



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2007: FREEDOM STAGNATION AMID PUSHBACK AGAINST DEMOCRACY

By Arch Puddington

The year 2006 saw the emergence of a series of worrisome trends that together present potentially serious threats to the stability of new democracies as well as obstacles to political reform in societies under authoritarian rule. These trends were among the principal findings of *Freedom in the World 2007*, Freedom House's annual survey of political rights and civil liberties worldwide. The survey findings note that the percentage of countries designated as Free has failed to increase for nearly a decade and suggest that these trends may be contributing to a developing "freedom stagnation." Major findings also include a setback for freedom in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, a more modest decline in Africa, and an entrenchment of authoritarian rule in the majority of countries of the former Soviet Union.

One of the most troubling developments identified is a growing "pushback" against organizations, movements, and media that monitor human rights or advocate for the expansion of democratic freedoms. A systematic effort to weaken or eliminate pro-democracy forces is most prevalent among authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet Union. But governments in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America have also taken steps to diminish freedom of assembly, smother civil society, and silence critics.

Thus far, this campaign to stifle civil society and squeeze potential sources of pro-democracy activism has mainly

played out in those societies already under dictatorial rule, such as Belarus and Uzbekistan, and those clearly moving in an authoritarian direction, such as Russia and Venezuela. The pushback against democracy therefore poses a much greater threat to the spread of freedom in authoritarian settings than to those societies where a strong measure of democratic liberties has been achieved. Significantly, the past year saw modest declines in such key authoritarian states as Iran and Zimbabwe.

In the longer established democracies of North America, Western Europe, and the South Pacific, lively debate continued about whether laws enacted to combat terrorism following 9/11, and other policies pursued by governments, constitute serious infringements on civil liberties. In many instances, concerns focused on the heightened scrutiny being given to certain minorities and immigrant communities in these countries.

On a global scale, the state of freedom in 2006 differs little from that of 2005.

The number of countries judged by *Freedom in the World* as Free in 2006 stood at 90, representing 47 percent of the world's 193 polities and 3,004,990,000 people—46 percent of the global population. The number of Free countries increased by one since the previous survey for the year 2005.

The number of countries qualifying as Partly Free stood at 58, or 30 percent of all countries assessed by the survey, with 1,083,000,000 people living in Partly Free societies, 17 percent of the world's total. The number of Partly Free countries did not change from the previous year.

Forty-five countries were judged Not Free, representing 23 percent of the total polities. The number of people living under Not Free conditions stood at 2,448,600,000—37 percent of the world—although it is important to note that about one half of this number lives in just one country: China. The number of Not Free countries did not change from 2005.

FREE, PARTLY FREE, NOT FREE

Freedom in the World provides three broad category designation for each of the countries and territories included in the index: **Free, Partly Free, and Not Free.**

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

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

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

The number of electoral democracies remained unchanged at 123. Three countries joined the ranks: Haiti, Zambia, and Montenegro, the last of which is a new country to the survey. Developments in three countries—Nigeria, Thailand, and the Solomon Islands—disqualified them from the electoral democracy list.

Three countries experienced positive status changes: Guyana moved from Partly Free to Free, and Haiti and Nepal moved from Not Free to Partly Free. Two countries experienced negative status changes: both Thailand and Congo (Brazzaville) moved from Partly Free to Not Free.

At the same time, the number of countries that experienced negative changes in freedom without meriting a status change outweighed those that received positive changes: 33 countries underwent negative changes, as opposed to a mere 18 with positive changes.

Several of the countries that showed declines during the year are those already counted among the world's most repressive states: Burma, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Eritrea, and Iran. Yet declines were also noted in a number of countries rated Free or Partly Free, but whose democratic institutions remain unformed or fragile, as well as in societies that had previously demonstrated a strong measure of democratic stability: South Africa, Kenya, Taiwan, Philippines, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Hungary. (A full list of country advances and declines, with explanations for the changes, follows in an appendix).

In 2006, Freedom House began publishing a more detailed set of data for the countries assessed by *Freedom in the World*. In addition to the overall political rights and civil liberties ratings that have traditionally been made public, for the first time, Freedom House released each country's scores in the seven subcategories that determine our ratings: political process, political pluralism and participation, functioning of government (including corruption and transparency), freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights. This move toward greater transparency in our ratings goes further to convey the "whys" that drive broader country ratings shifts, both positive and negative. Moreover, closer attention to *Freedom in the World's* subscores allows for a more precise analysis of global and regional trends in freedom. For policy makers and scholars, this has meant a clearer and more detailed window into individual country performance, trajectory, and the underlying reasons for political change. While this additional set of scores will be released later this year, a preliminary assessment points to several discernible trends that affected a substantial number of countries or presented particular problems in certain regions:

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WHAT IS AN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY?

In determining whether a country is an electoral democracy, Freedom House examines several key factors concerning how its national leadership is chosen. To qualify as an electoral democracy, a state must have:

- A competitive multi-party political system;
- Universal adult suffrage for all citizens; *
- Regularly contested elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy, reasonable ballot security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud that yields results that are unrepresentative of the public will;
- Significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning.

The ranking reflects a judgment about the last major national election/elections. In the case of presidential/parliamentary systems, both elections for the key offices must have been free and fair on the basis of the above criteria; in parliamentary systems, the last nationwide elections for the national legislature must have been free and fair. A country cannot be listed as an electoral democracy if it reflects the ongoing and overwhelming dominance of a single party or movement over numerous national elections. Such states are designated as dominant party states. Nor can a country be an electoral democracy if significant authority for national decisions resides in the hands of an unelected power (whether a monarch or a foreign or international authority). A country is removed from the ranks of electoral democracies if its last national election has failed to meet the criteria listed above, or if changes in law significantly erode the public's possibility for electoral choice.

* With exceptions for restrictions that states may legitimately place on citizens as sanctions for criminal offenses.

1. A decline in freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Although a decline in press freedom affected both democracies and authoritarian states, it was a particular problem in countries where authoritarian-minded leaders are moving to eliminate or marginalize independent voices. Emblematic of this trend is the announcement at year's end that Venezuela leader Hugo Chavez intends to deny a license renewal to a television station that has been critical of his policies.

2. A weakness in the rule of law. This was reflected in part in an upsurge in violence, street crime, and policing failures, especially in Latin America, as well as in seriously flawed judicial systems in a number of African countries.

3. Pervasive corruption and a lack of government transparency. These problems, deeply rooted in many cases, ranked as a crucial impediment to democratic governance across many

parts of the world, especially Africa, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and Latin America.

LATIN AMERICA: SUCCESSFUL ELECTIONS AMID CRIME AND UPHEAVAL

Despite the prevalence of some alarming trends, the past year was marked by an impressive number of competitive and fair elections in relatively new democracies and societies experiencing social turbulence. In Latin America alone, successful elections were conducted in Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and Nicaragua. The winning candidates included leftist populists, conservatives, and candidates with moderately left-of-center platforms. Still, each of these countries suffers from serious domestic problems that, in many cases, have weakened the fabric of their democratic institutions. A range of disturbingly high rates of violent crime, economic instability and massive inequality, and endemic corruption

WORST OF THE WORST

Of the 45 countries designated as Not Free, eight states have been given the survey's lowest possible rating. The eight worst rated countries represent a narrow range of systems and cultures. Two—Cuba and North Korea—are one party Marxist-Leninist regimes. Two—Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—are Central Asian countries ruled by dictators with roots in the Soviet period. Libya is an Arab country under the sway of a secular dictatorship, while Sudan is under a leadership that has elements both of radical Islamism and of the traditional military junta. The remaining worst rated states are Burma, a tightly controlled military dictatorship, and Somalia, a failed state.

There are two worst rated territories: Tibet (under Chinese jurisdiction) and Chechnya, where an indigenous Islamic population is engaged in a brutal guerrilla war for independence from Russia.

An additional ten countries and territories received scores that were slightly above the worst ranked countries: Belarus, China, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Laos, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Zimbabwe, and Western Sahara.

plague them all. Under these circumstances, the fact that these countries have conducted elections that are competitive, with a relatively level playing field in which opposition parties are free to campaign, as well as guarantees for minority participation, is a worthy achievement. Democracy will remain incomplete and therefore vulnerable, however, if governments fail to curb corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and protect the rights of minorities and the indigenous. Indeed, there is already a disturbing tendency in Latin America whereby parties or political movements refuse to accept the results of elections that were deemed fair—as evidenced by this year’s developments in Bolivia and Mexico, both countries with serious divisions between those of European descent and indigenous peoples.

ASIA-PACIFIC: A YEAR OF SETBACKS

The dominant development in the region was the military-led coup that ousted Thailand’s democratically elected president, Thaksin Shinawatra. The coup itself occurred without significant violence and, while all political activity and demonstration was suspended for some time, the military has subsequently avoided policies of overt repression. Thaksin’s style of governance had led the country’s *Freedom in the World* rating to decline in recent years. Nevertheless, Thailand had represented an important gain for democracy in Asia, and the coup caused its political rights rating to decline to the lowest possible for the survey, as well as its status to drop from Partly Free to Not Free.

Another important setback occurred in Sri Lanka, which saw decreases in both its political rights and civil liberties ratings due to the Tamil Tigers’ intimidation of civilians and increased harassment of the press. East Timor experienced a significant decline as the result of rioting and violent clashes involving both members of the defense forces and civilians, as well as a lack of government accountability. In Fiji, the ratings for both political rights and civil liberties dropped because of a coup that removed the elected prime minister from office and replaced him with an interim military government. Taiwan saw a small decline in its political rights rating due to concerns over corruption at the highest levels of government. There were also modest but ominous declines in Burma, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the Solomon Islands.

Although China continued to reflect dynamic change in the economic sphere, there was little evidence of openings toward political freedom or enhanced individual liberties. Heightened activism among the country’s middle class have led some to hope that the ripple effects produced by those changes that have enabled China to emerge as a major force in the global economy may transform the country’s political culture. Unfortunately, the past year was dominated by further repression of the press and internet, the prosecution of civic activists and the lawyers who represent them, and increased efforts to keep religion under the control of the state.

The region’s most important positive development was Nepal’s climb from Not Free to Partly Free due to the end of direct rule by King Gyanendra, the

return of parliament, and improvements in the rule of law.

Although the factors contributing to freedom's decline in the region varied from country to country, ethnic and religious division stood out as a major problem in some countries—Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Fiji—and a potential source of discontent in others, including Indonesia, which retained its designation as Free. Perhaps the most disquieting aspect of the year's developments is the fact that three countries previously considered showcases of Asian freedom—Thailand, the Philippines, and East Timor—experienced considerable setbacks.

When the Oceania countries of Australia and New Zealand and the small island nations such as Vanuatu and Nauru are factored out of the analysis, the gains for freedom in Asia appear somewhat less impressive over the life of the *Freedom in the World* survey. A thirty-year perspective shows that in 1976, there were 2 Free countries in Asia proper, 11 Partly Free, and 10 Not Free. For the year 2006, the breakdown for the core Asia countries is 6 Free, 8 Partly Free, and 10 Not Free. Japan is the only country designated as Free in both 1976 and 2006. The other Free country in 1976, Sri Lanka, has since fallen to Partly Free due to a protracted civil conflict. Clearly, the countries that have joined the Free category include globally important states with significant populations and thus represent important strides: South Korea, India, Taiwan, and Indonesia. But the more significant regional trends are the persistence of authoritarian rule in China and Southeast Asia, the continuing dictatorships in Burma and North Korea, and an outright

decline in freedom throughout most of south Asia (India excepted).

AFRICA: AFTER PROGRESS, MODEST REVERSALS

After several years of steady and, in a few cases, impressive gains for democracy, Sub-Saharan Africa suffered more setbacks than gains during the year. One country, Congo (Brazzaville), saw its *Freedom in the World* status decline from Partly Free to Not Free due principally to a heightened lack of transparency and openness on the part of the government. Other countries suffered declines as well—including those that have made some promising gains in the past—such as Burundi, Chad, Madagascar, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritius, Somalia, South Africa, and Guinea Bissau. More modest declines were registered in Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Kenya, Seychelles, and Zimbabwe.

There were also several important gains during the year. Congo (Kinshasa) saw its political rights rating improve because of successful presidential elections, the first in the country's history. Liberia, which showed progress in fighting corruption and expanding government transparency, enjoyed a notably peaceful environment during Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's first year as president. Conditions also improved in Malawi and Benin, as well as in Mauritania, which took important steps toward political pluralism and a functioning electoral framework.

As in Asia, the causes for decline in Africa varied from country to country. A region-wide analysis, however, reveals several factors that were common to the

decline of freedom in a number of countries. One is a lack of government transparency and openness in government conduct. A related issue is increased pressure by governments on freedom of expression and the media in countries with high levels of freedom, such as Ghana and Mali, as well as in countries with generally poor freedom records, including Burundi and Gabon. Another factor is regime pressure on opposition political parties and figures. Perhaps the most significant factor, however, is a weakness in the rule of law that is reflected in the scores of a number of countries, including generally high performers, such as South Africa, and countries with less impressive records in protecting freedom, such as Chad, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

RUSSIA AND ITS NEIGHBORS: A BLEAK PICTURE

The year saw little significant change for freedom in the region. As was the case the previous year, the only relatively bright spots among the non-Baltic countries of the former Soviet Union were Ukraine and Georgia, which have been designated as Free and Partly Free, respectively. Modest declines were noted in Russia, for its crackdown on non-governmental organizations; Azerbaijan, for the regime's increasingly tight grip on the media; and Kyrgyzstan, for a decline in religious freedom.

Russia's pervasive influence throughout the region bodes ill for reform prospects. President Vladimir Putin has systematically weakened or marginalized independent media, advocates for democracy, and regime critics generally. The murder of crusading journalist Anna Politkovskaya,

carried out in gangland assassination style, is but the latest, albeit the most disturbing, case in a series of journalist killings that have gone unsolved by the government. Putin placed further restrictions on the ability of opposition parties to effectively campaign for office, while government policies tolerated discrimination against Russian citizens from the country's North Caucasus and encouraged the mistreatment of immigrants from Georgia and other Caucasus countries.

Russia thus serves as a model for authoritarian-minded leaders in the region and elsewhere. Although its relations with Belarus were briefly frayed due to a dispute over energy prices, Russia has otherwise gone out of its way to support the region's autocrats and to oppose efforts by the United Nations and other bodies to condemn or impose sanctions on dictatorships with records of blatant human rights abuse. The region has produced three countries whose human rights and democracy records are among the world's worst: Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Leadership in all three share a ruthless determination to crush independent voices of opposition, whether in the press, the political arena, or civil society.

Both Ukraine and Georgia succeeded in further consolidating some of the reforms that had been instituted after their respective democratic revolutions. Ukrainian democracy, however, was somewhat tarnished by continuing corruption and political stalemate that occurred during the protracted process of establishing a governing coalition after parliamentary elections that failed to produce a clear winner.

Meanwhile, democracy grew deeper roots in most of Central and Eastern Europe, even as some experienced polarization and governance difficulties. The only major ratings change occurred in Bosnia-Herzegovina, due to the generally successful administration of national elections. More modest improvements were noted in Albania, for enhanced anti-corruption efforts; Croatia, for bolstering laws against hate crimes; and Romania, due to reform of the judiciary. Hungary registered a modest setback due to riots and civil unrest that occurred in an intensely polarized political environment.

In general, the year brought further evidence of the European Union's (EU) powerful influence on the post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Throughout the region, countries have amended their political process, transparency, treatment of minorities, rule of law, and basic civil liberties to meet the strict standards of EU membership. Moreover, EU standards have prevented new member states from backsliding, even as some have experienced political division and discontent over economic change.

MIDDLE EAST: CHANGE AT A GLACIAL PACE

The Middle East/North Africa region saw little change over the past year. The civil liberties ratings of both Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates increased as a result of improvements in freedom of assembly, while Syria's rating gained due to a small improvement in greater personal autonomy. Modest declines were registered in Egypt for repression of the political opposition and in Bahrain

and Iran for the curtailment of freedom of assembly.

While the Middle East continues to lag behind other regions in the development of free institutions, the fact that progress has been made since the September 11, 2001 attacks gives some cause for optimism. In 2000, the region had 1 Free country (Israel), 3 Partly Free countries (Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait), and 14 Not Free countries. By 2006, the number of Partly Free countries and territories had risen to seven with the addition of Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian Authority. In the latter, the hopes that competitive elections would lead to steps forward were dashed as a result of incursions by Israeli military forces, as well as the continued operation of militias engaged in violence against Israel and their own political rivals.

Worth noting is the fact that this progress was made under difficult circumstances: the invasion and occupation of Iraq, ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the rise of radical Islamism, increased terrorism, Iran and Syria's encouragement of anti-democratic forces, and generally poor economic records by non-oil-producing states.

Unfortunately, a confluence of these negative trends poses a powerful threat to the gains for freedom in Lebanon. The promising achievements of the Cedar Revolution were seriously jeopardized by the conflict with Israel that erupted as a result of the actions of the Hezbollah militia's capture of an Israeli serviceman, followed by Hezbollah's efforts to bring down the elected government, and especially by Syria and

Iran’s ongoing campaigns to destroy the country’s democracy.

**UNITED STATES AND EUROPE:
IMMIGRATION,
COUNTERTERRORISM, FREE
SPEECH**

Although the United States and almost all countries in Western Europe registered the highest possible ratings on the freedom index—a 1 for both political rights and civil liberties—*Freedom in the World* noted several problems in a number of these established democracies. In the United States, the

various facilities in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere; the enactment of legislation that allows the government to employ what some believe are methods bordering on torture in the interrogation of terrorism suspects; and the government’s eavesdropping on phone calls and email messages without judicially approved warrants. A number of cases arising from counter-terrorism policies are currently making their way through the judicial system, and the fact that the Democratic Party controls both houses of Congress will likely bring enhanced legislative scrutiny to the administration’s actions.

REGIONAL PATTERNS

<u>Region</u>	<u>Free</u>	<u>Partly Free</u>	<u>Not Free</u>
Asia Pacific	16 (41%)	12 (31%)	11 (28%)
The Americas	25 (71%)	9 (26%)	1 (3%)
CEE/FSU	13 (46%)	8 (29%)	7 (25%)
Middle East	1 (6%)	6 (33%)	11 (61%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	11 (23%)	22 (46%)	15 (31%)
Western Europe	24 (96%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)

gains made by the opposition Democratic Party in mid-term congressional elections somewhat allayed apprehensions over the level of competitiveness of the country’s political process. However, the United States suffered from a series of political corruption cases and weakness in the enforcement of laws meant to ensure the rights of workers to form unions and engage in collective bargaining. There was, as well, continued controversy over the counter-terrorism policies of the Bush administration: the continued detention of terrorism suspects at the naval base in Guantanamo Bay; the detention of some terrorism suspects in

At the same time, the survey again took note of problems facing a number of European societies grappling with large numbers of immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In particular, the survey pointed to the failure to integrate non-white immigrants into the fabric of European economic and cultural life. The problems associated with the increase of Muslim immigration rose to the surface during the furor over the publication of a series of cartoons in a Danish newspaper that were regarded as anti-Muslim, and an ongoing controversy over laws that prohibit Holocaust denial and hate speech. Although press freedom is protected

throughout Europe, fears have been expressed over the potential for self-censorship in matters relating to Muslims, immigration, religious differences, and other sensitive issues.

THE “PUSHBACK” AGAINST DEMOCRACY

The pushback against democracy, a phenomenon that has been gaining momentum for several years, emerged as a major obstacle to the spread of freedom in 2006. While there is nothing especially new about the suppression of democracy advocates by dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, certain features of the current pushback distinguish it from past methods of political repression.

First, the targets of the pushback are less likely to be political parties or labor unions—the targets of the past—but, rather, independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), other civil society institutions, and the press. Second, regimes are generally less likely to employ the traditional techniques of extreme repression: military rule, mass arrests, assassinations, torture, and coups. Instead, governments often use legalistic tactics to put potential voices of opposition out of business, including the smothering of free media by regime-directed economic pressure (such as discouraging advertisers from doing business with independent newspaper and broadcast outlets), the denial of licenses to privately-owned television stations, unabashed state takeovers, and criminal slander charges against reporters who criticize the leadership. Another increasingly common tactic is use of the tax police to investigate and reinvestigate NGOs that are critical of

government policies. Third, a number of regimes have recently adopted policies that make it difficult or impossible for domestic NGOs to receive support from foreign sources. This can be an important weapon given the lack of local sources of financial support in impoverished countries.

An element of global cooperation also distinguishes the current drive against democracy and democracy promotion. For example, a 2005 statement issued at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an entity comprised of Russia, China, and several Central Asian countries attacked democracy assistance by asserting that, “the right of every people to its own path of development must be fully guaranteed.”

In addition to China and Russia, Iran, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Venezuela have all adopted policies designed to suppress NGOs, restrict freedom of assembly, or marginalize the press.

The pushback against democracy is particularly disturbing insofar as it affects societies in which political parties are weak or unformed. In this context, it is often civil society that serves as the principal driving force behind democratic change and the protection of human rights. Organizations that fight for women’s rights, advocate for government transparency, protest police abuse and torture, defend the rights of minorities, and protect academic freedom are what prevent societies with troubled political conditions from declining into despotism.

CONCLUSION: A LOOMING FREEDOM STAGNATION?

Freedom House began publishing its annual index of global freedom in 1972. By any standard, the expansion of political democracy, personal liberties, and good government practices over the ensuing years has been nothing short of remarkable. A quarter century ago, in 1981, *Freedom in the World* designated 54 countries, 33 percent of the world's total at the time, as Free. In 2006, 90 countries were judged Free, or 47 percent of all countries. Even more striking is the shift in the number of countries designated as Not Free: 39 percent of the world's countries held the status of Not Free in 1981, whereas 23 percent stand as Not Free in 2006.

Freedom's expansion has touched every region, with substantial shifts in the formerly Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Latin America, where juntas and strongmen gave way to democratically elected governments. In 1981, huge swathes of the globe seemed mired in despotism and dictatorship: the Soviet Union, China, much of Africa, and practically every country of the Middle East. The year 1981 marked the culmination of a period in which Marxist-Leninist movements appeared to have scored impressive gains in Southeast Asia, Africa and, to a lesser extent, Central America and the Caribbean. Right-wing strongmen maintained a firm grip on power in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Indonesia, South Korea, and the Philippines, while South Africa remained tightly controlled by the apartheid regime.

The past quarter century has thus produced unprecedented gains for political freedom. As we acknowledge this particular record of progress, we must also take a hard look at freedom's more recent trajectory. And here, the record gives serious cause for concern.

For the past nine years, since 1998, the proportion of countries designated as Free has remained essentially unchanged at 46 percent. To be sure, this period has seen a number of key countries—Mexico, India, Indonesia, Ukraine, and several countries of the former Yugoslavia—progress. It has also seen significant setbacks, however, most notably in Russia, Venezuela, and Pakistan. China's continued resistance to allowing its citizens to exercise their essential political rights and civil liberties has meant that over 2 billion people continue to live in a Not Free society. While some countries of the Arab Middle East have made progress over the past decade, change for the region overall continues to move at a glacial pace; it still suffers from a "freedom deficit." Globally, there is a discernible trend whereby countries achieve a modest level of freedom—these are the Partly Free countries of the survey—and then experience a failure to move forward to liberal democracy. Does this apparent halt in progress suggest that we are facing a period of freedom stagnation?

As frequently pointed out, many of freedom's gains during the final years of the Cold War and the immediate post-Soviet period occurred in what might be considered the easiest cases: Central European countries with historic ties to the democratic world, Latin American countries with (inconsistent) democratic

histories, and Asian countries with strong economies and close ties to the United States and Europe.

Yet, consider the arguments of many scholars and regional experts made not so long ago: that democracy was not the natural state of affairs in Central Europe and especially in the Balkans; that Catholic (and Orthodox) societies were destined to an autocratic fate; that personal freedom was alien to Asian culture; and even that Third World societies generally needed the firm hand of authoritarianism, as opposed to the messiness of democracy, in order to secure development for their populations. These arguments have been discredited as the citizens of these countries have asserted their right to universally recognized political freedoms. The gains have been achieved in such diverse settings as El Salvador, Slovakia, Indonesia, and Ghana, suggesting that relatively recent histories of dictatorship, civil conflict, and weak democratic institutions do not necessarily prohibit progress.

Indeed, while elections themselves are not sufficient, the ability to elect—and remove—one's leaders is a fundamental mechanism of democratic accountability. One of the most important achievements of the modern democracy movement is the expansion in the number of countries that regularly conduct fair and competitive elections. As noted above, successful elections were conducted throughout South and Central America during the past year, despite an alarming surge of criminal violence, political polarization, and dissatisfaction with economic globalization. Not so long ago, coups were the normal state of affairs in various regions. Today, the significance

of the coup in Thailand is magnified by the fact that the event is so rare.

That elections have become the norm in some two-thirds of the world's countries is due, in part, to the international norms that have been established and to the willingness of the international community to apply these norms. Numerous private and quasi-government entities monitor elections and publicize violations of accepted polling standards. The EU insists on fair and competitive elections as a requirement for membership, and the Commonwealth and the Organization of American States emphasize elections in their charters and monitoring activities.

Meanwhile, a growing number of organizations monitor and comment on other specific dimensions of freedom: corruption and transparency, minority rights, press freedom, religious freedom, academic freedom, worker's rights, and women's equality. Offenders worldwide may very well be paying more attention as a number of governments and transnational organizations have incorporated assessment of freedom indicators into their foreign-assistance allocation processes.

These initiatives should be strengthened and expanded if we are to avoid the consolidation of a freedom stagnation or even a reversal of recent gains. At the same time, it is essential to identify and protest against the tactics employed by those currently driving the pushback against democracy. That those countries responsible for this campaign against freedom's expansion include some of the largest and most powerful in the world make a redoubled effort all the more important.

APPENDIX – Ratings and Status Changes, Trend Arrow Explanations

Status Changes	
Improvements	
Guyana	Political Rights rating improved from 3 to 2, and status from Partly Free to Free, due to free and fair presidential and legislative elections and the emergence of the new Alliance for Change Party that helped open the political party system.
Haiti	Political Rights rating improved from 7 to 4, Civil Liberties rating from 6 to 5, and status from Not Free to Partly Free, because the country held its first elections in more than five years, replacing the interim government of Gerard Latortue (which assumed power following the February 2004 ouster of former President Aristide) with Rene Preval as president and a new parliament.
Nepal	Political Rights rating improved from 6 to 5, Civil Liberties rating from 5 to 4, and status from Not Free to Partly Free, due to the return of parliament and the end of King Gyanendra’s direct rule following April protests, along with improvements in the rule of law and media and NGO freedoms.
Declines	
Congo (Brazzaville)	Political rights rating declined from 5 to 6, and status from Partly Free to Not Free, due to decreased openness and transparency in government.
Thailand	Political rights rating declined from 3 to 7, Civil Liberties rating from 3 to 4, and status from Partly Free to Not Free, as a result of the September military-led coup that ousted the democratically elected leader Thaksin Shinawatra, abrogated the constitution, dissolved parliament and the Constitutional Court, and resulted in new restrictions on media freedoms and bans on political gatherings.
Ratings Changes	
Improvements	
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Political Rights rating improved from 4 to 3 because of the successful administration of the 2006 general elections, deemed free and fair by observers.
Comoros	Political Rights rating improved from 4 to 3 due to the holding of legitimate presidential elections and a decline in military influence over political choices.
Congo (Kinshasa)	Political Rights rating improved from 6 to 5 due to the holding of successful presidential and legislative elections in 2006, the country’s first in more than 40 years.
Guatemala	Political Rights rating improved from 4 to 3 as a result of greater minority organizing and participation in government.
Kuwait	Civil Liberties rating improved from 5 to 4 because of the removal of longstanding legal restrictions on freedom of assembly.
Liberia	Political Rights rating improved from 4 to 3 due to improvements in governmental efforts to combat corruption and to greater government transparency.
Malawi	Civil Liberties rating improved from 4 to 3 due to a decline in police excess against the political opposition.

Mauritania	Political Rights rating improved from 6 to 5 due to changes to the electoral framework to include the creation of an independent electoral commission, as well as to greater political pluralism and government transparency.
Syria	Civil Liberties rating improved from 7 to 6 because of small improvements in personal autonomy and the country's commercial sphere.
Trinidad & Tobago	Political Rights rating improved from 3 to 2 due to the loosening of former Prime Minister Panday's grip on the UNC opposition party as several dissidents split off to form their own party; Prime Minister Manning's stronger regional voice; and the country's greater independence from Venezuela and deepened ties with the U.S. as a result of its booming gas sector.
United Arab Emirates	Civil Liberties rating improved from 6 to 5 because of improvements in freedom of assembly.
Zambia	Political Rights rating improved from 4 to 3 because of the successful conduct of the country's presidential election, reportedly the best since 1991, and concurrent legislative elections.
Declines	
Burundi	Political Rights rating declined from 3 to 4 due to the government and ruling party's increased repression of the opposition.
Chad	Civil Liberties rating declined from 5 to 6 due to increased insecurity in the eastern part of the country as a result of the crisis in neighboring Sudan's Darfur region.
Cote d'Ivoire	Political Rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the legislature's continuing to function without a mandate as a result of President Gbagbo's further postponement of presidential elections.
East Timor	Civil Liberties rating declined from 3 to 4 due to the extent to which the violence exhibited by rioters and security forces threatened press freedom and the livelihoods of Dili residents; significant setbacks in the rule of law, including police compliance in the May violence and an ongoing culture of impunity for abuse on the part of security forces; and the passing of a new defamation code that inhibits freedom of expression.
Fiji	Political Rights rating declined from 4 to 6 and Civil Liberties rating from 3 to 4 because of the ousting of Prime Minister Qarase and the establishment of an interim military government by the head of the military in early December, and to subsequent limits imposed on freedom of assembly and declines in the rule of law.
Guinea-Bissau	Political Rights rating declined from 3 to 4 due to President Joao Bernardo Vieira's dismissal of the opposition prime minister, whose party held the legislative majority, in favor of a political ally.
Iraq	Civil Liberties rating declined from 5 to 6 because of growing sectarian violence and insecurity.
Madagascar	Political Rights rating declined from 3 to 4 due to serious irregularities during the presidential elections, including the disqualification of an opposition candidate and the use of multiple ballots.
Mauritius	Civil Liberties rating declined from 1 to 2 because of an increase in crime and the government's failure to address it.

Mexico	Civil Liberties rating declined from 2 to 3 due to a decline in press freedom, including increasing violence against journalists.
Solomon Islands	Political Rights rating declined from 3 to 4 due to the poor conduct of April parliamentary elections, which were followed by two days of riots.
Somalia	Political Rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the increased consolidation of power of the Islamic Court Union—especially in Mogadishu—which is not a freely elected government accountable to the people and which has worked to limit political participation.
South Africa	Political Rights rating declined from 1 to 2 due to the ruling ANC’s increasing monopoly on policymaking and its increasingly technocratic nature.
Sri Lanka	Political Rights rating declined from 3 to 4 and Civil Liberties from 3 to 4 because of heightened political intimidation by the Tamil Tigers, increased harassment of the media, and higher levels of violence directed at members of the Tamil ethnic minority by the government and Tamil rebels.
Taiwan	Political Rights rating declined from 1 to 2 due to concerns about corruption, particularly links among politicians, business, and organized crime.
Trend Arrows	
Up	
Albania	Upward trend arrow due to increased efforts to combat corruption.
Benin	Upward trend arrow due to free and fair March presidential elections, which allowed for the peaceful transfer of power to an independent candidate.
Croatia	Upward trend arrow due to the introduction of the definition of hate crimes in the Criminal Code.
Italy	Upward trend arrow due to increased freedom of the press following the departure from office of Prime Minister Berlusconi, whose leadership had been marred by his domination over the country’s broadcast media.
Maldives	Upward trend arrow due to increased space for political parties to legally operate, as well as to legislation that reduced the influence of the executive over the judiciary.
Romania	Upward trend arrow due to the implementation of measures to reform the judiciary designed to meet the requirements for the country’s membership in the European Union.
Down	
Argentina	Downward trend arrow because of President Kirchner’s centralization of power in the executive branch and limiting of other government branches’ autonomy, including changing the tax system to limit the influence of provincial governors, gaining higher spending discretion at the expense of Congress, and politicizing the process of Supreme Court justice selection.
Azerbaijan	Downward trend arrow due to a decline in press freedom, including President Aliyev’s increasingly tight grip on the media.
Bahrain	Downward trend arrow due to new legal restrictions on freedom of assembly.

Brazil	Downward trend arrow for increased political corruption, including the involvement of the governing party in many of the country's most serious corruption scandals.
Burma	Downward trend arrow due to the largest offensive against the ethnic Karen population in a decade and the displacement of thousands of Karen as a result of the attacks.
Egypt	Downward trend arrow due to the security forces' ruthless suppression of political dissent.
Eritrea	Downward trend arrow due to unequal treatment for religious minorities under the law.
Ethiopia	Downward trend arrow due to the government's repression of opposition protests.
The Gambia	Downward trend arrow because of political harassment by the National Intelligence Agency following a coup attempt in March.
Hungary	Downward trend arrow due to major riots, described as the most serious since the country's invasion by the Soviet Union in 1956, following a leaked admission by Prime Minister Gyurcsany that the government had been lying about its economic performance and other issues.
Iran	Downward trend arrow for government crackdowns against freedom of assembly.
Kenya	Downward trend arrow because of a lack of transparency regarding governmental anti-corruption efforts.
Kyrgyzstan	Downward trend arrow for a decline in religious freedom, including a number of violent incidents involving alleged religious extremists that took place in the country's south.
Malaysia	Downward trend arrow due to restrictions on press coverage and public discussion of issues relating to race or religion, as well as to a decline in religious freedom.
Philippines	Downward trend arrow due to a spate of political killings specifically targeting leftwing political activists.
Russia	Downward trend arrow for the government's intensified crackdown on NGOs, particularly those receiving foreign funding.
Seychelles	Downward trend arrow because of a crackdown on the opposition, including the adoption of a bill widely perceived as designed to forestall plans by an opposition party to establish its own radio station.
Zimbabwe	Downward trend arrow due to increasingly violent crackdowns on the opposition, growing militarization of state agencies and functions, and a deterioration in conditions for thousands displaced by Operation Murambatsvina.

This report was completed with the assistance of Camille Eiss and Aili Piano.