

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2019

Democracy in Retreat

In 2018, Freedom in the World recorded the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The reversal has spanned all continents and a variety of countries, from long-standing democracies like the United States to consolidated authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. The overall losses are still shallow compared with the gains of the late 20th century, but the pattern is consistent and ominous. Democracy is in retreat.

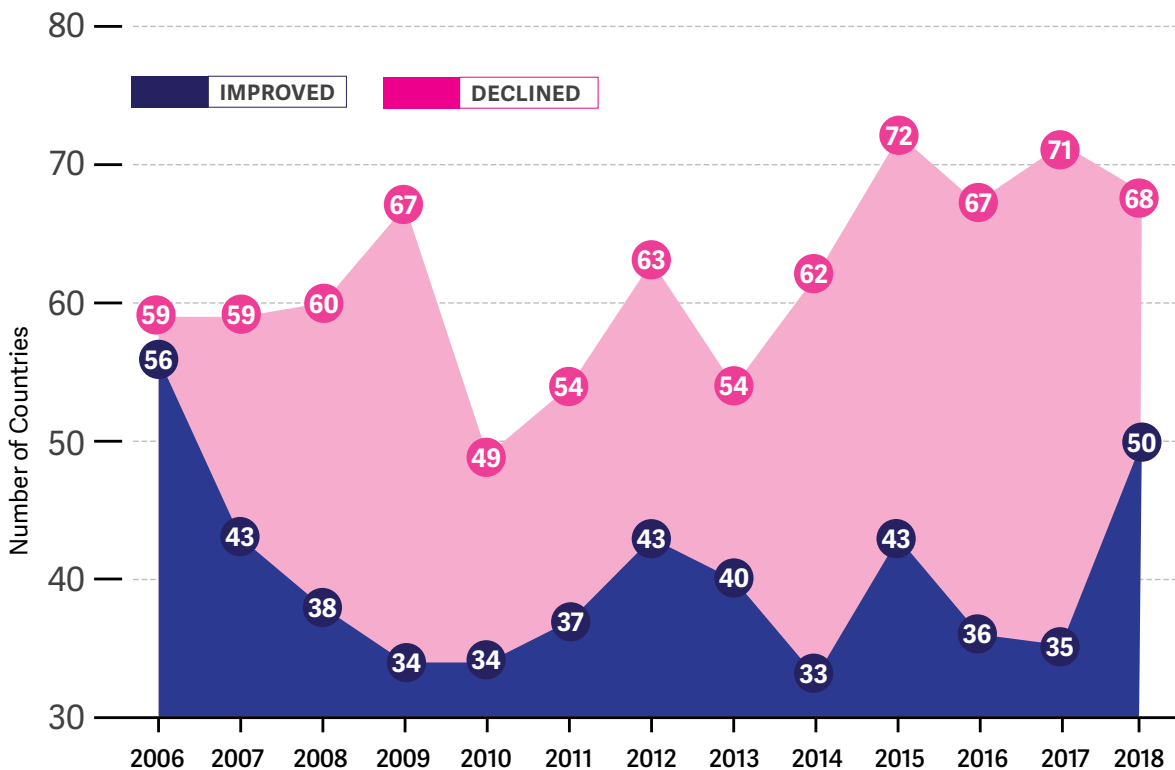
Overall in 2018, 68 countries suffered net declines in

political rights and civil liberties, with only 50 registering gains. The share of Not Free countries has increased over the past 13 years, and the crisis of confidence in long-standing democracies has intensified. Democratic norms such as free and fair elections and free expression are being shattered.

Over the period since the 13-year slide began in 2006, 116 countries have seen a net decline, and only 63 have experienced a net improvement.

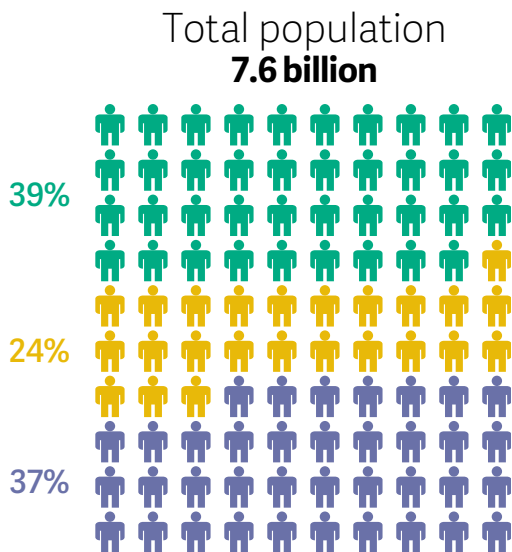
13 YEARS OF DECLINE

Countries with net declines in aggregate score have outnumbered those with gains for the past 13 years.

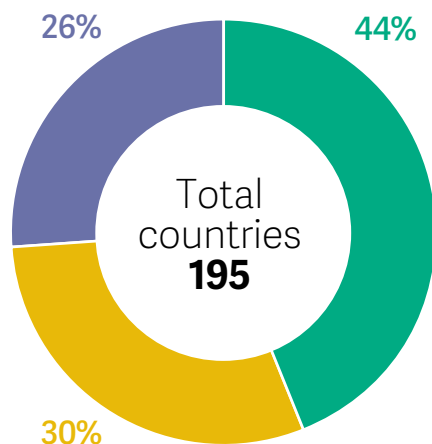


Key Global Findings

GLOBAL: STATUS BY POPULATION



GLOBAL: STATUS BY COUNTRY



- The **United States** remained firmly in the Free category but ranked behind other major democracies such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. US rule of law declined as government policies and actions improperly restricted the legal rights of asylum seekers, discrimination became evident in the acceptance of refugees for resettlement, and immigration enforcement and detention policies were excessively harsh or haphazard. In contrast, freedom of assembly improved, with an upsurge in civic action and no repetition of the previous year’s protest-related violence.
- Ethnic cleansing is a growing trend, observed in 11 countries in 2018, compared to 3 countries in 2005.
- In many struggling democracies, antiliberal leaders’ verbal attacks on the media contributed to broader declines in press freedom and growing physical threats against journalists. These attacks have emboldened authoritarian rulers elsewhere to take far more aggressive action in response to critical coverage.
- A growing number of governments—24 in recent years—reached beyond their borders to target expatriates, exiles, and diasporas with physical surveillance, kidnapping, and even assassination. Saudi Arabia’s murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey put a spotlight on authoritarian regimes’ uninhibited cross-border pursuit of their perceived enemies.
- In a positive development, 2018 saw more countries with large improvements (more than 5 points) than in 2017. Most notably in **Angola, Armenia, Ethiopia, and Malaysia**, politicians unexpectedly responded or were forced to respond to public demands for democratic change, serving as a reminder that people continue to strive for freedom, accountability, and dignity, even in countries where the odds of success seem insurmountable.

Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries saw important developments during 2018 that affected their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny in 2019.


- **Armenia:** Nikol Pashinyan's reform-minded alliance won snap elections after unpopular leader Serzh Sargsyan unsuccessfully attempted to extend his rule.
- **Brazil:** Right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro captured the presidency with rhetoric steeped in disdain for democratic principles.
- **Cambodia:** Leader Hun Sen secured near-total power in lopsided elections after authorities dissolved the main opposition party and shuttered independent media.
- **Cameroon:** Long-time president Paul Biya extended his rule through deeply flawed elections, while the ongoing Anglophone crisis threatened deterioration into civil war.
- **China:** Over a million ethnic Uighurs and others have been forced into brutal "reeducation" centers, while President Xi Jinping's position was secured indefinitely.
- **Ethiopia:** Following protests, a new reformist prime minister lifted the state of emergency, released political prisoners, and permitted more open political debate.
- **Iraq:** Despite allegations of fraud and a controversial recount, competitive elections led to a peaceful transfer of power.
- **Poland:** The conservative ruling party has laid waste to the country's legal framework in its drive to assert control over the judiciary.
- **Sri Lanka:** President Maithripala Sirisena's unilateral dismissal of the prime minister threatened recent democratic gains, though the Supreme Court declared the move unconstitutional.
- **Tanzania:** The government arrested opposition leaders, stifled protests, and pushed for legislation to further cement the ruling party's stranglehold on politics.

Freedom in the World 2019 Status Changes


Hungary

 Hungary's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to sustained attacks on the country's democratic institutions by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which has used its parliamentary supermajority to impose restrictions on or assert control over the opposition, the media, religious groups, academia, NGOs, the courts, asylum seekers, and the private sector since 2010.


Nicaragua

 Nicaragua's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to authorities' brutal repression of an antigovernment protest movement, which has included the arrest and imprisonment of opposition figures, intimidation and attacks against religious leaders, and violence by state forces and allied armed groups that resulted in hundreds of deaths.


Serbia

 Serbia's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to deterioration in the conduct of elections, continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine independent journalists through legal harassment and smear campaigns, and President Aleksandar Vučić's de facto accumulation of executive powers that conflict with his constitutional role.

Uganda

 Uganda's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to attempts by long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni's government to restrict free expression, including through surveillance of electronic communications and a regressive tax on social media use.

Zimbabwe

 Zimbabwe's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free because the 2018 presidential election, though deeply flawed, granted a degree of legitimacy to the rule of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had taken power after the military forced his predecessor's resignation in 2017.

Key Regional Findings

In addition to the countries listed on page 3, the following countries saw developments of regional significance.

Americas

- **Venezuela** suffered yet another steep decline in freedom as President Nicolás Maduro extended his authoritarian rule with a profoundly flawed presidential election, and as the country's economic and humanitarian crises persisted.
- Democratic improvements have continued in **Ecuador** since the 2017 election of President Lenín Moreno, including a more relaxed government stance toward media criticism, a ban on holding office for those convicted of corruption, and a constitutional referendum that restored presidential term limits.

Asia-Pacific

- Hopes for democratic reform rose in **Malaysia** after an opposition alliance unexpectedly defeated incumbent prime minister Najib Razak's Barisan Nasional coalition, which had ruled the country for decades.
- While **Pakistan's** elections were competitive, the military's influence over the courts and the media was widely thought to have tilted the contest in favor of the new prime minister, Imran Khan.
- **Bangladesh's** weak electoral system further deteriorated, as security forces cracked down on the opposition ahead of parliamentary voting, election-day irregularities were widespread, and interparty violence resulted in more than a dozen deaths.

Eurasia

- **Uzbekistan**—while still governed by a highly repressive regime—experienced another year of tentative improvement, as authorities continued to release political prisoners and ease restrictions on NGOs.
- **Russia's** Vladimir Putin and **Azerbaijan's** Ilham Aliyev each secured new presidential terms, benefiting from strong-arm tactics that included the repression of independent media and civil society, the abuse of state resources, and the persecution of genuine political opponents—as well as outright fraud.

Europe

- Violence reached the press in **Slovakia**, where investigative reporter Ján Kuciak was shot to death in his home after uncovering corrupt links between government officials and organized crime.
- President Milo Đukanović of **Montenegro** continued to consolidate state power around himself and his clique, subverting basic standards of good governance and exceeding his assigned constitutional role.
- In **Turkey**, simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections took place under a two-year state of emergency that was later lifted, though authorities continued to engage in purges of state institutions and arrests of journalists, civil society members, and academics.

Middle East and North Africa

- Political repression worsened in **Egypt**, where President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi claimed to have been reelected with 97 percent of the vote after security forces arbitrarily detained potential challengers.
- In **Saudi Arabia**, after the government drew praise for easing its draconian ban on women driving, authorities arrested high-profile women's rights activists and clamped down on even mild forms of dissent. Evidence also mounted that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had personally ordered the assassination of self-exiled critic and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, dashing any remaining hopes that the young prince might emerge as a reformer.
- The consolidation of democracy in **Tunisia** continued to sputter, as freedoms of assembly and association were imperiled by legislative changes and the leadership's failure to set up a Constitutional Court undermined judicial independence and the rule of law.
- Nationalism strained **Israel's** democracy as lawmakers approved changes that effectively downgraded the constitutional status of non-Jewish citizens and allowed the interior minister to revoke the residency of Jerusalem-based Palestinians for "breach of loyalty."

Sub-Saharan Africa

- There was a tentative opening in **Angola**, where new president João Lourenço took notable actions against corruption and impunity, reducing the outsized influence of his long-ruling predecessor's family and granting the courts greater independence.
- **Zimbabwe's** political system essentially returned to its precoup status quo, as President Emmerson Mnangagwa used deeply flawed general elections to reclaim a modicum of legitimacy following the military's 2017 ouster of longtime president Robert Mugabe, and his ruling ZANU-PF party showed few signs that it was committed to fostering genuine political competition.
- In **Uganda**, long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni's administration sought to constrain dissent by implementing new surveillance systems and instituting a regressive tax on social media use.
- **Senegal's** reputation as one of the most stable democracies in West Africa was threatened by new procedural barriers that could limit the opposition's participation in upcoming elections.

Worst of the Worst

Of the 50 countries designated as Not Free, the following 13 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate score
Syria	0
South Sudan	2
Eritrea	2
Turkmenistan	2
North Korea	3
Equatorial Guinea	6
Saudi Arabia	7
Somalia	7
Sudan	7
Tajikistan	9
Uzbekistan	9
Central African Republic	9
Libya	9

Recommendations

Strengthening and Protecting Core Values in Established Democracies

- **Respect human rights at home**, including by welcoming fact-based reporting, enforcing anticorruption laws, encouraging citizens' participation in elections, and ensuring that all migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers receive fair and proper treatment under the law.
- **Invest in civic education.** In the United States, new legislation or funding opportunities can encourage states to develop civic education curricula that emphasizes fundamental tenets of democracy.
- **Strengthen measures that guard against foreign influence over government officials.** Greater transparency requirements for officials' personal finances and campaign donations, and the establishment of a code of conduct for engagement with foreign officials, can help insulate governments from foreign attempts to subvert democratic institutions.
- **Invest in elections infrastructure to guard against foreign interference in balloting.** In the United States, funding should focus on replacing outdated

voting machines, strengthening cybersecurity for existing systems, and improving the technological expertise of state elections staff.

- **Require social media companies to report foreign efforts to spread online disinformation and propaganda.**

Defending and Expanding Democracy around the World

- **Invest in alliances with other democracies, and in multilateral institutions.** By emphasizing their shared values and coordinating aid and public diplomacy efforts, democratic countries can offer an attainable alternative to repression and coercion.
- **Confront abuses of international institutions** such as efforts by illiberal leaders to manipulate Interpol, the UN Human Rights Council, and other international institutions for their own ends.
- **Encourage and protect journalists and freedom of the press** by pushing back against anti-media rhetoric that aims to strip journalists of legitimacy, supporting programs that strengthen journalists'

technical capacity, and ensuring that attacks on journalists are prosecuted.

- **Be prepared to promptly challenge preelection rights abuses**, including internet blocking, media restrictions, suppression of protests, or arrests of opposition candidates.
- **Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses and acts of corruption** through the Global Magnitsky Act or similar legislation.
- **Emphasize democracy-strengthening programs in foreign assistance.** In addition to critical institution-building efforts—such as strengthening the rule of law and ensuring free elections—democracy programs should prioritize engaging and empowering local citizens so that institutional improvements are durable.
- **Focus funding and diplomatic engagement on**

countries at critical junctures, including countries that have experienced recent expansions in freedom, such as Angola, Ethiopia, Armenia, and Ecuador, and countries in which democratic progress is threatened, such as Senegal, Tanzania, and Tunisia.

Harnessing the Power of the Private Sector to Protect Democracy

- **Private companies should adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**, including avoiding commercial relationships with foreign governments that force companies to violate fundamental rights.
- **Tech companies should use internal expertise to help counter Chinese state censorship and protect the public** through accessible tools that keep pace with innovations by the Chinese government and complicit Chinese firms.

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