



Photo by Azim Khan Ronnie

Further Democratic Backsliding & Rising Authoritarianism

Three-quarters of the world's population now lives in countries where freedom is declining, and civic space is being constrained at an alarming rate.

Since 2013, **103 countries**—democracies and autocracies alike—have proposed more than 240 legislative initiatives that would restrict civil society, from burdensome oversight procedures to limits on access to resources. This trend accelerated over the last year as political leaders sought to capitalize on public anxiety over the COVID-19 pandemic to seize more power, degrade democratic institutions, and suppress human rights. **More than 50 countries** issued measures restricting expression and privacy, and **141 countries** restricted public assembly.

Alarm over democratic backsliding is underscored by a global rise in authoritarianism. Seeking to present an alternative to liberal democracy, authoritarians are actively working to undermine democratic and electoral institutions and values by employing cyber tools, economic levers, dis- and misinformation, and military and political influence. Opposition leaders are under increasing attack amid a rise in **transnational authoritarian repression**, which targets exiles and diaspora communities to silence dissent.

Worldwide, mis- and disinformation **threaten the public sphere** by mainstreaming extreme views, fueling political polarization, and giving undue momentum to fringe, anti-democratic values and discourse. The absence of an informed citizenry, capable of discerning fact from fiction, as well as a lack of investment in accurate and locally-trusted news sources, threatens social cohesion and is acutely evident on social media, where the business model is driven by users' engagement.

The year ahead represents an opportunity to curb the decline of democracy and push back against authoritarianism and corruption worldwide. Countries' response to COVID-19 is as much a governance challenge as a health challenge. It is not enough to "build back better," we must build back democratically. Foreign assistance is a critical lever in encouraging states to reverse emergency measures limiting

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civic engagement taken in response to the pandemic. Similarly, global vaccination efforts will only be successful if they are underpinned with the democratic values of transparency, accountability, equity, and inclusivity. Such values must also drive the utilization of COVAX funding.

Support for democracy and human rights is critical to addressing the world's most pressing challenges. The crisis at the U.S. southern border, after all, draws into sharp focus the consequences of poor governance, corruption, and the absence of citizen security—as well as the spillover and destabilizing effects into neighboring countries and the broader region.

The year ahead will be marked by a recommitment to democratic allies and increased rhetoric around divergent governance models between the community of democracies and resurgent authoritarianism. The U.S. must work to build democratic resilience at home and abroad by strengthening political and civic engagement, increasing government oversight and accountability, countering the destabilizing effects of corruption and kleptocracy, and working to ensure democracy delivers for its citizens. As the Biden Administration looks ahead to the Summit for Democracy, the U.S. must bring a sense of both humility and a renewed commitment to its support for democracy assistance overseas.

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