instrumental in the writing of this booklet: Elen Aghekyan, Rukmani Bhatia, Jennifer Dunham, Shannon O’Toole, Arch Puddington, Sarah Repucci, Tyler Roylance, and Vanessa Tucker.

This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2018 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](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

### ON THE COVER

---

Cover image by KAL.

## Democracy in Crisis

by Michael J. Abramowitz

Political rights and civil liberties around the world deteriorated to their lowest point in more than a decade in 2017, extending a period characterized by emboldened autocrats, beleaguered democracies, and the United States' withdrawal from its leadership role in the global struggle for human freedom.

Democracy is in crisis. The values it embodies—particularly the right to choose leaders in free and fair elections, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—are under assault and in retreat globally.

A quarter-century ago, at the end of the Cold War, it appeared that totalitarianism had at last been vanquished and liberal democracy had won the great ideological battle of the 20th century.

Today, it is democracy that finds itself battered and weakened. For the 12th consecutive year, according to *Freedom in the World*, countries that suffered democratic setbacks outnumbered those that registered gains. States that a decade ago seemed like promising success stories—Turkey and Hungary, for example—are sliding into authoritarian rule. The military in Myanmar, which began a limited democratic opening in 2010, executed a shocking campaign of ethnic cleansing in 2017 and rebuffed international criticism of its actions. Meanwhile, the world's most powerful democracies are mired in seemingly intractable problems at home, including social and economic disparities, partisan fragmentation, terrorist attacks, and an influx of refugees that has strained alliances and increased fears of the "other."

The challenges within democratic states have fueled the rise of populist leaders who appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment and give short shrift to fundamental

civil and political liberties. Right-wing populists gained votes and parliamentary seats in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria during 2017. While they were kept out of government in all but Austria, their success at the polls helped to weaken established parties on both the right and left. Centrist newcomer Emmanuel Macron handily won the French presidency, but in Germany and the Netherlands, mainstream parties struggled to create stable governing coalitions.

Perhaps worst of all, and most worrisome for the future, young people, who have little memory of the long struggles against fascism and communism, may be losing faith and interest in the democratic project. The very idea of democracy and its promotion has been tarnished among many, contributing to a dangerous apathy.

The retreat of democracies is troubling enough. Yet at the same time, the world's leading autocracies, China and Russia, have seized the opportunity not only to step up internal repression but also to export their malign influence to other countries, which are increasingly copying their behavior and adopting their disdain for democracy. A confident Chinese president Xi Jinping recently proclaimed that China is "blazing a new trail" for developing countries to follow. It is a path that includes politicized courts, intolerance for dissent, and predetermined elections.

The spread of antidemocratic practices around the

### Freedom in the World methodology

*Freedom in the World 2018* evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 14 territories during calendar year 2017. 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. These scores are used to determine two numerical ratings, for political rights and civil liberties, with a rating of 1 representing the most free conditions and 7 the least free. A country or territory's political rights and civil liberties ratings then determine whether it has an overall status of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

For complete information on the methodology, visit <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2018/methodology>.

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.

world is not merely a setback for fundamental freedoms. It poses economic and security risks. When more countries are free, all countries—including the United States—are safer and more prosperous. When more countries are autocratic and repressive, treaties and alliances crumble, nations and entire regions become unstable, and violent extremists have greater room to operate.

Democratic governments allow people to help set the rules to which all must adhere, and have a say in the direction of their lives and work. This fosters a broader respect for peace, fair play, and compromise. Autocrats impose arbitrary rules on their citizens while

ignoring all constraints themselves, spurring a vicious circle of abuse and radicalization.

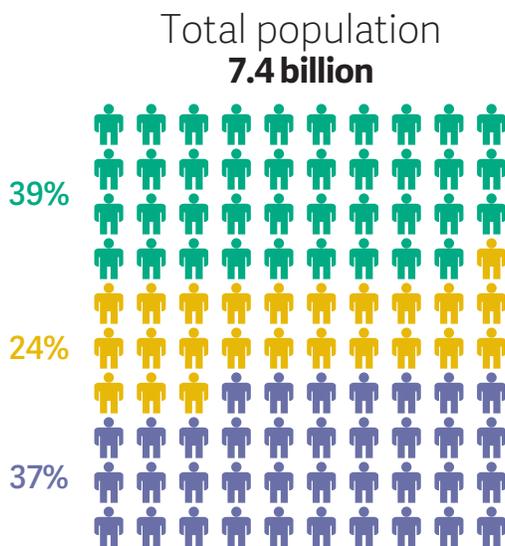
### The United States accelerates its withdrawal from the democracy struggle

A long list of troubling developments around the world contributed to the global decline in 2017, but perhaps most striking was the accelerating withdrawal of the United States from its historical commitment to promoting and supporting democracy. The potent challenge from authoritarian regimes made the United States' abdication of its traditional role all the more important.

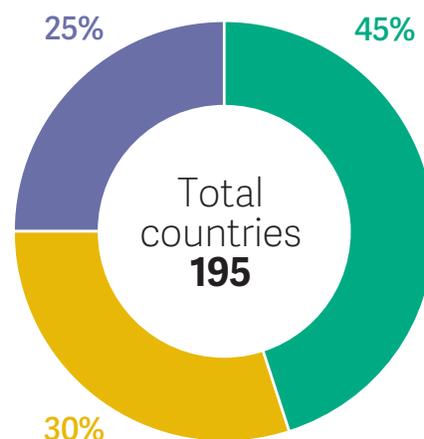
Despite the U.S. government's mistakes—and there



GLOBAL: STATUS BY POPULATION



GLOBAL: STATUS BY COUNTRY



## The United States in decline

Freedom House has tracked a slow decline in political rights and civil liberties in the United States for the past seven years. Prominent concerns have included the influence of money in politics, legislative dysfunction, and severe inequalities in the criminal justice system.

In 2017, however, the deterioration accelerated. The United States lost three points on the 100-point scale used by *Freedom in the World* due to:

- growing evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election campaign and a lack of action by the Trump administration to prevent a reoccurrence of such meddling;
- violations of basic ethical standards by the new administration, including the president's failure to divest himself of his business empire, his hiring of family members as senior advisers, and his appointment of cabinet members and other

senior officials despite apparent conflicts of interest; and

- a reduction in government transparency, including an unusual pattern of false statements by the administration, the president's failure to disclose basic information such as his personal tax data, policy and other decisions made without meaningful input from relevant agencies and officials, and the removal of information on issues of public interest from government websites for political or ideological reasons.

The United States now receives a score of 86 out of 100 points. While this places it below other major democracies such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, it is still firmly in the Free category. Nevertheless, a three-point decline in a single year is rare for an established democracy. In particular, Freedom House is closely watching President Trump's verbal attacks on the press and their potential impact on the public's access to free and independent news media.

have been many—the American people and their leaders have generally understood that standing up for the rights of others is both a moral imperative and beneficial to themselves. But two long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and a global recession soured the public on extensive international engagement, and the perceived link between democracy promotion on the one hand and military interventions and financial costs on the other has had a lasting impact.

The Obama administration continued to defend democratic ideals in its foreign policy statements, but its actions often fell short, reflecting a reduced estimation of the United States' ability to influence world events and of the American public's willingness to back such efforts.

In 2017, however, the Trump administration made explicit—in both words and actions—its intention to cast off principles that have guided U.S. policy and formed the basis for American leadership over the past seven decades.

President Trump's "America First" slogan, originally coined by isolationists seeking to block U.S. involvement in the war against fascism, targeted traditional

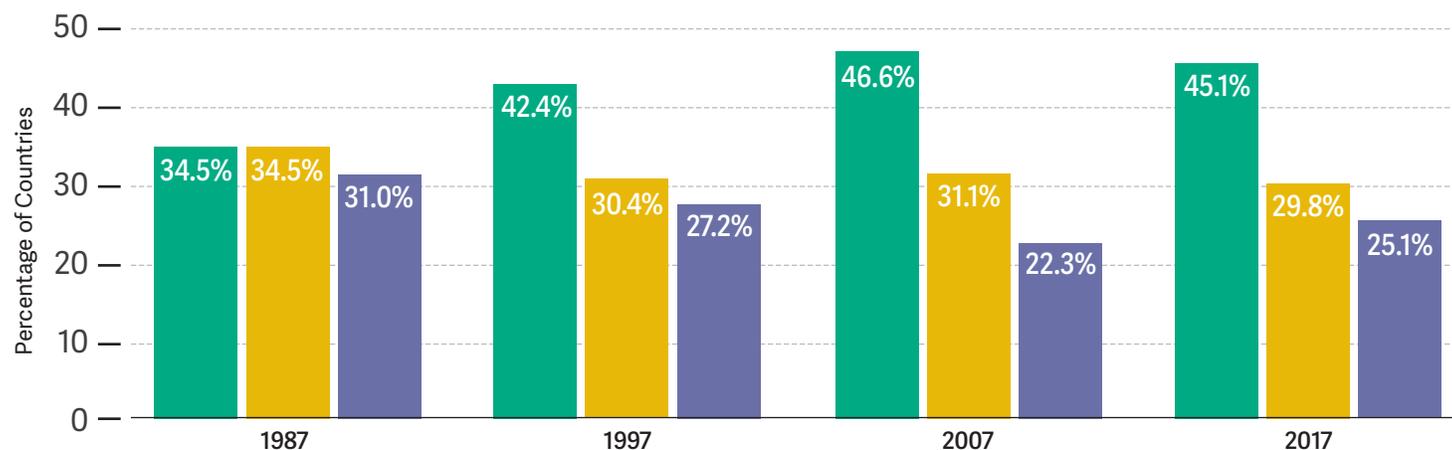
notions of collective global security and mutually beneficial trade. The administration's hostility and skepticism toward binding international agreements on the environment, arms control, and other topics confirmed that a reorientation was taking shape.

Even when he chose to acknowledge America's treaty alliances with fellow democracies, the president spoke of cultural or civilizational ties rather than shared recognition of universal rights; his trips abroad rarely featured any mention of the word "democracy." Indeed, the American leader expressed feelings of admiration and even personal friendship for some of the world's most loathsome strongmen and dictators.

This marks a sharp break from other U.S. presidents in the postwar period, who cooperated with certain authoritarian regimes for strategic reasons but never wavered from a commitment to democracy as the best form of government and the animating force behind American foreign policy. It also reflects an inability—or unwillingness—by the United States to lead democracies in effectively confronting the growing threat from Russia and China, and from the other states that have come to emulate their authoritarian approach.

## FREEDOM IN THE BALANCE

After years of major gains, the share of Free countries has declined over the past decade, while the share of Not Free countries has risen.



### Democratic norms erode within the United States

The past year brought further, faster erosion of America's own democratic standards than at any other time in memory, damaging its international credibility as a champion of good governance and human rights.

The United States has experienced a series of setbacks in the conduct of elections and criminal justice over the past decade—under leadership from both major political parties—but in 2017 its core institutions were attacked by an administration that rejects established norms of ethical conduct across many fields of activity. President Trump himself has mingled the concerns of his business empire with his role as president, appointed family members to his senior staff, filled other high positions with lobbyists and representatives of special interests, and refused to abide

by disclosure and transparency practices observed by his predecessors.

The president has also lambasted and threatened the media—including sharp jabs at individual journalists—for challenging his routinely false statements, spoken disdainfully of judges who blocked his decisions, and attacked the professional staff of law enforcement and intelligence agencies. He signals contempt for Muslims and Latin American immigrants and singles out some African Americans for vitriolic criticism. He pardoned a sheriff convicted of ignoring federal court orders to halt racially discriminatory policies and issued an executive order restricting travel to the United States from a group of Muslim-majority countries after making a campaign promise to ban all foreign Muslims from the United States. And at a time when millions around the world have been forced to

### Mugabe's fall from power in Zimbabwe

The process by which elected president Robert Mugabe was compelled to resign in November under pressure from the military pushed Zimbabwe over the threshold from Partly Free to Not Free in *Freedom in the World 2018*. This downgrade may seem counterintuitive given Mugabe's long and often harsh rule, the sudden termination of which prompted celebration in the streets. But it was the regime's years of repression of the opposition, the media, and civil society, and its high levels of corruption and disregard for the rule of law, that

placed Zimbabwe at the tipping point between Not Free and Partly Free prior to 2017.

The next year will be crucial for Zimbabwe, as general elections are expected. It remains to be seen whether newly installed president Emmerson Mnangagwa—a stalwart of the ruling party—is prepared make much-needed reforms that would enable free elections, or will simply retain the uneven playing field that had allowed Mugabe to remain in power since 1980.

## Ethnic cleansing in Myanmar

Myanmar has a long history of persecuting the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim community of more than a million people living in western Rakhine State. In August 2017, the military reacted to attacks from a small armed faction of the Rohingya by launching a violent campaign against civilians that many in the international community have described as ethnic cleansing. Over 600,000 Rohingya have sought refuge in neighboring Bangladesh, reporting widespread arson, rape, and mass murder by military personnel.

These horrific events underscored how far Myanmar still is from becoming a democracy. In 2015, voters elected a civilian leadership after decades of military rule. However, under a hybrid political system created by the outgoing regime, the military retains immense power and autonomy. It continues to use brutal tactics to fight multiple ethnic insurgencies, and its campaign in Rakhine State is supported by radical Buddhist leaders who portray the Rohingya as a menace to national unity and security.

flee war, terrorism, and ethnic cleansing, President Trump moved to implement major reductions in the number of legal immigrants and refugees that the United States would accept.

The president's behavior stems in part from a frustration with the country's democratic checks and balances, including the independent courts, a coequal legislative branch, the free press, and an active civil society. These institutions remained fairly resilient in 2017, but the administration's statements and actions could ultimately leave them weakened, with serious consequences for the health of U.S. democracy and America's role in the world.

## China and Russia expand their antidemocratic influence

While the United States and other democratic powers grappled with domestic problems and argued about foreign policy priorities, the world's leading autocracies—Russia and China—continued to make headway. Moscow and Beijing are single-minded in their identification of democracy as a threat to their oppressive regimes, and they work relentlessly, with increasing sophistication, to undermine its institutions and cripple its principal advocates.

The eventual outcome of these trends, if unchecked, is obvious. The replacement of global democratic norms with authoritarian practices will mean more elections in which the incumbent's victory is a foregone conclusion. It will mean a media landscape dominated by propaganda mouthpieces that marginalize the opposition while presenting the leader as omniscient, strong, and devoted to national aggrandizement. It will

mean state control over the internet and social media through both censorship and active manipulation that promotes the regime's message while confusing users with lies and fakery. And it will mean more corruption, injustice, and impunity for state abuses.

Already, Vladimir Putin's Russia has carried out disinformation campaigns before elections in countries including the United States, France, and Germany, cultivated ties to xenophobic political parties across Europe, threatened or invaded its closest neighbors, and served as an alternative source of military aid for Middle Eastern dictatorships. Its chief goal is to disrupt democratic states and fracture the institutions—such as the European Union—that bind them together.

Beijing has even greater ambitions—and the resources to achieve them. It has built up a propaganda and censorship apparatus with global reach, used economic and other ties to influence democracies like Australia and New Zealand, compelled various countries to repatriate Chinese citizens seeking refuge abroad, and provided diplomatic and material support to repressive governments from Southeast Asia to Africa. Moscow often plays the role of spoiler, bolstering its position by undercutting its adversaries, but the scope and depth of Beijing's activities show that the Chinese regime aspires to truly global leadership.

## Corrupt and repressive states threaten global stability

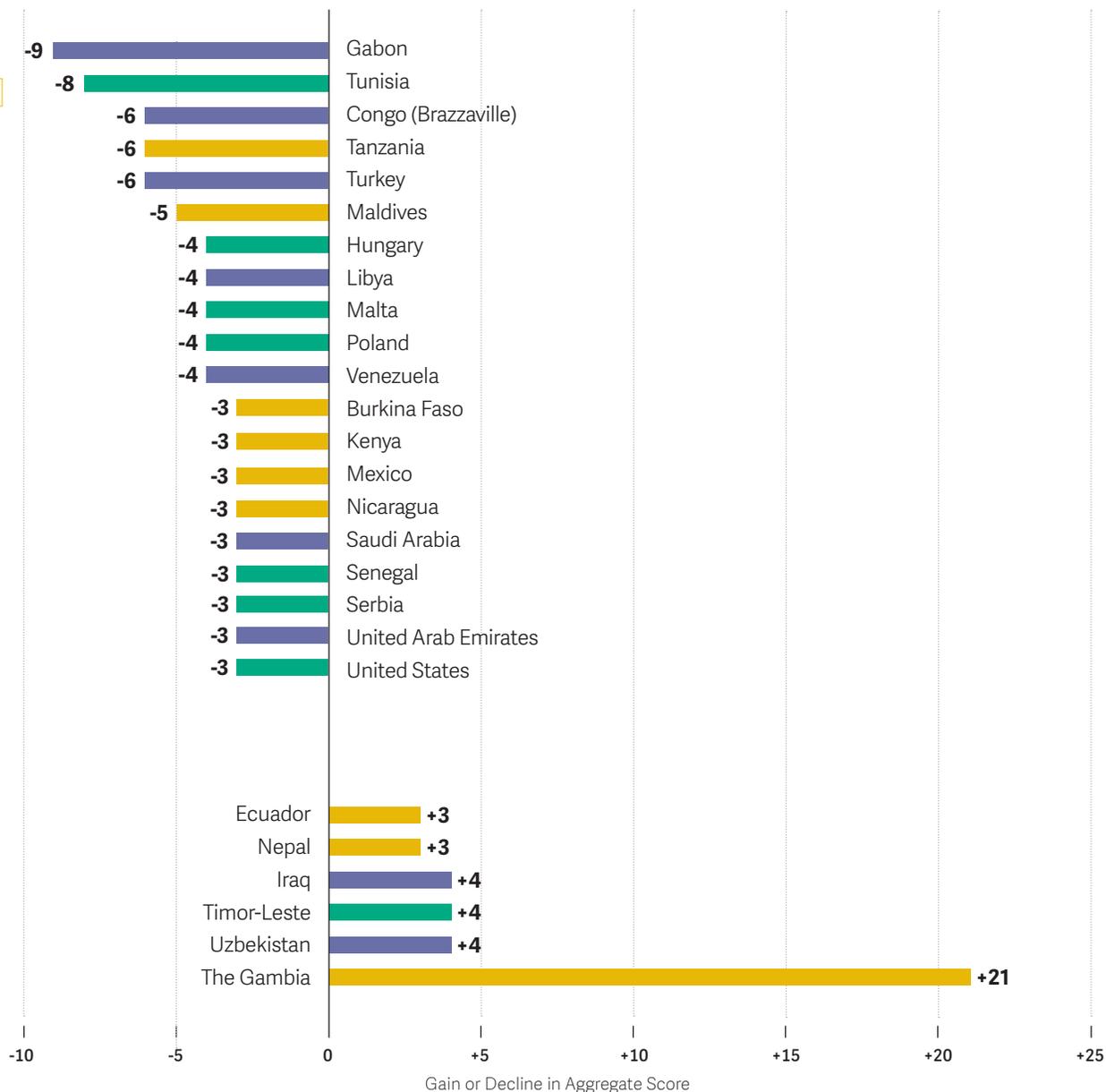
The past year provided ample evidence that undemocratic rule itself can be catastrophic for regional and global stability, with or without active interference from major powers like Russia and China.

### LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2017

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



Note: This chart shows aggregate score changes of 3 or more points.



### Worst of the Worst

Of the 49 countries designated as Not Free, the following 12 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate score
Syria	-1
South Sudan	2
Eritrea	3
North Korea	3

Country	Aggregate score
Turkmenistan	4
Equatorial Guinea	7
Saudi Arabia	7
Somalia	7
Uzbekistan	7
Sudan	8
Central African Republic	9
Libya	9

## Turkey moves to ‘Not Free’

Turkey’s passage over the threshold from Partly Free to Not Free is the culmination of a long and accelerating slide in *Freedom in the World*. The country’s score has been in free fall since 2014 due to an escalating series of assaults on the press, social media users, protesters, political parties, the judiciary, and the electoral system, as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan fights to impose personalized control over the state and society in a deteriorating domestic and regional security environment.

Erdoğan has pushed out his rivals and former allies within the ruling party, reshaped media ownership to fit his needs, and rammed through

an unpopular constitutional referendum to create a “super-presidential” system without meaningful checks and balances. His response to the July 2016 coup attempt has become a sprawling witch hunt, resulting in the arrest of some 60,000 people, the closure of over 160 media outlets, and the imprisonment of over 150 journalists. The leaders of the third-largest party in the parliament are in prison, and nearly 100 mayors across the country have been replaced through emergency measures or political pressure from the president. The government has even pressed its crackdown beyond Turkey’s borders, triggering a flood of Interpol “red notice” requests to detain critics abroad, among other effects.

In Myanmar, the politically dominant military conducted a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Muslim Rohingya minority, enabled by diplomatic cover from China and an impotent response from the rest of the international community. Some 600,000 people have been pushed out, while thousands of others are thought to have been killed. The refugees have strained the resources of an already fragile Bangladesh, and Islamist militants have sought to adopt the Rohingya cause as a new rallying point for violent struggle.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan broadened

and intensified the crackdown on his perceived opponents that began after a failed 2016 coup attempt. In addition to its dire consequences for detained Turkish citizens, shuttered media outlets, and seized businesses, the chaotic purge has become intertwined with an offensive against the Kurdish minority, which in turn has fueled Turkey’s diplomatic and military interventions in neighboring Syria and Iraq.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, authoritarian rulers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt

## International pressure helps end decades of oppression in The Gambia

The Gambia secured one of the largest-ever improvements in *Freedom in the World* for 2017, registering a 21-point score increase and moving from Not Free to Partly Free. For more than two decades, the country had suffered under the oppressive rule of President Yahya Jammeh, who first took power in a military coup. Under his regime, government opponents, independent journalists, and rights activists faced intimidation, arbitrary arrest, torture, and forced disappearance.

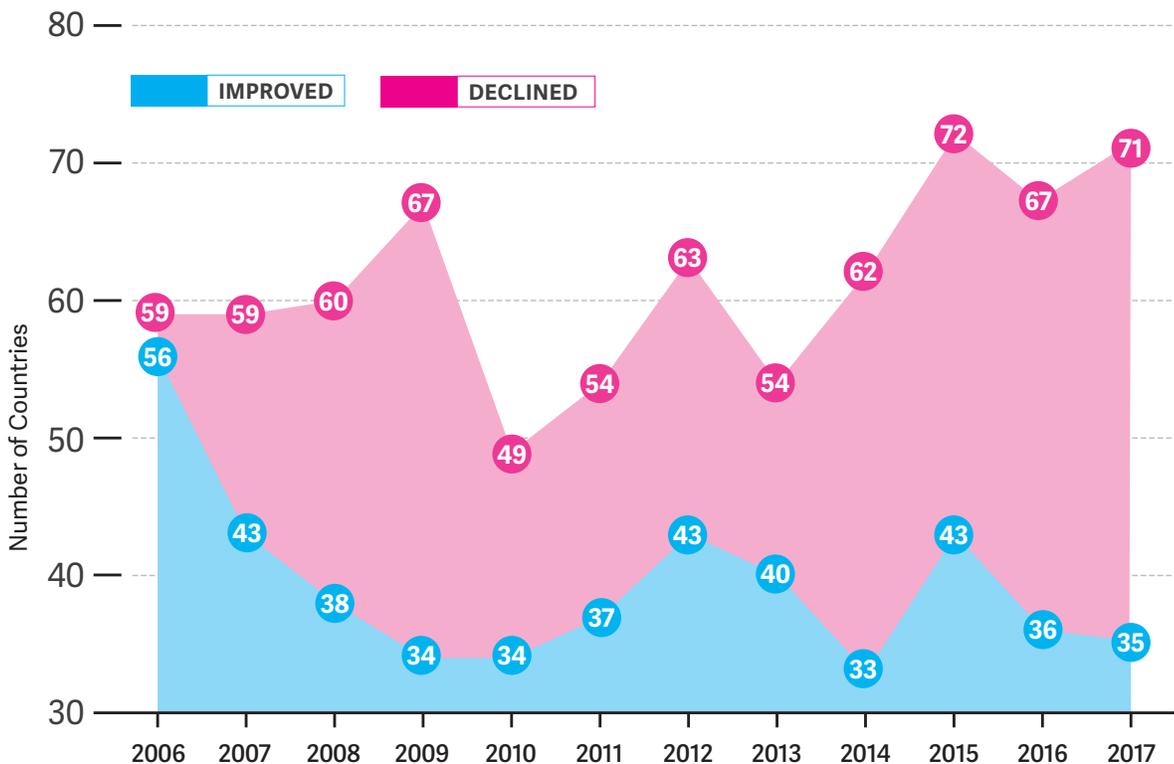
Although the country’s past elections had been marred by violence and rigging, the December 2016 presidential vote resulted in a surprise victory for opposition candidate Adama Barrow. For weeks, Jammeh refused to concede, but he relented after the regional body ECOWAS sent

in troops in January 2017. While much-needed institutional reforms still lie ahead, fundamental freedoms have improved under Barrow’s government, and successful legislative elections were held in April. Among other positive developments, exiled journalists and activists returned, political prisoners were released, ministers declared their assets to an ombudsman, the press union began work on media-sector reform, and arrest warrants were issued for suspects in the 2004 murder of journalist Deyda Hydara.

The year’s developments illustrated the decisive value of robust and well-timed international support for democratic transitions, though long-term advice and incentives will be necessary to ensure that good governance takes root.

**12 YEARS OF DECLINE**

Countries with net declines in aggregate score have outnumbered those with gains for each of the past 12 years.



asserted their interests in reckless ways that perpetuated long-running conflicts in Libya and Yemen and initiated a sudden attempt to blockade Qatar, a hub of international trade and transportation. Their similarly repressive archrival, Iran, played its own part in the region's conflicts, overseeing militia networks that stretched from Lebanon to Afghanistan. Prom-

ises of reform from a powerful new crown prince in Saudi Arabia added an unexpected variable in a region that has long resisted greater openness, though his nascent social and economic changes were accompanied by hundreds of arbitrary arrests and aggressive moves against potential rivals, and he showed no inclination to open the political system.

**An Arab success story founders in Tunisia**

Sharp democratic declines in Tunisia in 2017 threatened to downgrade the only country in the Arab world with a status of Free. Following the ouster of its longtime dictator in 2011, which launched the Arab Spring, Tunisian political factions and civil society worked together to draft a democratic constitution and hold free elections, moving the country from Not Free to Free in just four years. However, the events of the past year indicate that while the international community was quick to praise the country's achievements, it did not provide enough sustained support and attention. Without careful development and consolidation, the new democra-

cy may not withstand pressure from a resurgent old guard that was never fully dismantled.

Looming problems in 2017 included the continued postponement of subnational elections, the ability of power brokers from the old regime to protect their interests through new legislation, failure to create and fully fund independent bodies called for in the constitution, executive domination of the legislature, and intimidation of the media. If Tunisia continues on its current path, the hard-won gains of 2011 could disappear, and democracy will lose its foothold in a repressive and unstable region.

The humanitarian crisis produced in Venezuela by President Nicolás Maduro's determination to stay in power continued to drive residents to seek refuge in neighboring countries. But other Latin American states also proved problematic: Brazil's sprawling corruption investigations implicated leaders across the region. Mexico's embattled administration resisted reforms that would help address rampant graft, organized crime, and a crumbling justice system.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, incumbent rulers' ongoing use of violence to flout term limits helped to generate internal displacement and refugees. A

deeply flawed electoral process in Kenya contributed to political violence there, while South Sudan's leaders chose to press on with a bloody civil war rather than make peace and face a long-overdue reckoning with voters.

North Korea presented one of the most glaring threats to world peace, aggressively building up its nuclear arsenal in an attempt to fortify an exceptionally oppressive and criminal regime.

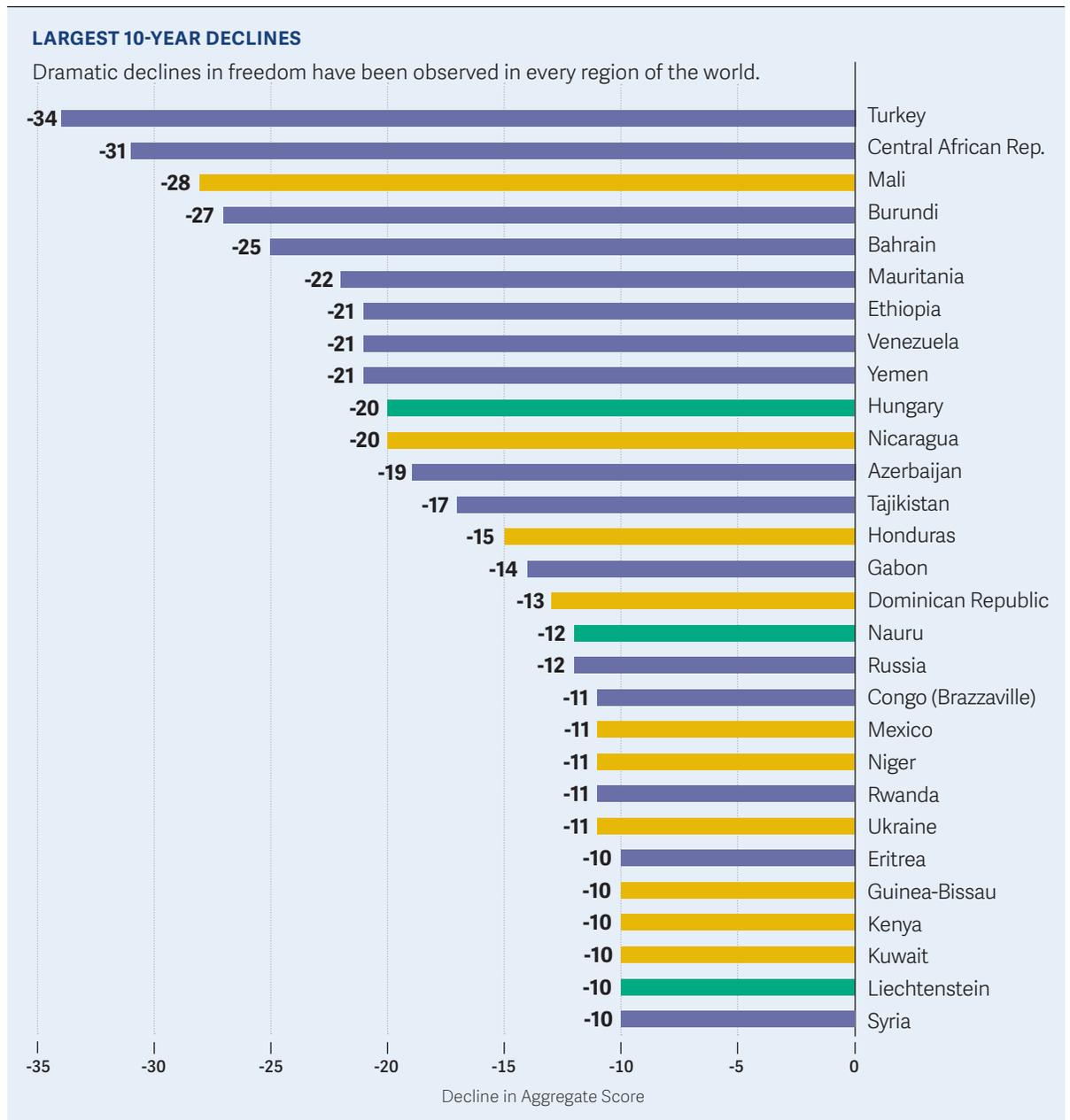
### Freedom in one country depends on freedom for all

Democracies generally remain the world's wealthiest so-

## Countries to Watch in 2018

The following countries are among those that may be approaching important turning points in their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny during the coming year.

- **Afghanistan:** Opposition alliances are crystallizing ahead of long-overdue parliamentary elections, but preparations for the polls have been lacking, and it is uncertain whether they will be held as planned in 2018.
- **Angola:** Newly elected president João Lourenço moved to weaken the control of his predecessor's family in 2017, but it remains to be seen whether he will make a serious effort to stem endemic corruption or ease restrictions on politics, the media, and civil society.
- **Georgia:** The ruling Georgian Dream party recently pushed through constitutional amendments that—combined with the financial backing of its reclusive billionaire patron—will make an effective challenge by the fractured opposition in future elections even more unlikely, potentially cementing the party's control for years to come.
- **Iraq:** Improved security has helped create space for competition among newly registered parties and candidates ahead of the 2018 elections, which will test the resilience of the country's political system.
- **Macedonia:** A democratically elected, ethnically inclusive government is seeking to root out corruption and other systemic abuses that grew worse under its scandal-plagued predecessor, and it could even resolve the lingering "name dispute" with Greece that has impeded the country's path toward EU membership.
- **Mexico:** The July 2018 general elections will serve as a referendum on an administration that has failed to curb rampant violence and corruption, and has become increasingly hostile toward independent media and civil society activists.
- **Saudi Arabia:** Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's controversial reform program is likely to cause even more upheaval in Saudi government and society, as small gains in social freedoms and attempts to attract foreign investors go hand in hand with attempts to quash dissent and fight off perceived opponents.
- **South Africa:** Under a new leadership elected in December, the ruling African National Congress will be under pressure to clean up its image—which has been sullied by corrupt former party leader and current national president Jacob Zuma—ahead of general elections in 2019.
- **United States:** The media and the judiciary—both of which have a long history of independence—face acute pressure from the Trump administration, whose smears threaten to undermine their legitimacy.
- **Uzbekistan:** The new government has taken tentative steps toward greater openness and international engagement, but lasting change in one of the world's most repressive political systems will require sustained international attention as well as support for independent voices in the country's media and civil society.



cieties, the most open to new ideas and opportunities, the least corrupt, and the most protective of individual liberties. When people around the globe are asked about their preferred political conditions, they embrace democracy's ideals: honest elections, free speech, accountable government, and effective legal constraints on the police, military, and other institutions of authority.

In the 21st century, however, it is increasingly difficult to create and sustain these conditions in one country while ignoring them in another. The autocratic regimes in Russia and China clearly recognize that to maintain power at home, they must squelch open debate, pursue dissidents, and compromise rules-based institutions be-

yond their borders. The citizens and leaders of democracies must now recognize that the reverse is also true: To maintain their own freedoms, they must defend the rights of their counterparts in all countries. The reality of globalization is that our fates are interlinked.

In August 1968, when Soviet tanks entered Czechoslovakia to put down the Prague Spring, a small group of dissidents gathered in Red Square in Moscow and unfurled a banner that read, "For your freedom and ours." Almost 50 years later, it is this spirit of transnational democratic solidarity and defiance in the face of autocracy that we must summon and revive.

# Regional Trends

## Americas

### Gains and declines show value of electoral turnover

Despite the decline in democracy worldwide in 2017—and Venezuela’s continued descent into dictatorship and humanitarian crisis—the Americas region displayed some signs of resilience.

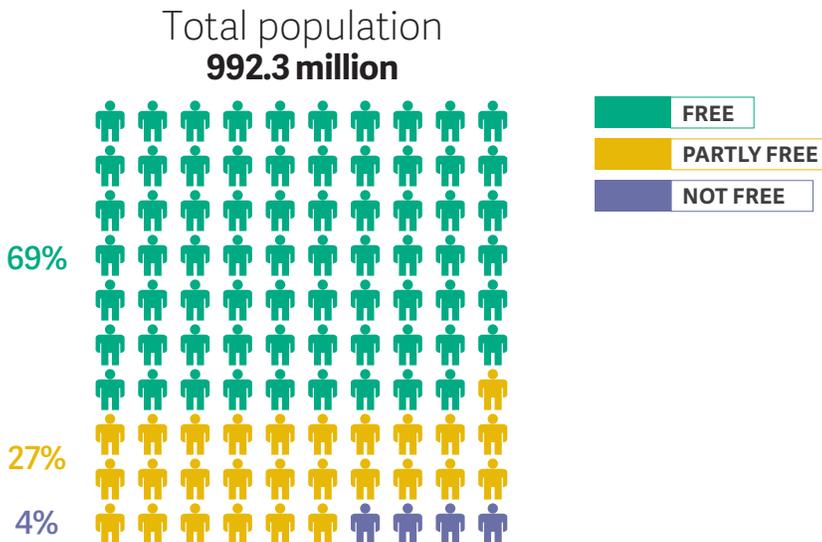
Under new president Lenín Moreno, Ecuador turned away from the personalized and often repressive rule of his predecessor, Rafael Correa. Moreno has eased pressure on the media, promoted greater engagement with civil society, proposed the restoration of term limits, and supported anticorruption efforts, including a case against his own vice president. Moreno had been Correa’s chosen successor, but his unexpectedly reformist stance once again demonstrated the potential for regular elections and transfers of power to disrupt authoritarian entrenchment.

Meanwhile, under a new administration that took office in late 2015, Argentines benefited from a freer press as part of the country’s recovery from the authoritarian tendencies of former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. In Colombia, more citizens could enjoy basic due process rights as the government implemented reforms to limit pretrial detention and continued to expand its territorial control under a 2016 peace agreement with left-wing rebels.

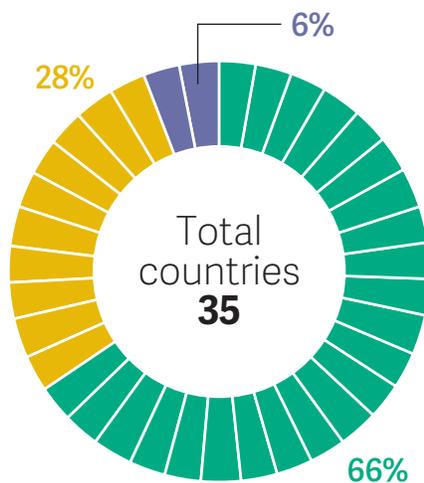
Nevertheless, declines outpaced gains in the region as a whole in 2017. In Honduras, after an early presidential vote count favored the opposition candidate, a belatedly updated total handed victory to the incumbent, prompting protests, curfews, and calls for a new election. In Bolivia, the constitutional court—which had been elected through a highly politicized process—struck down term limits that would have prevented incumbent leader Evo Morales from seeking reelection. Voters had rejected the lifting of term limits in a 2016 referendum, and international observers called the court’s reasoning a distortion of human rights law.

Nicaragua carried out deeply flawed municipal elections that favored the party of President Daniel

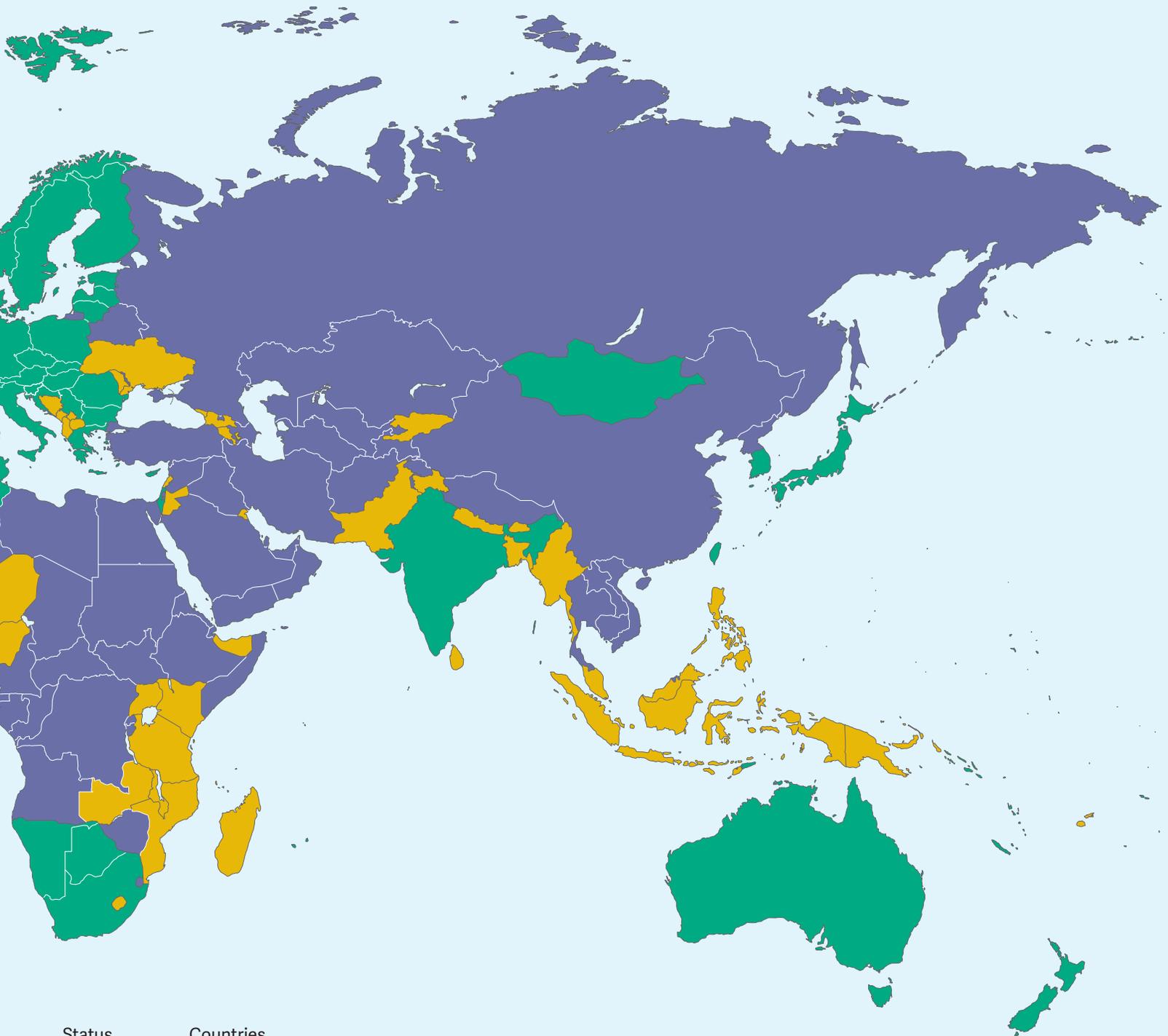
AMERICAS: STATUS BY POPULATION



AMERICAS: STATUS BY COUNTRY







Status	Countries
FREE	88
PARTLY FREE	58
NOT FREE	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>

*Freedom in the World 2018* assessed 195 countries around the globe.

Ortega, and the government enacted judicial reforms that further centralized state authority and shifted power from juries to judges. Separately, Mexico was shaken by new revelations of extensive state surveillance aimed at journalists and civil society activists who threatened to expose government corruption and other wrongdoing.

## Asia-Pacific

### Antidemocratic forces on the march

Repressive regimes in Asia continued to consolidate their power in 2017, while marginalized communities faced dire new threats.

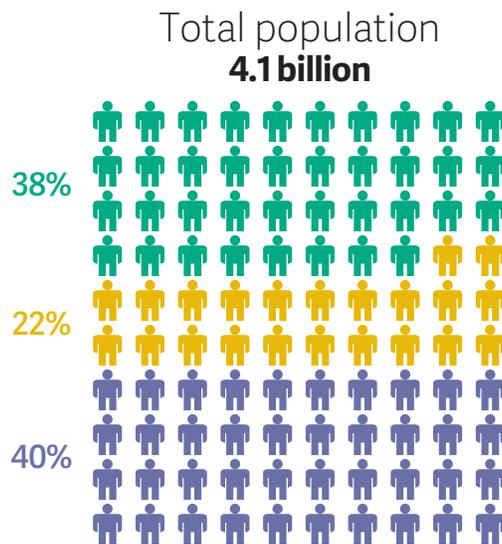
Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen oversaw a decisive crackdown on the country's beleaguered opposition and press corps as his Cambodian People's Party prepared for national elections in 2018. The politicized Supreme Court dissolved the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party, and party leader Kem Sokha was charged with treason. In a series of blows to free expression, the authorities shuttered the independent *Cambodia Daily*, pushed several radio stations off the air, and announced that sharing criticism of the government on social media was a crime.

The Communist Party leadership in Beijing exercised ever-greater influence in Hong Kong as it attempted to stamp out growing public support for local self-determination. Four prodemocracy lawmakers were expelled from the legislature on the grounds that their oaths of office were "insincere," making it easier for progovernment forces to pass major legislation and rules changes. In addition, the government obtained harsher sentences against three prominent protest leaders, and the Chinese legislature annexed a law criminalizing disrespect of the national anthem—which is often booed by Hong Kong soccer fans—to the territory's Basic Law, effectively compelling the local legislature to draft a matching measure.

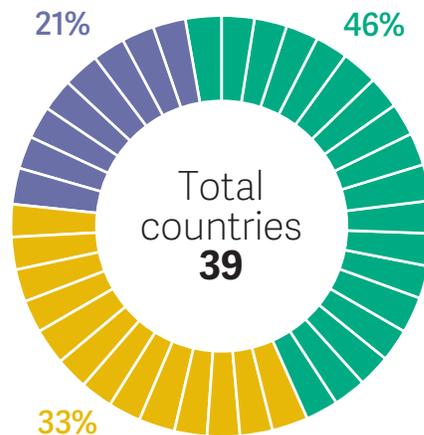
In Myanmar, the military's brutal campaign of rape, mutilation, and slaughter aimed at the Rohingya minority forced over 600,000 Rohingya to flee the country. The crisis, and the civilian leadership's failure to stop it, underscored severe flaws in the country's hybrid political system, which grants the military enormous autonomy and political power.

The Maldives suffered from acute pressure on

#### ASIA-PACIFIC: STATUS BY POPULATION



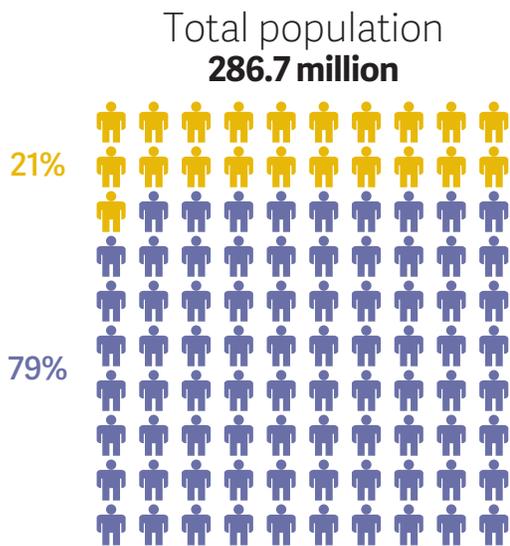
#### ASIA-PACIFIC: STATUS BY COUNTRY



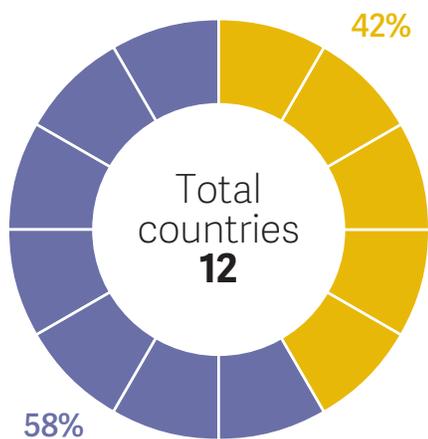
freedom of speech and dissent in 2017. The murder of prominent liberal blogger Yameen Rasheed had a chilling effect, encouraging people to self-censor rather than speak out against religious extremism. Moreover, the military was used to block opposition efforts to remove the speaker of parliament, and a number of lawmakers were ousted for defecting from the ruling party.

In a bright spot for the region, Timor-Leste, one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia, conducted fair elections that led to a smooth transfer of power. The process helped to consolidate democratic development in the country and allowed new parties and younger politicians to gain seats in the parliament.

**EURASIA: STATUS BY POPULATION**



**EURASIA: STATUS BY COUNTRY**



**Eurasia**

**Some doors open as others close**

Observers have long speculated about the problems and opportunities posed by presidential succession in Central Asia, where a number of entrenched rulers have held office for decades. In Uzbekistan, speculation turned into cautious optimism in 2017, as the country’s new administration—formed following the 2016 death of longtime president Islam Karimov—took steps toward reform. Among other moves, the government ended forced labor in the annual cotton harvest for some segments of the population, and announced plans to lift the draconian exit-visa regime

and make the national currency fully convertible. The new administration has also granted more breathing room to civil society; some local groups reported a decrease in state harassment, and a Human Rights Watch delegation was allowed to enter Uzbekistan for the first time since 2010.

In other parts of the region, however, governments sought to stave off change. In Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, heavily flawed voting highlighted the continuing erosion of democratic norms surrounding elections. The dominant parties in both countries relied on harassment of the opposition, voter intimidation, and misuse of administrative resources to maintain a grip on power. In Armenia’s case, the blatant electoral misconduct stands at odds with the country’s pursuit of a closer relationship with the European Union, with which it signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement in November.

Perhaps the most alarming threats to democracy in the region involved authoritarian forces reaching across borders to punish their critics. Exiled Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was kidnapped in Tbilisi by men who allegedly spoke Georgian, then transported across the border to Azerbaijan, raising concerns that Georgian authorities were complicit in the abduction. In Ukraine, a prominent Chechen couple who were fierce opponents of Vladimir Putin and supported Ukraine in the Donbas conflict fell victim to an assassination attempt that killed one and injured the other. Numerous plots against politicians were also reported during the year, with Ukrainian authorities mostly pointing the finger at Russian security services.

**Europe**

**Right-wing populists win seats and reject democratic values**

Reverberations from the 2015–16 refugee crisis continued to fuel the rise of xenophobic, far-right parties, which gained ground in elections in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria.

Marine Le Pen, leader of France’s far-right National Front, defeated mainstream presidential candidates with her pledges to suspend immigration and hold a referendum on France’s EU membership, though she lost in the second round to centrist newcomer Emmanuel Macron. The Euroskeptic, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany became the first far-right

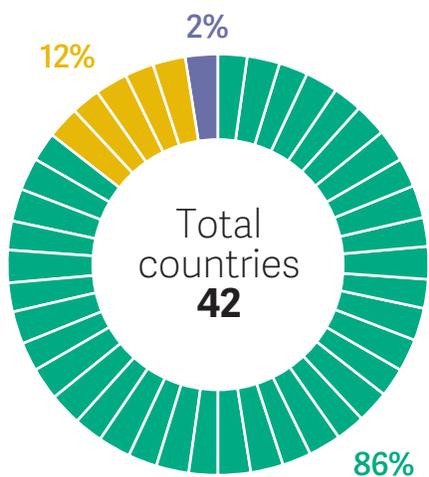


EUROPE: STATUS BY POPULATION

Total population  
618.1 million



EUROPE: STATUS BY COUNTRY



party to enter Germany's legislature since 1945, following a campaign in which its leaders demanded the deportation of "large numbers of refugees" and characterized Islam as incompatible with German identity. In Austria, the similarly Islamophobic Freedom Party finished third in parliamentary elections and entered a governing coalition headed by the conservative People's Party. In the Netherlands, the notoriously xenophobic Party for Freedom chipped away enough support from mainstream parties to finish second, becoming the parliament's primary opposition group.

In Hungary and Poland, populist leaders continued to

consolidate power by uprooting democratic institutions and intimidating critics in civil society. Smears of the opposition appeared in public media in both countries, and both passed laws designed to curb the activities of nongovernmental organizations. Poland's ruling party also pressed ahead with an effort to assert political control over the judiciary, adopting laws that will affect the Supreme Court, the local courts, and a council responsible for judicial appointments.

Events in the Western Balkans demonstrated a need for continued engagement in the region by major democracies. In Macedonia, mediation by Washington and Brussels helped resolve a years-long political crisis, paving the way for a new, democratically elected government. But in Serbia, EU leaders' tolerance of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian tendencies allowed him to further sideline the opposition and undermine what remains of the independent media after winning the country's presidency in April.

Middle East and North Africa

Authoritarian rule and instability reinforce one another

In a region ravaged by war and dictatorship, Tunisia has stood out for its successful transition to democratic rule after hosting the first Arab Spring uprising in 2011. In 2017, however, earlier signs of backsliding became far clearer: municipal elections were once again postponed, leaving unelected councils in place seven years after the revolution, and figures associated with the old regime increased their influence over the vulnerable political system, for example by securing passage of a new amnesty law despite strong public opposition. The extension of a two-year-old state of emergency also signaled the erosion of democratic order in Tunisia.

Tunisia's security situation has been undermined by lawlessness in neighboring Libya, where disputes between rival authorities in the east and west have led to political paralysis. Reports of modern-day slave markets were added to other abuses against refugees and migrants stranded in militia-run detention camps. Their captivity in Libya stems in part from an EU-led crackdown on human trafficking across the Mediterranean.

Libya's problems also pose a threat to Egypt. The authoritarian government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has allegedly supported the anti-Islamist

**MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:  
STATUS BY POPULATION**

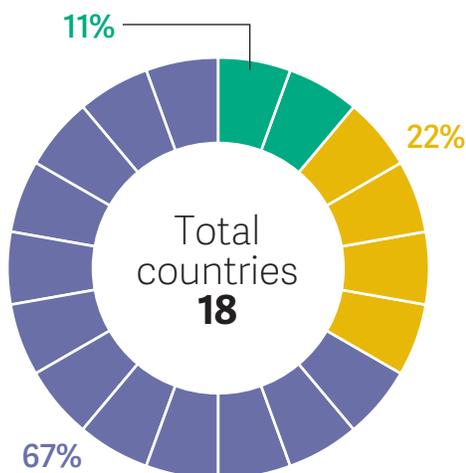
Total population  
**424.8 million**



and improved security has helped to create space for competition among newly registered parties and candidates ahead of the 2018 elections. IS also lost territory in Syria, but the repressive Assad regime gained ground, and civilians in areas captured from IS by U.S.-backed fighters faced widespread devastation and concealed explosives.

Yemen’s civil war churned on despite a late-year rift in the rebel alliance, leaving some three-quarters of the population in need of humanitarian aid. Small groups of war-weary protesters in Sanaa repeatedly turned out to demand the release of political prisoners and an international response aimed at ending the violence. The Saudi-led coalition supporting Yemen’s ousted government continued its indiscriminate bombing campaign, while in Saudi Arabia itself, Mohammed bin Salman worked to consolidate power after replacing the previous crown prince in June. Among other rapid and opaque decisions during the year, he arbitrarily detained hundreds of princes, officials, and businessmen under the pretense of an anticorruption campaign.

**MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:  
STATUS BY COUNTRY**



**Sub-Saharan Africa**

**New leaders from old parties may fail to bring reform**

New leaders replaced longtime incumbents in Angola and Zimbabwe in 2017, but their background in the ruling elite raised doubts about their promises of change.

The dramatic exit of President Robert Mugabe in late 2017 left the future of democracy in Zimbabwe uncertain. While his departure after nearly four decades in office was widely welcomed, he resigned under pressure from the military, and his successor, former vice president and ruling party stalwart Emmerson Mnangagwa, was a key member of Mugabe’s repressive regime.

In Angola, newly elected president João Lourenço began to dismantle the family-based power structure set up by his predecessor, José Eduardo dos Santos, who served as president for 38 years and was still head of the ruling party. In one of his first moves as head of state, Lourenço, a ruling party member who had served as dos Santos’s defense minister, fired the former leader’s daughter as chairwoman of the national oil company. It remained unclear, however, whether Lourenço would tackle corruption comprehensively or

campaign of the de facto government in eastern Libya in order to buttress its own floundering efforts to combat extremist violence, which has extended from the Sinai to touch all corners of Egypt. Rather than reforming its abusive security services and enlisting support from all segments of Egyptian society, however, the regime continued its repression of dissent in 2017 and adopted a restrictive new law designed to choke off international funding for nongovernmental organizations and provide legal cover for their arbitrary closure.

Elsewhere in the region, Iraqi forces declared victory over the Islamic State (IS) militant group in December,

## Freedom in the World 2018 Status Changes

 **The Gambia's** status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to the installation of newly elected president Adama Barrow into office in January and the holding of competitive legislative elections in April. Among other openings associated with the departure of former president Yahya Jammeh, exiled journalists and activists returned, political prisoners were released, ministers declared their assets to an ombudsman, and the press union began work on media-sector reform.

 **Timor-Leste's** status improved from Partly Free to Free due to fair elections that led to a smooth transfer of power and enabled new parties and candidates to enter the political system.

 **Turkey's** status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency, the mass replacement of elected mayors with government appointees, arbitrary prosecutions of rights activists and other perceived enemies of the state, and continued purges of state employees, all of which have left citizens hesitant to express their views on sensitive topics.

 **Uganda's** status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to the resilience of the media sector and the willingness of journalists, bloggers, and citizens to voice their opinions, though the political environment remained tightly restricted under the regime of long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni.

 **Zimbabwe's** status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the process by which elected president Robert Mugabe was compelled to resign in November under pressure from the military.

simply consolidate his own control over the levers of power and public wealth.

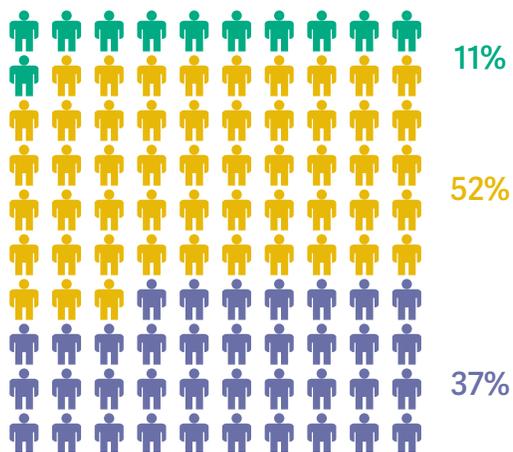
Leaders in several other countries clung to power, often at the expense of their citizens' basic rights. Kenya's Supreme Court initially won broad praise for annulling the results of what it deemed to be a flawed presidential election. However, the period before the court-mandated rerun was marred by a lack of substantive reforms, incidents of political violence, and a boycott by the main opposition candidate, Raila Odinga. These factors undermined the credibility of President Uhuru Kenyatta's victory, in which he claimed 98 percent of the vote amid low turnout.

In neighboring Tanzania, the government of President John Magufuli—who took office in 2015 as a member of the only ruling party the country has ever known—stepped up repression of dissent, detaining opposition politicians, shuttering media outlets, and arresting citizens for posting critical views on social media. And in Uganda, 73-year-old president Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, sought to remove the presidential age limit of 75, which would permit him to run again in 2021. Museveni had just won reelection the previous year in a process that featured police violence, internet shutdowns, and treason charges against his main challenger.

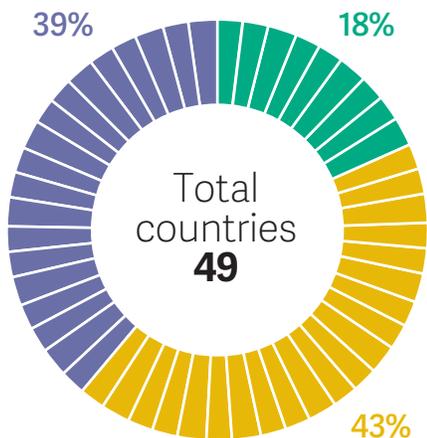
Even in South Africa, a relatively strong democratic performer, the corrosive effect of perpetual incumbency on leaders and parties was apparent. A major corruption scandal continued to plague President Jacob Zuma, with additional revelations about the wealthy Gupta family's vast influence over his government. The story played a role in the ruling African National Congress's December leadership election, in which Zuma's ex-wife and ally, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, was defeated by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa.

**SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: STATUS BY POPULATION**

Total population  
**1.02 billion**



**SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: STATUS BY COUNTRY**



# Freedom in the World 2018 Trend Arrows

**Ecuador** received an upward trend arrow due to reduced pressure on the media and civil society, as well as progress on anticorruption efforts, under newly elected president Lenín Moreno.

**Nepal** received an upward trend arrow due to the first national, regional, and local elections held under a new constitution, with high voter turnout despite some reports of violence.

**Bolivia** received a downward trend arrow due to a constitutional court ruling that abolished term limits and paved the way for President Evo Morales to run for a fourth term in 2019.

**Cambodia** received a downward trend arrow due to a crackdown on the political opposition, including the dissolution of the main opposition party and treason charges against its leader.

**Hong Kong** received a downward trend arrow due to the expulsion of four prodemocracy lawmakers from the legislature, jail sentences against protest leaders, and other apparent efforts by pro-Beijing authorities to stamp out a movement calling for local self-determination.

**Hungary** received a downward trend arrow due to increasing intimidation of civil society groups and the opposition, which has left citizens more reluctant to speak out on political topics.

**Morocco** received a downward trend arrow due to harsh state responses to major demonstrations throughout the year.

**Serbia** received a downward trend arrow due to President Aleksandar Vučić's continued consolidation of power, including through opaque party financing methods, politicization of law enforcement, and attempts to undermine critical journalists with financial investigations and smears in government-friendly media.

**Tanzania** received a downward trend arrow due to mounting repression of the opposition, media outlets, and social media users who are critical of the increasingly authoritarian president, John Magufuli.

**Tunisia** received a downward trend arrow due to further postponement of municipal elections and growing pressure on the political system from powerful elements of the former regime.



Freedom in one  
country depends on  
freedom for all.





Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036

111 John Street, Suite 810  
New York, NY 10038

[www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)  
[facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC](https://facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC)  
[@FreedomHouseDC](https://twitter.com/FreedomHouseDC)  
202.296.5101 | [info@freedomhouse.org](mailto:info@freedomhouse.org)