

ONLY 20 PERCENT *of* PEOPLE LIVE *in* FREE COUNTRIES:

AN ANALYSIS OF FREEDOM HOUSE'S 2023 REPORT

By Emily Ann Milnes

THE DESIRE FOR FREEDOM IS ENDURING AND UNIVERSAL. AGAINST LONG HISTORIES OF AUTHORITARIANS, DYNASTIES, AND EMPIRES, ORDINARY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD DEMONSTRATE RESILIENT HOPE IN THEIR UNRELENTING PURSUIT OF FREEDOM, POLITICAL RIGHTS, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES. BUT DEMOCRACY IS FRAGILE.

Since 1973, Freedom House has published **Freedom in the World**, a comprehensive report (Report) assessing global trends in political rights and civil liberties. The Report ranks countries in three categories: "Free," "Partly Free," and "Not Free"¹ according to the standards of democracy derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).² When Freedom House began its publication five decades ago, only 44 out of 148 countries were "Free." Today, 84 out of 195 countries (or 43 percent of the world's total countries) are "Free."³ And yet, only 20 percent of the world's population live in these "Free" countries. The remaining 80 percent of the total global population do not currently live in countries with access to the basic freedoms that democracy brings.

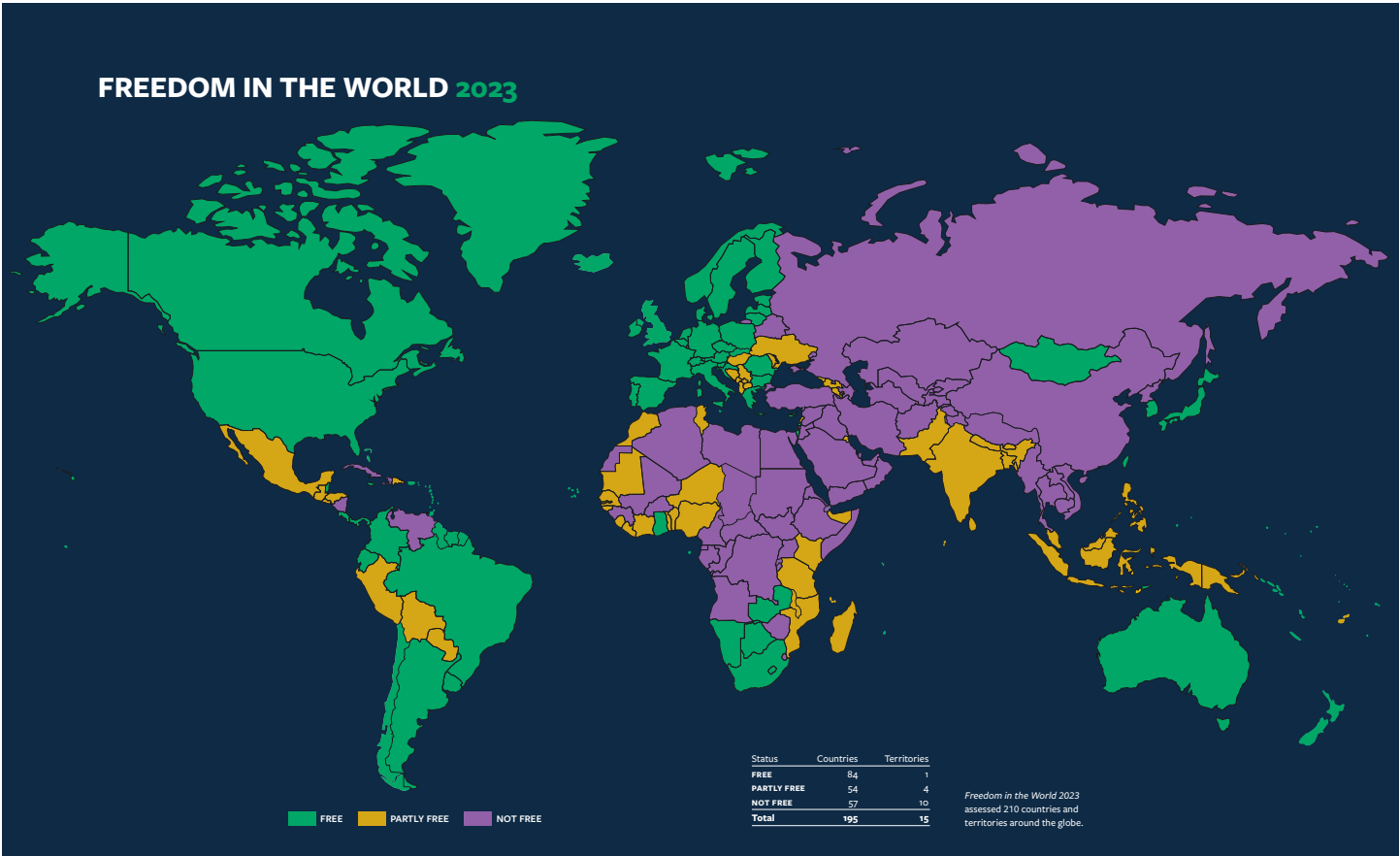
**"THE REMAINING 80 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL GLOBAL
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EIGHTY PERCENT OF THE WORLD’S POPULATION DO NOT LIVE IN A “FREE” COUNTRY

While this increase in the number of “Free” countries is heartening, it is important not to assume unit size or consistency in freedoms and human rights across regions. A country receiving the top ranking of “Free” does not mean an absence of human rights violations or societal problems. Rather, it means that while there is always room for improvement, certain indicators of democracy, such as freedom of religion, freedom to assemble, and free speech

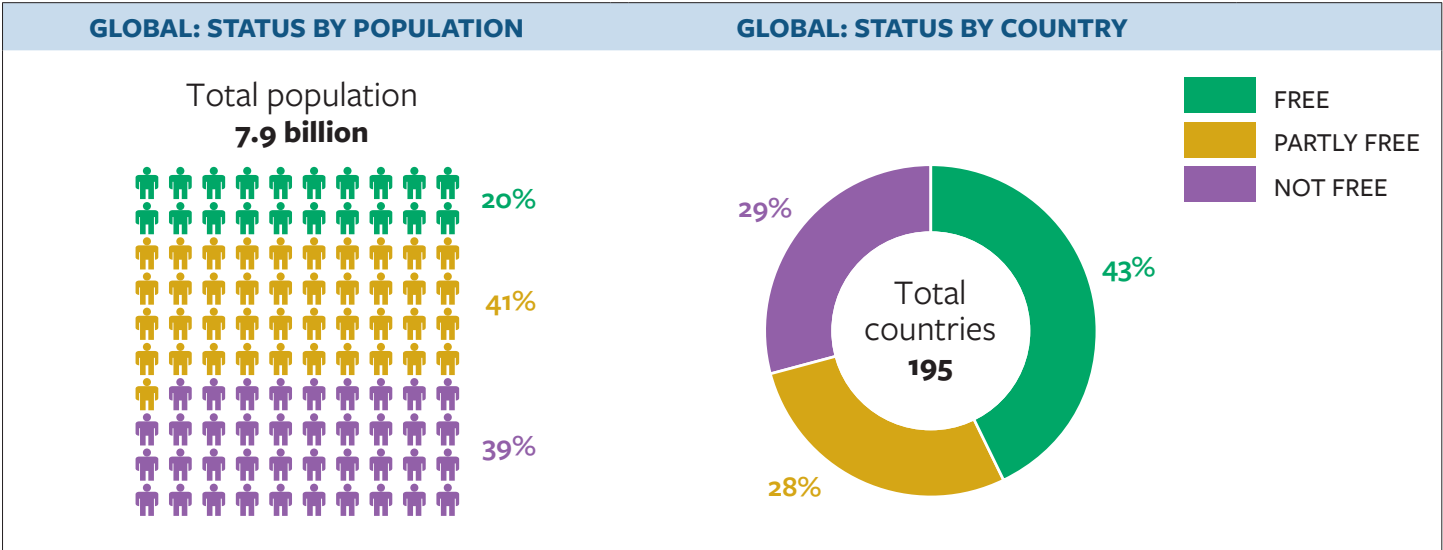
are static. For example, in looking at the following map from the Report, the United States, the Americas, and Europe are mostly “Free” (despite some countries in these territories seeing decline in their aggregate scores this year).⁴ On the other hand, the lack of democratic freedoms within territories like the Eurasian block and much of Africa is sobering.⁵

And while the number of countries with basic political rights and civil liberties have increased from 44 to 84 in the last 50 years, countries that are “Partly Free” or “Not Free” remain where most of the world’s population lives.



Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2023 Map (page 23).

¹ Freedom in the World Research Methodology, <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology>.
² Freedom in the World at 21.
³ Freedom in the World at 12 and 16.
⁴ Freedom in the World at 25 and 28.
⁵ Freedom in the World at 27 and 24.



INDICATORS USED BY FREEDOM HOUSE TO RANK EACH COUNTRY/REGION AS "FREE," "PARTLY FREE," OR "NOT FREE"

POLITICAL RIGHTS INDICATORS	CIVIL LIBERTIES INDICATORS
Electoral Process • Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? • Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? • Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? Political Pluralism and Participation • Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free or undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? • Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? • Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? • Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? Functioning of Government • Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? • Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? • Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	Freedom of Expression and Belief • Are there free and independent media? • Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? • Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? • Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? Associational and Organizational Rights • Is there freedom of assembly? • Is there freedom for nongovernmental organization, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? • Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? Rule of Law • Is there an independent judiciary? • Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? • Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? • Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights • Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place or residence, employment, or education? • Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? • Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice or marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? • Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

“AUTHORITARIAN RULE REMAINS A DIRECT THREAT AGAINST DEMOCRACY...”

And while there is no one-size-fits-all approach to political rights and civil liberties, Freedom House finds that “popular self-government through credible, competitive, free, and fair elections continues to be the hallmark of democracy and a guarantee of its associated benefits.”¹² Again, these tried-and-true standards of democracy stem from the already agreed upon UDHR.

The 2023 Report has five key findings which are insightful for organizations and leaders fighting for freedom around the world today:

1. Global freedom continues to deteriorate for its 17th consecutive year in every region of the world. This means that countries with declines in their aggregate score of “Free,” “Partly Free,” and “Not Free” (as derived from the 10 political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators) continue to outnumber countries showing gains in freedom through the framework of those same indicators.¹³

2. Authoritarian rule remains a direct threat against democracy, with human rights violations, government destabilization, and the loss of basic liberties felt recently in countries such as Burkina Faso (which experienced the steepest decline in freedom among all of the countries in the 2023 Report, moving from “Partly Free” to “Not Free”¹⁴), in Peru (moving from “Free” to “Partly Free”), Myanmar (“Not Free”), and Ukraine (“Partly Free”). The Report finds that regimes around the world continue to persecute ethnic minority groups and women, amounting to acts of “genocide”¹⁵ (such as China’s state-sanctioned forced labor exploiting Uyghurs).¹⁶

Worst of the Worst

Of the 57 countries designated as Not Free, the following 16 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate Score
South Sudan	1
Syria	1
Turkmenistan	2
Eritrea	3
North Korea	3
Equatorial Guinea	5
Central African Republic	7
Tajikistan	7
Afghanistan	8
Belarus	8
Saudi Arabia	8
Somalia	8
Azerbaijan	9
China	9
Myanmar	9
Yemen	9

Freedom House’s Worst of the Worst table (page 31).

¹² Freedom in the World at 16.

¹³ See Freedom in the World at 31 for Worst of the Worst table.

¹⁴ Freedom in the World at 4.

¹⁵ Freedom in the World at 6.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/>. See also, U.S Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Report on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2022/09/01/statement-on-un-human-rights-office-report-on-xinjiang/>.

“THE FACT THAT 80 PERCENT OF THE WORLD’S POPULATION DO NOT LIVE IN FREEDOM IMPACTS EVERYONE REGARDLESS OF GEOGRAPHY, ETHNICITY, RELIGION, OR SOCIAL STATUS.”

3. However, improvements in democracy provide a glimmer of hope that **the struggle for freedom is approaching a turning point**. In the areas of political rights and civil liberties, Freedom House reports that 34 countries made improvements, while 35 countries declined.¹⁷ This is the narrowest country-gap recorded in the 17-year decline of global freedom, meaning that the margin between countries showing an aggregate score decline outnumbering countries with gains is the narrowest since the overall pattern of decline began.¹⁸ However, because freedom varies across regions, not all countries are aligned in freedom.

4. **Freedom of expression** remains the leading indicator of global democratic decline.¹⁹ Seventeen years ago, 14 countries and territories scored 0 out of 4 on the media freedom indicator.²⁰ This year’s Report finds that number has now increased to 33 due to attacks from autocrats, violence, and intimidation with the intent of silencing free speech around the world.

5. **Freedom remains a decades-long fight** with ordinary people faithfully pursuing freedom and defending their rights against authoritarian regimes: “The 50 years of data generated by Freedom in the World offer heartening proof that democratic progress is always possible.”²¹

DEMOCRACY MATTERS BECAUSE FREEDOM MATTERS

Despite the democracy gap narrowing for the first time in 17 years, most of the world’s population do not live free from the oppression of others in speech, thought, worship,

and work. This is both sobering and staggering because 80 percent of 7.9 billion people is not merely a global statistic but reflects individuals who each have inherent value and human dignity and are therefore deserving of democracies’ full freedoms.

Advancing democracy requires a firm understanding of democracy. Freedom House defines democracy as “a governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights.”²² It means freedom from the oppression of opinion, person, and thought. These principles are not limited to a Western ideal. The UDHR itself embodies these freedoms.²³ Advancing democracy, therefore, means calling countries to the already agreed principles of the UDHR, and the thoughtful, respectful championing of the expansion of political rights and civil liberties which allow for human flourishing within the context of nations, regions, cultures, checks and balances.

The fact that 80 percent of the world’s population do not live in freedom impacts everyone regardless of geography, ethnicity, religion, or social status. We should care about democracy because free societies allow for human flourishing and potential, the free exchange of ideas, freedom of religion, and marketplace competition. Compassion and care for human rights and the suffering of others is at the core of what it means to be human. A threat to democracy elsewhere—the snuffing out of freedom—is a threat to national security, order, and economic welfare at home. Freedom matters.

¹⁷ Freedom in the World at 2.

¹⁸ Freedom in the World at 13.

¹⁹ Freedom in the World at 34.

²⁰ Freedom in the World at 13.

²¹ Freedom in the World at 17.

²² Freedom in the World at 21.

²³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

“ONE OF THE
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FREEDOM HOUSE'S POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Over its 50 years of research and reporting, Freedom House consistently finds that autocrats disregard laws and norms because they do not actually believe that democracies are serious about upholding them. Democracy is fragile and the needle easily swings. Upholding laws and norms, strengthening democratic institutions, and supporting human rights defenders is important for instilling, upholding, and defending freedom for current and future generations.

Accountability and integrity must become tools that democratic nations not only rely on for governance internally, but externally in policy and practice, as well, through diplomacy and foreign policy. The world should celebrate as countries such as Colombia and Lesotho move from “Partly Free” to “Free,” and act using the tools of policy and diplomacy to hold countries accountable when they downgrade.

A HOPEFUL TURNING POINT

The demand for freedom is universal. The increase in “Free” countries and the resilience of ordinary people fighting for freedom around the world, despite strong resistance, proves this. **Freedom in the World 2023** finds that there is the possibility of a hope-filled turning point for global freedom as the democracy gap narrows. To protect and expand freedom, there must be political will.²⁴ One of the solutions, therefore, is to equip and support champions to act on behalf of freedom. It also requires clear commitment to the virtues of democracy within the context of promoting freedom, including the ability to speak freely, write freely, associate freely, worship and work freely.²⁵ In this moment of a hopeful turning point, we must not grow weary in our efforts, policies, and diplomacy to promote and protect such freedoms. Human dignity demands freedom.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- **Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy**
- **Freedom in the World Research Methodology**
- **Freedom in the World Publication Archives**

²⁴ Freedom in the World at 32.

²⁵ Freedom in the World at 33.