

# DEMOCRACY UNDER LOCKDOWN

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom



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October 2020

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### ON THE COVER

A protester wears a face mask at a political demonstration in Bolivia during the coronavirus pandemic. Credit: Aizar Raldes/AFP via Getty Images.

# Democracy under Lockdown

## The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom

by Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz

### Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a crisis for democracy around the world. Since the coronavirus outbreak began, the condition of democracy and human rights has grown worse in 80 countries. Governments have responded by engaging in abuses of power, silencing their critics, and weakening or shuttering important institutions, often undermining the very systems of accountability needed to protect public health.

This is the conclusion of new Freedom House research on the impact of COVID-19 on democracy and human rights, produced in partnership with the survey firm GQR. Based on a survey of 398 journalists, civil society workers, activists, and other experts as well as research on 192 countries by Freedom House’s global network of analysts, this report is the first of its kind and the most in-depth effort to date to examine the condition of democracy during the pandemic ([see full methodology](#)).

The research strongly supports the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the 14 years of consecutive decline in freedom. Not only has democracy weakened in 80 countries, but the problem is particularly acute in struggling democracies and highly repressive states—in other words, settings that already had weak safeguards against abuse of power are suffering the most. The findings illustrate the breadth and depth of the assault

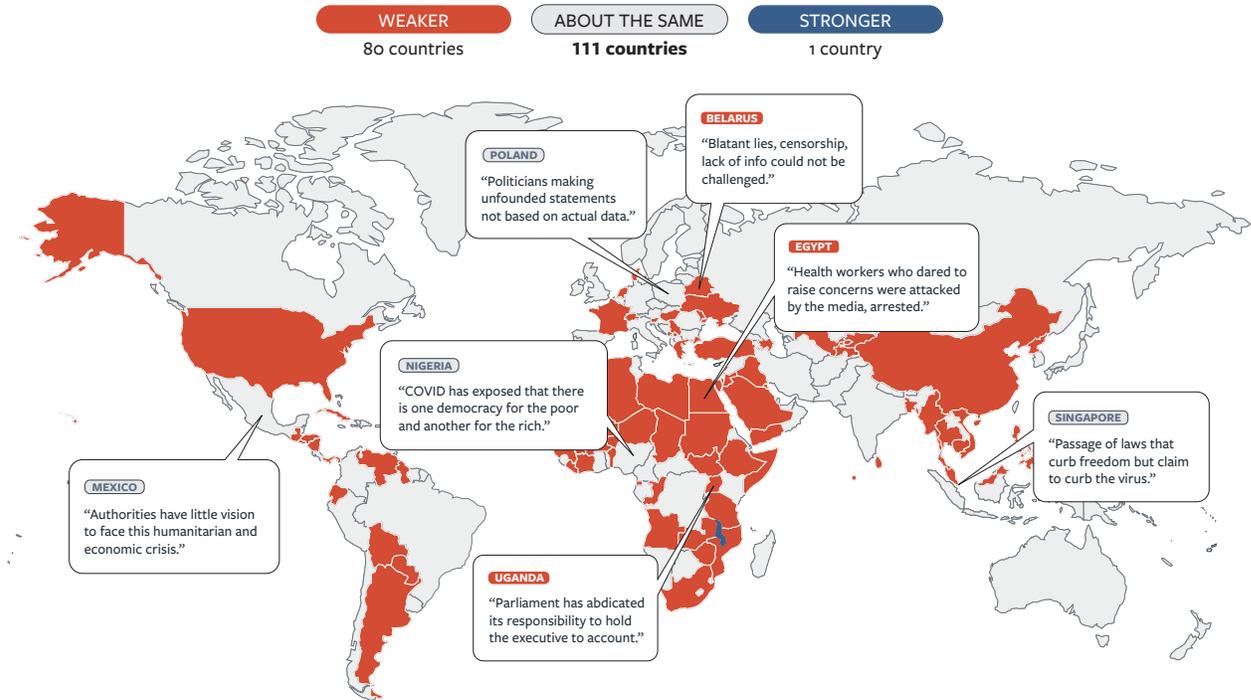
on democracy. As one respondent on Cambodia put it, “The government [took] coronavirus as the opportunity to demolish democratic space.”

Sri Lanka’s experience illustrates the global trends. The government of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa accelerated its authoritarian agenda over the past six months, stepping up efforts to control independent reporting and unfavorable speech by ordering the arrest of anyone who criticizes or contradicts the official line on the coronavirus. Early elections were called but, as the outbreak accelerated, were postponed, leaving the national legislature out of session beyond the constitutional deadline and weakening checks on executive power. Health concerns were also exploited by authorities as a pretext for human rights abuses, especially against the minority Muslim population.

The crisis of democratic governance, having begun long before the pandemic, is likely to continue after the health crisis recedes, as the laws and norms being put in place now will be difficult to reverse. Among the experts surveyed, 64 percent agreed that the impact of COVID-19 on democracy and human rights in their country of focus will be mostly negative over the next three to five years. China’s experience over the past nine months could prove a dystopian model for the future: increased nationalist and propagandistic rhetoric

## GLOBAL DEMOCRACY HAS GROWN WEAKER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Since the coronavirus outbreak began, the condition of democracy and human rights has deteriorated in 80 countries around the world.



at home in an effort to drown out calls for transparency and accountability, enhanced and innovative technological surveillance, crackdowns on individuals within and outside the country who share information that contradicts regime messaging, and the persecution of potential critics among the domestic elite.

Yet even amid devastation and disruption, some have responded to the pandemic with hope and rejuvenation. Journalism has thrived in certain countries as people seek out factual information, and investigative reporting has persisted in several of the most hostile environments. As one expert on

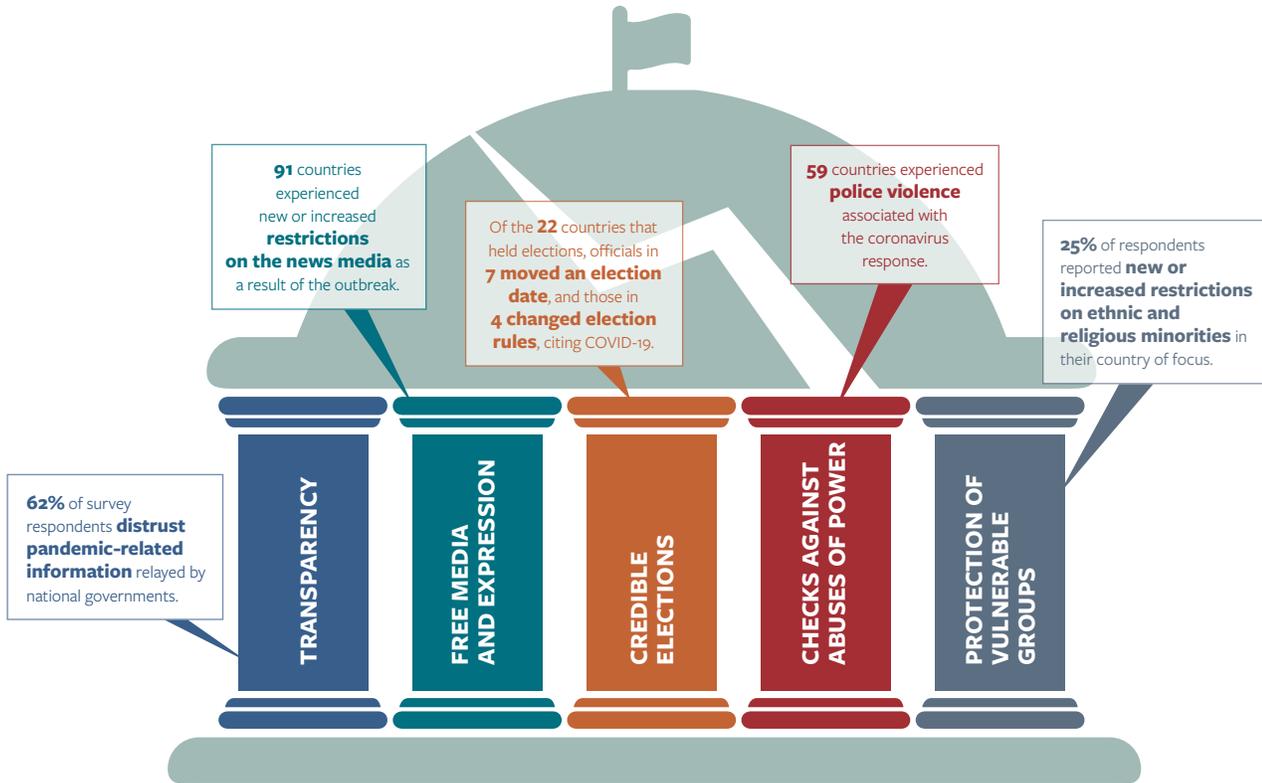
Cuba said, "Activists and independent journalists have been willing to risk fines and imprisonment to report accurately on what is taking place in the country." Civil society organizations have also worked tirelessly to maintain accountability in face of new challenges. And the mishandling of the crisis by many governments has spurred demands for change, most notably in Belarus, where mass protests that began in August have blossomed into a major movement for political reform. Democracy is suffering around the world, but the public's demand for it has not been extinguished.

The following report summarizes the results of Freedom House's research into the impact of COVID-19 on democracy and human rights from January to August 2020. It describes five aspects of accountability that have been weakened: checks against abuses of power, protection of vulnerable groups, transparency and anticorruption, free media and expression, and credible elections. It concludes with a summary of the reasons for hope and a set of recommendations, along with the report methodology.

Democracy is suffering around the world, but the public's demand for it has not been extinguished.

## UNDERMINING ACCOUNTABILITY AROUND THE WORLD

Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have eroded the essential pillars of democracy in countries around the world, creating a crisis for global freedom.



## Abuse of Power

Among survey respondents, 27 percent reported government abuse of power as one of the three issues most affected by the coronavirus outbreak. Officials and security services perpetrated violence against civilians, detained people without justification, and overstepped their legal authority. Governments are also using the pandemic as a justification to grant themselves special powers beyond what is reasonably necessary to protect public health. They have then exploited these emergency powers to interfere in the justice system, impose unprecedented restrictions on political opponents, and undermine crucial legislative functions. As one respondent said of Turkey, “Coronavirus was used as an excuse for the already oppressive government to do things that it has long planned to do, but had not been able to.”

Freedom House research found evidence of police violence against civilians in at least 59 countries. Most of the violence occurred in less democratic settings, with 49 percent of Partly Free countries and 41 percent of Not Free countries under review experiencing such abuses.<sup>1</sup> Detentions and arrests linked to the pandemic response were noted in at least 66 countries, including 49 percent of Partly Free countries and 54 percent of Not Free countries. In Egypt, classified as Not Free, one expert noted, “The military regime has used COVID-19 as an opportunity to further repress political activists, rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and doctors, arresting dozens, denying them basic assistance in places of detention, and placing several on terrorist lists.”

<sup>1</sup> Free, Partly Free, and Not Free statuses come from [Freedom in the World 2020](#). “Countries under review” refers to the 192 countries covered by this report.

The high rates of abuse by authorities in Partly Free countries likely indicate that governments with both a relatively active opposition and weak checks on their own power perceive a greater need and opportunity to resort to violence. One Partly Free country, Liberia, experienced “brutal and corrupt enforcement of curfew orders by security forces.” In another, Zimbabwe, “COVID-19 has also been used to arrest, abduct, rape, assault, and intimidate human rights activists, opposition party leaders/supporters, civil society leaders, journalists, and other dissenting voices on ‘allegations of violating lockdown conditions.’”

Surveillance has greatly increased during the pandemic, and broad monitoring can easily become excessive and intimidating. For example, a respondent on the Philippines reported that authorities have visited the homes of individuals who may have been exposed to the virus, and arrests are frequently carried out for violations as simple as not wearing a mask while crossing a border. In Sri Lanka, a survey respondent described the “house-to-house collection of household-level information by the police, accompanied by military intelligence.”

Many experts also detailed crackdowns on opposition figures or the judiciary. In Kazakhstan, “there is an increase in the persecution of civic activists and political opposition

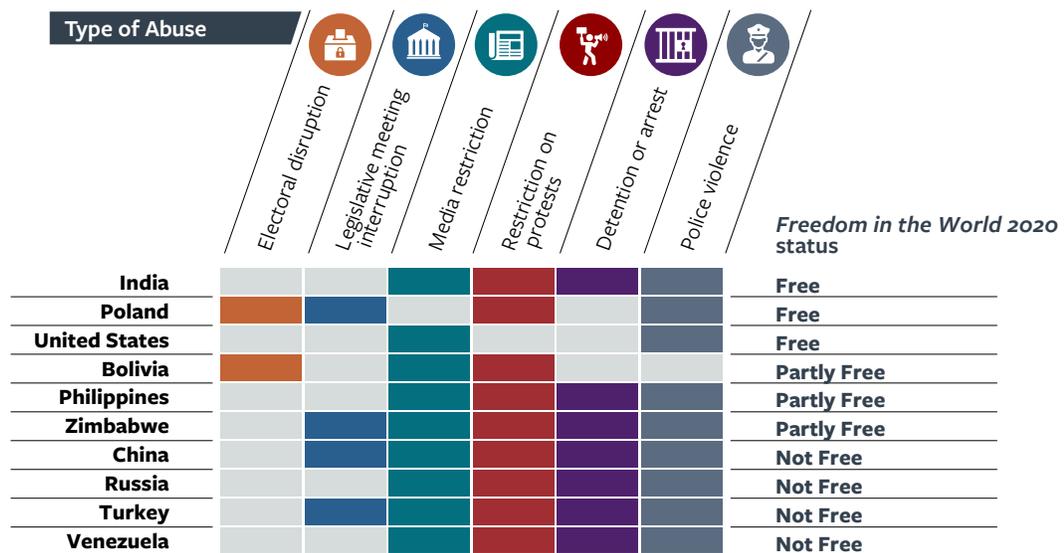
for expressing their critical opinions on social media or disseminating information about human rights violations, including through the initiation of criminal cases.” In Cambodia, “[Prime Minister] Hun Sen’s government has used COVID-19 to bolster its crackdown on the political opposition.” In Azerbaijan, “the government has used the pretext of breaking quarantine to crack down on opposition political activists.” In Guatemala, the “pandemic has been utilized to continue attacks against the rule of law. The country is in the process of electing magistrates to [the] highest courts and corrupt and criminal groups are looking to rig the process.” In Serbia, “the judiciary has become a puppet of the executive branch, trials are being...conducted via video link, without the presence of defense attorneys.”

At the same time, parliaments have been hamstrung by health restrictions and emergency laws, and at times manipulated for political purposes. One respondent on Singapore noted that the most disturbing development has been the “passage of laws that curb freedom but claim to curb the virus.” Almost 4 in 10 (39 percent) of the surveyed experts, representing 65 countries, said meetings of the national legislature were canceled for at least part of the pandemic.

Such abuses may reflect a government’s fear of losing power, rather than confidence in its own strength. Overall,

## KEY GOVERNMENT ABUSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Governments across the Free to Not Free spectrum engaged in various abuses of human rights and democratic institutions in response to the coronavirus pandemic.



57 percent of respondents felt that governing parties in their country of focus have grown weaker since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, compared with only 27 percent who believe they are stronger. In the countries where democracy was seen as weakening this year, experts were likely—by a margin of 6 percentage points—to see governing parties in a stronger position, as in Bangladesh, Burundi, Poland, and Sri Lanka. However, this apparent “bump” for governing parties in democratically declining countries represents only a fraction of the gains enjoyed by governing parties in better-performing countries where there are high rates of approval for the national government’s response to the coronavirus, or where the economy is strong, such as Estonia.

The survey findings highlighted two countries that are not long-standing democracies yet have resisted imposing widely

abusive measures in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The 10 experts who responded to the survey on Tunisia, which became a Free country in *Freedom in the World 2015*, all expressed approval of the national government’s handling of the outbreak. At the time of this writing, virus cases were on the rise, and there have been reports of police abuse and arbitrary enforcement of lockdown measures, but officials have refrained from serious infringements on fundamental freedoms. In Georgia, which remains a Partly Free country, the government has been widely commended among the population for imposing strict, but transparent, measures to tackle the pandemic. Georgia has had one of the lowest death rates globally, resulting in a significant popularity boost for the ruling Georgian Dream party ahead of October elections. These cases are a reminder that any country can take steps to manage health risks while respecting human rights.

## Marginalized Communities

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Abuses of power during the pandemic have had a disproportionate impact on communities that were already marginalized. Among the experts surveyed, 29 percent said a lack of protection for minorities and vulnerable populations was one of three issues most affected by the coronavirus response; 25 percent said new or increased restrictions on ethnic and religious minorities have been put in place as a result of the coronavirus outbreak in their countries of focus. In some cases, these groups suffered disproportionately because their status put them at greater risk. But the dearth of accountability precipitated by weakened independent media or acquiescent legislative and judicial branches has allowed both state and nonstate actors to discriminate against certain groups with impunity.

In some countries, lockdown measures have been applied in an openly discriminatory manner to specific segments of the population. In Bulgaria, Romany neighborhoods were placed under harsher movement restrictions than areas where Roma did not constitute a majority. In Kuwait, authorities put greater restrictions on noncitizen neighborhoods than on areas where mostly citizens live. Criminal and rebel groups have also used the pandemic as a pretext to prey on marginalized communities. In Colombia, according to a survey respondent, “ethnic minorities had to completely withdraw into their shelters to protect themselves from the

virus and with that they found themselves at the mercy of... illegal armed groups.”

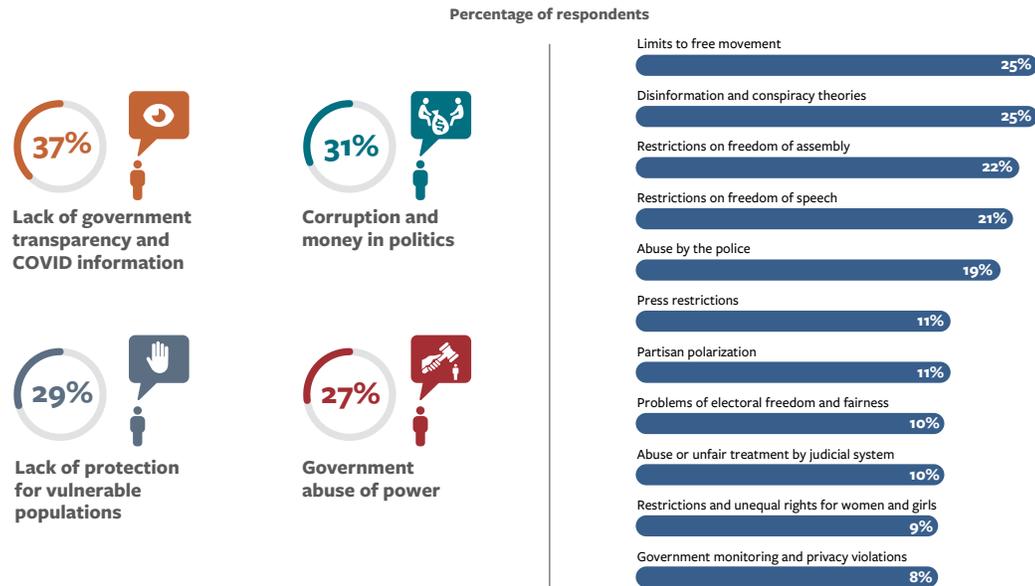
Marginalized groups have faced disproportionate sanctions. In the United Kingdom, news media have reported that Black people and people of Asian descent are detained at higher rates than white residents under new police powers. In Turkey, a respondent claimed that “police violence under the cover of COVID-19 audits and checks disproportionately targets minorities.”

Governments and societies have continued to use marginalized groups as scapegoats, blaming them for spreading the virus. India’s Muslims were labeled “superspreaders” and subjected to “a vicious hate campaign” in response to news of an Islamic religious gathering in New Delhi that was linked to an outbreak of COVID-19. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, “Muslims were treated as superspreaders with some members of government blaming Muslims for people not being able to celebrate the Sinhala and Tamil New Year,” and “the media would highlight cases where the patients were of a minority community.” Moreover, against their religious customs and despite World Health Organization recommendations stating that burials were acceptable, Sri Lankan Muslims were ordered to cremate those in their community who died after

## UNDER ASSAULT: GOOD INFORMATION, TRANSPARENCY, VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

A survey of experts identified the three most common problems associated with the pandemic response around the world.

Survey question: *Understanding that you may work on specific issues listed below, in your opinion, which THREE of the following have been most affected by COVID-19 in your main country of focus over the past few months?*



contracting the virus. In Montenegro, “the government and its media used the opportunity to label any religious protest gatherings, especially those of the members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as reckless if not outright intentional attempts to spread the coronavirus and undermine the ruling regime.”

In Costa Rica, already marginalized Nicaraguan migrants and refugees who work in the agricultural sector are reportedly viewed by many as contributing to the spread of COVID-19. In Serbia, “the anti-migrant atmosphere has grown...as migrants were portrayed as possible carriers of the virus.” A respondent on Turkey noted that “the declaration by [the] Directorate of Religious Affairs [said] that the LGBTI+ individuals are responsible for spreading the virus around the world as the damned group by God.”

Specific pandemic-related policies and practices have also targeted refugees who are already fleeing persecution. The Malaysian government “falsely promis[ed] no action on refugees for taking Covid tests, but later ended up arresting and detaining many to be deported.” Journalists attempting to expose conditions for refugees amid the pandemic have been muzzled in several countries.

As international attention remains focused on combatting the coronavirus, governments and other actors have been able to escalate ongoing abuses against vulnerable groups with little scrutiny. In Myanmar, where the International Court of Justice has ordered the government to prevent genocide against the Rohingya and mobile internet access has been largely restricted since June 2019, “The military has intensified attacks in ethnic areas, which can be related to less international scrutiny due to coronavirus. This has caused mass displacement and grave human rights violations, particularly in western Myanmar.” Local civil society groups and other stakeholders similarly have less capacity to hold perpetrators accountable for rights violations not directly linked to the pandemic response.

Despite these grave developments, some bright spots have appeared. The government in Portugal, for instance, granted migrants temporary citizenship rights so they could secure public services. A respondent for Tunisia said that the government and the people “provided aid to all needy minorities and refugees, especially [those] from Syria and Africans.” Sustained, inclusive measures have the potential to pave the way for greater equality after the health crisis has subsided, which in turn can foster better outcomes for future crises.

## Transparency and Anticorruption

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Authoritarian and democratically elected leaders alike have failed to be candid about the impact of the coronavirus. Among the surveyed experts, 37 percent, representing 65 countries, named government transparency and information about coronavirus as one of the three issues most affected by the response to the pandemic. In fact, shortcomings in transparency and official information ranked highest among the 15 issues suggested to respondents. For experts focused on countries that *Freedom in the World* classifies as Not Free, the response was even stronger, with 46 percent citing transparency as a chief concern.

Experts from around the world expressed broad skepticism of government information on the coronavirus. A 62 percent majority of survey respondents said they distrust what they are hearing about the pandemic from the national government in their country of focus, and among Not Free countries, 77 percent distrust such information. Respondents expressed slightly more confidence about information from local governments, but a 53 percent majority distrusts these sources as well. About half (52 percent) of respondents, representing 66 countries, said the virus has “led to a proliferation of disinformation coming from the government.” For example, a respondent on Poland saw “politicians making unfounded statements not based on actual data, and when challenged, claiming they have never said such a thing and that their words have been taken out of context.” These attitudes toward government stand in contrast to opinions about the media: a 56 percent majority of respondents have confidence in what the media in their country are reporting about the virus.

In open-ended written responses to the survey, some experts referred to outright government denial of the virus, as in countries including Nicaragua and Turkmenistan, or promotion of unsafe or unproven treatments, in countries such as Brazil and Tanzania. In a chilling response to a question about the most disturbing practice they have seen, one expert said, “Dead bodies buried at night.”

The survey corroborates the idea that corruption thrives when transparency declines; 31 percent of respondents representing 45 countries included “corruption and money in politics” among the top three issues they see as most affected by the pandemic response. Massive government outlays to assist with public health and the economy, often distributed hastily with no meaningful mechanisms in place to monitor the funds, have provided opportunities for corruption. For example, in Mauritania, “the ministers of the ruling party used COVID funds to make donations on behalf of the prime minister.” Other experts shared stories about the disappearance of supplies, or suspicious contracts with uncertified medical providers. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a raspberry farm infamously won a state contract to acquire ventilators, “companies not registered for medical services were registered overnight to participate in embezzlement of huge funds for purchase of medical equipment of suspicious origin.”

As the pandemic drags on, public attention will inevitably turn elsewhere, permitting even further abuses to go unchecked. The burden of preventing degraded norms from taking hold will largely fall on democracy advocates and independent journalists, who must continue to place pressure on governments to remain transparent and adhere to the rule of law.

## Media and Expression

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Independent media have often been stifled during the pandemic, making accountability difficult and hampering the dissemination of vital information. Based on Freedom House research, at least 91 of 192 countries (47 percent) experienced restrictions on the news media as part of the response to the coronavirus outbreak. The media in 62 percent of Partly Free

countries and 67 percent of Not Free countries under review experienced such constraints.

Journalists covering the crisis have been arrested and targeted with violence, harassment, and intimidation. Governments have exerted control over content, revoked

outlets’ registrations, suspended printing of newspapers, denied press credentials, and limited independent questioning at press conferences. New legislation against spreading “fake news” about the virus has been passed, while websites have been blocked and online articles or social media posts removed. The increased public need for impartial information during a pandemic makes such varied methods of suppression particularly egregious.

In addition to specific controls on the news media, government restrictions on free speech and criticism of the government have been imposed in at least 72 countries (38 percent); 56 percent of Partly Free and 57 percent of Not Free countries under review saw limits on free expression. As one respondent on Kyrgyzstan said, “Medical workers who openly spoke out about the problems they encountered were forced to apologize and recant their claims on video.” In response to how their work has been affected by the pandemic, a respondent on Bangladesh stated, “I am more cautious in publicly criticising government responses on COVID-19.”

Freedom of expression and belief has precipitously deteriorated during the 14 consecutive years of decline in overall global freedom observed by *Freedom in the World*. The pandemic has aggravated this negative trajectory, particularly in countries where independent journalism was already under pressure. In Rwanda, where severe legal restrictions are in place and a journalist went missing last year, there has been “a lot of restriction in matters of independent reporting from non-government institutions. Some journalist[s] who were broadcasting via [YouTube] channels were arrested, and others have been reprimanded from covering issues of COVID-19.”

Several countries that experienced a large decline in freedom during 2019<sup>2</sup> have imposed new or increased restrictions on the media since the outbreak began. One of these countries is Tanzania, where the media has effectively been barred from covering the pandemic. Another is Nigeria, where a respondent wrote that there have been “increased cases of journalists detained for their opinions



Olatunji Disuj, commander of the Lagos State Rapid Response Squad, communicates with officers during Nigeria’s five-week-long lockdown. Credit: Oluwafemi Dawodu/Shutterstock.

of government policies,” while the presidency has limited accreditations for press conferences.

These intentional restrictions help enable governments to act with impunity, sometimes with the assistance of a subservient legislature or judiciary. Even when governments seem to be providing accurate information, quarantines and restrictions on travel may hinder the ability of the media to monitor and question them. In the words of a Lebanon respondent, “during lock[down] the government at first did not allow the journalist[s]...to move freely, they had to get special permits.”

Governments and citizens must recognize that press freedoms and freedom of expression are essential tools for exposing misconduct and assessing the effectiveness of the pandemic response. Public health depends on the protection of these core democratic values.

<sup>2</sup> Three or more points in *Freedom in the World 2020*.

## Elections

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National elections in nine countries, and many more subnational votes, were disrupted in some way between January and August 2020, with frequent accusations that decisions on election administration had been politicized. Given the rapid onset of the pandemic and the acute health risks it posed to voters, postponements were not always unreasonable. Yet such moves frequently failed to meet democratic standards, either because new elections were not scheduled promptly or because officials set new dates without making adequate preparations for safe and secure voting.

Among the 24 countries that had a national election planned during the period under review, 22 nationwide votes took place. Seven countries moved an election date, including three that did not immediately plan for new elections, though they eventually set new dates. COVID-19 provoked changes in election rules in four countries, damaging the credibility of the elections in two cases. There were 13 countries that introduced alternative voting methods that minimized health risks.

In Sri Lanka, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved the opposition-controlled parliament in March in a bid to hold early parliamentary elections in April. Due to the health crisis, however, the country was unable to conduct the elections within the constitutional timeframe of three months. Five months ultimately passed before the balloting was held in August, during which the president ruled without a legislature. Rajapaksa's party won the elections in a landslide, adding to fears that he and his brother, former president and current prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, would consolidate power and build an authoritarian regime.

Other votes also seemed designed to tighten an authoritarian grip. Burundi's election went ahead on May 20 with few health precautions for the population, yet foreign observers were required to quarantine; conveniently for the ruling party, none showed up. According to an expert on Belarus, where a fraudulent election has led to ongoing mass protests, "The authorities, having done nothing to stop the spread of the coronavirus, used the epidemic solely to limit the rights of citizens during the election campaign," including by restricting international and local observers.



Voters arrive at a polling station during parliamentary elections in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on August 5, 2020. Credit: Ruwan Walpola/Shutterstock.

Elections were postponed in Ethiopia and Bolivia, dashing hopes that voting would bring clarity to transitional situations. In Ethiopia, reformist prime minister Abiy Ahmed took power in 2018 through an internal party process, and Parliament's term was set to expire in October 2020. The government decided this spring that the coronavirus necessitated an indefinite electoral delay. This has led to political unrest and fears of a return to authoritarian rule.

In Bolivia, the incumbent government was meant to serve on an interim basis after protests against a seriously flawed vote led former president Evo Morales to flee the country in November 2019. Yet the special election was postponed three times, ostensibly due to the coronavirus. (It was scheduled for October 18 at the time of writing.) Critics of the caretaker president—who is also a presidential candidate—see her handling of the health situation as politically motivated. As one respondent said of Bolivia, "The coronavirus arrived at a

moment of democratic fragility, since our country was in the midst of a governmental transition pending new elections...this once again threw the country into a state of social upheaval.”

In Hong Kong, where prodemocracy protests against Beijing’s growing control have persisted for more than a year, legislative elections originally set for September, in which the opposition had hoped to make further gains after major successes in 2019 district council voting, have been postponed by 12 months. Although COVID-19 was the official justification, the relatively low infection and death rates in the territory, the June imposition of a draconian national security law, and the August banning of 12 prodemocracy candidates from running next year are among the many signs that have led experts to accuse the Chinese Communist Party of using the delay to complete its suffocation of Hong Kong’s freedom and autonomy.

Among the countries that held elections, two encouraging cases stand out. South Korean citizens voted for their National Assembly in April with high confidence in their government’s response to the pandemic. Protective

measures were implemented at polling places and specific arrangements were made to avoid disenfranchising voters who were sick or quarantined. The ruling party was rewarded with a resounding victory amid the highest turnout in 28 years. In May, New Zealand officials announced a range of measures to help ensure that its September parliamentary elections could go forward, including more early voting, personal protective equipment for polling places, and various forms of remote voting. Although the elections were subsequently pushed to October, the government will remain within its mandate under the plan, and maintains high public trust.

South Korea and New Zealand are both rich, small, established democracies. Nevertheless, they prove that successful elections can go forward during a pandemic with proper planning and resources. COVID-19 cannot be considered a short-term disruption, and democracy cannot be deferred indefinitely. A case to watch is Georgia’s parliamentary elections, set for October, which survey respondents flagged as a possible positive example of international engagement in support of necessary electoral preparations.

## Pandemic in the United States

COVID-19 has thrived amid the misinformation and scapegoating of democratically elected populists in countries like India and Brazil. It has also deepened the fractures in the democratic institutions of the United States. Not only have US death tolls been among the highest in the world, but the pandemic hit in a crucial election year, and public health has become politicized.

The Trump administration has been sharply criticized for creating a fog of misinformation around the pandemic. In his press conferences and social media posts, the president repeatedly downplayed the severity of the coronavirus,

attacked state governors from the opposition Democratic Party for imposing social-distancing measures, promoted unproven treatments and false health statistics, asserted that the pathogen would soon disappear, and pushed for restrictions to be lifted even as the contagion spread, among other harmful statements. The Department of Health and Human Services ordered hospitals to redirect their COVID-19 data from an established reporting system at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to a new database controlled by the department, leading to concerns that the information could be manipulated or obfuscated for political reasons. Senior public health professionals who openly contradicted the president’s claims were marginalized, while others struggled to bridge the gap between the science and the administration’s political and economic priorities.

Many of the state-by-state primary elections leading up to the general elections in November were held after the first coronavirus cases were detected in February and March. Attempts to postpone the April voting in Wisconsin led to a

**Experts have expressed doubt that local election authorities are prepared for the November elections.**

mixed series of lower court decisions that culminated in a US Supreme Court ruling the night before election day. In the resulting confusion, thousands of voters who had requested absentee ballots never received them, and wait times for in-person voting reportedly reached up to four hours due to reductions in the number of polling places. Conditions were little better in June, when shortages of poll workers, voting-machine problems, and dysfunction surrounding absentee ballots wreaked havoc in the state of Georgia. Many experts have expressed doubt that local election authorities across the country are prepared for the November elections, citing increased demand for voting by mail, likely staffing shortfalls, and last-minute changes to electoral rules—all related to the pandemic.

In addition to its political reverberations, COVID-19 has underscored the country's racial inequities, which put Black and Latino populations at a particular disadvantage. Households in these communities are more likely to have

members who continued traveling to their workplaces during local lockdown periods because their jobs could not be done remotely, meaning they faced a greater risk of exposure to the virus. Members of these groups were also more likely to have preexisting health conditions—many of which can be linked to systemic bias in housing, health care, employment, and education—that exacerbated the severity of the disease among those who contracted it.

Separately, between March and July, US authorities used an emergency health directive to summarily expel more than 40,000 people who were apprehended for allegedly making unauthorized border crossings, including unaccompanied minors and those who sought to apply for asylum as permitted by US and international law. The policy raised concerns that the Trump administration was exploiting the pandemic as a pretext to set aside due process obligations and intensify its clampdown on asylum seekers and immigration in general.

## Democracy and Human Rights Work Changes amid Pandemic

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Individual democracy and human rights activists and journalists, who were already under tremendous pressure from undemocratic governments, have faced severe constraints during the coronavirus outbreak. In survey responses, restrictions on movement in particular were cited for creating obstacles to holding workshops, meeting with sources, providing support to vulnerable populations, and conducting advocacy work. A respondent on Poland explained, “As a journalist, my ability to contact information sources has been limited—most such contacts have to be made electronically...which significantly reduces the confidence of information sources and limits the amount of information I receive.” A respondent on Ghana said, “The quarantine and ban on social gatherings...made it difficult for us to reach the vulnerable during the lockdown, particularly women who suffered from gender-based violence.”

Technological alternatives have been useful for some organizations, for instance by allowing them to engage with more stakeholders, but others lament poor internet

connectivity and a diminished ability to accomplish their aims. In Morocco, “project activities linked to human rights [were] either postponed or replaced by online activities which had less impact at the level of interaction and engagement.” In Turkey, an “inability to conduct physical meetings has affected advocacy and outreach work (especially when communities are unable to utilise technology for various reasons).” In contrast, a respondent speaking about activist work in Honduras said that “there is a larger audience that has the time to learn and mobilize as well as show dissent.” Additional work has also arisen as more people need assistance and new government abuses related to the pandemic require monitoring, straining civil society's capacity.

Funding has become more difficult to obtain, and focus has shifted—among governments, donors, and other stakeholders—from democracy and human rights issues to more basic material needs. As a Philippines respondent said, “The coronavirus outbreak has forced us to adjust our operations,” adding that “the pandemic has also





Belarusian people flocked to attend a preelection rally for opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in Minsk in July 2020. Credit: Svetlana Turchenick/Shutterstock.

Journalism has received a boost in some locations as people seek out information related to the health situation. Many survey respondents described journalists risking their own freedom and safety in order to report on the coronavirus and subsequent government abuses. In the Philippines, where independent media is under assault by the Duterte government, “journalists covering the pandemic are pushing back through their enterprising methods of reporting despite the limitation in movement. They are also more indignant whenever restrictions are applied to the press, such as in the case of [the] ABS-CBN shutdown, wherein hundreds of journalists stood in support of the news network.”

Courts and legislators are also providing checks on excessive power and abuses in certain countries. Brazil’s Supreme Court, for instance, has restrained President Jair Bolsonaro’s antidemocratic tendencies: as Indigenous communities were struck particularly hard by the virus, and Bolsonaro vetoed part of a bill that would have provided them with assistance, the court ruled that the government must enact health measures in response. It also suspended a provisional measure that would have limited freedom of information requests. In Lesotho, a respondent reported, “the judiciary also ruled against the former prime minister’s decision to shut down Parliament using COVID-19 as the reason.” A respondent on Israel reported

being inspired by “specific parliament members who stood for themselves against their own political parties.”

Despite quarantines, curfews, and lockdowns, many people are still taking to the streets to challenge their governments, revealing that the global pattern of mass protests that emerged in 2019 has continued. Although 158 countries have had new restrictions placed on protests, Freedom House researchers identified significant protests in at least 90 countries since the outbreak began. These demonstrations were held in 39 percent of Free countries, 60 percent of Partly Free countries, and 43 percent of Not Free countries under review. At least one third of the countries in each region experienced a significant protest, up to two thirds seeing protests in some regions. The sheer number of demonstrations across all types of regimes and in every region of the world demonstrates that even as governments look to take advantage of the crisis to strengthen their own positions, people will continue to challenge them.

Events in Belarus represent a powerful example of pushback in a country where freedom of assembly has long been severely restricted. Unprecedented mass protests against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has led the country since 1994, erupted in August following his claim of victory

in a vote marred by repression of opposition figures and allegations of widespread fraud. Resistance against Lukashenka was sparked at least in part by his denial of the pandemic, which contributed to a deadly outbreak of the virus. Thousands of protesters have been detained, and many have been subjected to extensive brutality by security forces, including torture. With Russian president Vladimir Putin threatening to intervene on Lukashenka's behalf, it is vital that the international community support the protesters' demands for government accountability and democratic change.

Yet for every noteworthy attempt to hold bad actors accountable and to respect political rights and civil liberties, there are numerous other measures that have chipped away at democratic norms and freedoms. Especially in struggling democracies and amid more recent reformers, freedom is fragile and requires constant cultivation. Proponents of democracy must support one another around the world to ensure that government failures lead to renewed demands for stronger institutions. Otherwise the deadly COVID-19 pandemic will result in lasting damage to global freedom.

## Recommendations for Protecting Human Rights and Democracy in the Fight against COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic presents a grave threat to public health. At the same time, measures adopted to combat it can have harmful, discriminatory effects, inflicted both intentionally and unwittingly. Restrictive emergency measures can also be extended and repurposed after the pandemic and associated health risks begin to recede.

The democracy and human rights experts surveyed for this report—including journalists, civil society members, and academics working in over 100 countries—were asked to identify needs that arose during the course of their work as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. They were also asked how the international community can help support democracy and human rights during the pandemic. The following recommendations include their input.

Freedom House calls on governments, civil society organizations, and donors to protect political rights and civil liberties during and after the pandemic by following these recommendations.

**Ensure that emergency measures are accountable, proportionate, and time-restricted.** Emergency restrictions should be clearly communicated, enacted in a transparent manner, well grounded in law, necessary to serve a legitimate purpose, and proportionate to the threat. Emergency restrictions affecting basic rights, including freedoms of assembly, association, or internal movement, should be limited in duration, subject to independent oversight, and imposed and

extended based only on transparent criteria. Individuals should have the opportunity to seek remedies and compensation for any unnecessary or disproportionate rights violations committed during the crisis.

**Provide technical support and training for online work.** Assistance with moving work online was the most frequently identified need cited by the democracy and human rights experts surveyed for this report. Civil society organizations and activists should collaborate on local and global levels to identify best practices for remote work and develop associated trainings, and governments and donors should help fund these efforts. Specific needs identified include training in the use of communications platforms, including to conduct and supplement remote seminars and conferences; training on effectively sharing and promoting work online; and both technical advisers and software to strengthen digital security and improve digital hygiene practices. Respondents also highlighted a need for computers and other equipment, and a need to improve, or even introduce, internet access in many areas.

**Ensure that free and independent media can thrive, and people have access to fact-based information.** A free press, and ensuring freedom of expression and access to information, is critical during times of emergency. Support for media—including financial assistance, technical support, skills training, and mentoring—was another frequently identified need of survey respondents. Independent media outlets and

freelance journalists already face enormous obstacles in many countries, leaving a scarcity of timely, accurate, and fact-based reporting. During the pandemic and accompanying economic crisis, financial support is imperative if journalists are to continue their daily work, including disseminating fact-based information and data about COVID-19 infections and treatments, and countering mis- and disinformation. Governments should deliver clear, accurate, and up-to-date information about the virus, and officials should not endorse speculation or falsehoods. Governments and internet service providers should make every effort to support and maintain reliable access to the internet. Criminal penalties for distributing false information are disproportionate and prone to arbitrary application and abuse. In the United States, the proposed Universal Press Freedom Act would prioritize the promotion of press freedom by appointing an ambassador-at-large to coordinate US foreign policy engagement on global press freedom issues.

**Support free and fair elections that respect public health.** Every step should be taken to protect the administration of free and fair elections during the pandemic. Voter-registration rules and polling-station procedures should be adjusted in order to safeguard public health. Opportunities for socially distanced voting should be provided through measures such as early voting, vote-by-mail, or other remote voting procedures where their integrity can be ensured. Campaigns should pursue alternative mechanisms for voter outreach—such as online rallies and contacting with voters via text message—when large public gatherings are not advisable. Election officials should identify travel-related and other challenges that could hamper the work of independent election observers, and implement measures to ensure their presence at the polls. When safe and secure elections cannot be held as planned, changes should be made with buy-in from a range of political and civic stakeholders, and voting should be rescheduled promptly, with systematic measures put in place to ensure that polls are held in a timely manner.

**Provide emergency funding that allows democracy and human rights organizations to continue daily work.** Many survey respondents said stopgap funding was urgently needed if civic organizations and activists were to continue their day-to-day work in the absence of their usual revenue streams. Democracy and governance projects are all the more urgent while undemocratic rulers are using the pandemic as a pretext to further restrict rights. Civil society groups are essential in efforts to address restrictions on fundamental rights, advance necessary electoral and judicial reforms, and counter intensifying political polarization. Democratic governments

and private donors should ensure that civil society groups—particularly those operating in restrictive environments—have the funding necessary to continue their critical work strengthening democracy and governance and protecting human rights. In the United States, the Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act (S.3819/H.R.6986) should be passed without delay. If enacted, it would, among other things, provide funding for programs that strengthen democratic institutions; support civil society groups and human rights defenders; and bolster human rights, including press freedom.

**Identify human rights abuses, condemn them when they occur, and hold perpetrators to account.** Survey respondents called on democratic governments and other advocates to monitor for and forcefully condemn abuses when they occur, and to ensure abuses do not go unnoticed despite the pandemic. Respondents highlighted the need for special attention to groups that may face heightened vulnerabilities during the pandemic, including women; LGBT+ people; and members of ethnic, racial, religious, and other marginalized groups. Efforts should be made to ensure that these communities have equal access to essential services and receive equal treatment under the law. Scapegoating certain groups as the purported cause of the health crisis, and encouraging or condoning intercommunal tensions and rights abuses, are grave violations for which perpetrators must be held accountable. Clear government messaging should denounce discriminatory practices or violence perpetrated against marginalized communities. Visa bans and asset freezes, such as those provided for in the Global Magnitsky laws in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and the Baltic States, should be imposed on entities and individuals involved in human rights abuses, including government officials. The Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act (S.3819/H.R.6986) currently pending before the US Congress would require the secretary of state and administrator of USAID to develop a strategic plan for how to address global human rights violations that occur during the pandemic, and would direct the US government to consider gross violations of human rights when determining whether a foreign government is eligible to receive security-sector assistance.

**Combat corruption in pandemic response efforts.** Foreign governments, international institutions, and private donors have provided tens of million dollars to governments and local aid groups around the world to help address COVID-19. However, kleptocrats and other corrupt actors have used the opportunity to enrich themselves. This betrayal of public trust contributes directly to an

increased coronavirus death toll by diverting resources away from public health initiatives. Survey respondents called on government officials, activists, civil society groups, and donors to ensure that coronavirus relief funding is used as intended and does not end up lining the pockets of authoritarian leaders, bolstering their staying power and enabling them to further restrict fundamental rights. Some respondents encouraged donors to link international aid, grants, and loans to basic benchmarks reflecting the recipient government's commitment to democratic processes and the protection of human rights. Training for civil society in monitoring and documenting financial and other abuses, as well as international condemnation and targeted sanctions for abusers, are essential if corruption is to be rooted out.

Corrupt officials should be held accountable for their actions through targeted sanctions such as the Global Magnitsky laws. Democracies should limit opportunities for the laundering of stolen funds through international financial markets. Corrupt actors routinely funnel stolen funds through international financial markets, laundered via seemingly legitimate purchases in democratic nations. Transparency laws should be updated if necessary to ensure that accurate identifying information about purchasers and their funding sources is available. In the United States, lawmakers should advance proposed measures like the Corporate Transparency Act (H.R. 2513) and the similar ILLICIT CASH Act (S. 2563), which would prohibit corrupt actors from hiding behind shell corporations by requiring the disclosure of true, beneficial owners.

## Methodology

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This report, designed and written by Freedom House in partnership with survey firm GQR, is based on a survey of experts conducted by GQR, combined with desk and field research Freedom House conducted between March and September 2020.

For the online survey portion of the report (referred to as the “survey” in the text), approximately 1,000 experts were invited to participate, selected from a list of activists and experts on democracy and human rights within the networks of Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy. In total, 398 experts from 105 countries completed the survey, which was conducted online by GQR from July 29 to August 15. Respondents were given the choice to respond in six different languages: Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. All individual responses are anonymous to protect the identity and security of the respondents and ensure open conversation. The survey respondents' answers have been lightly edited for clarity. Full data from the survey can be found [here](#).

Among the respondents, 68 percent have been working on issues of democracy and human rights for more than 10 years, while 23 percent have been doing so for more than 20 years. They mostly come from backgrounds in civil society (54 percent), journalism (15 percent), and academia (11 percent), and 98 percent have at least a university graduate degree. Just under 4 out of 10 (38 percent) identify as women.

Each expert was asked to provide their views on one country of focus. In total they reported on the state of democracy in 105 countries and territories, primarily from transitional democracies, and hybrid and authoritarian countries. The full list of countries and territories in the survey is: Afghanistan, Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burma, Burundi, Cambodia, Canada, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, North Korea, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovenia, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, The Bahamas, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, West Bank and Gaza, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

Desk and field research drew on Freedom House's global network of analysts as well as Freedom House staff covering 192 countries (referred to as “Freedom House research” in the text). Freedom House conducted this research between March and September 2020. The full list of countries is:

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Estonia, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kosovo, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lebanon, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Malta, Marshall Islands,

Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia, Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nauru, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, North Korea, North Macedonia, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Palau, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of the Congo, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Samoa, San Marino, São Tomé and Príncipe, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Sudan, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, The Bahamas, The Gambia, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe.



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

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