

# **The Global Decline in Freedom: Threats to U.S. Values and Interests**

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the committee, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written statement be admitted into the record.

We are here today to talk about the status of human rights and freedom around the world. I suspect there are a variety of opinions in this room about the degree to which the United States ought to be involved actively promoting human rights internationally. Some of you may wonder whether U.S. support can even make a difference or is a wise use of resources given our many pressing domestic needs, or alternative international strategic and economic objectives of the United States.

I believe that human rights and freedoms around the world are inextricably linked to the national security and economic interests of the United States. Not only is investing in these principles a natural expression of our values, it is a necessity to protect our own interests. America is safest when other nations around the world are peaceful and prosperous. Our diplomacy and our foreign assistance, therefore, should empower human rights defenders and reformers to build free, flourishing, peaceful societies.

## Status of Freedoms Worldwide

What is the status of freedom globally? And how does it impact U.S. security interests and economic interests?

*Freedom in the World*, Freedom House's flagship publication, has documented the tenth straight year of global decline in freedom, with 105 countries experiencing a decline over the last decade. During that same timeframe, only 61 countries have seen an improvement.

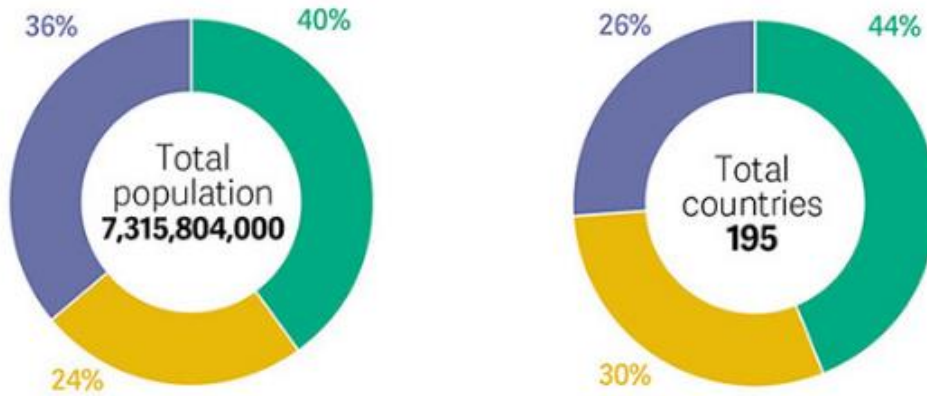
## A Decade Of Decline

Countries with net declines in aggregate score have outnumbered those with gains for the past 10 years.



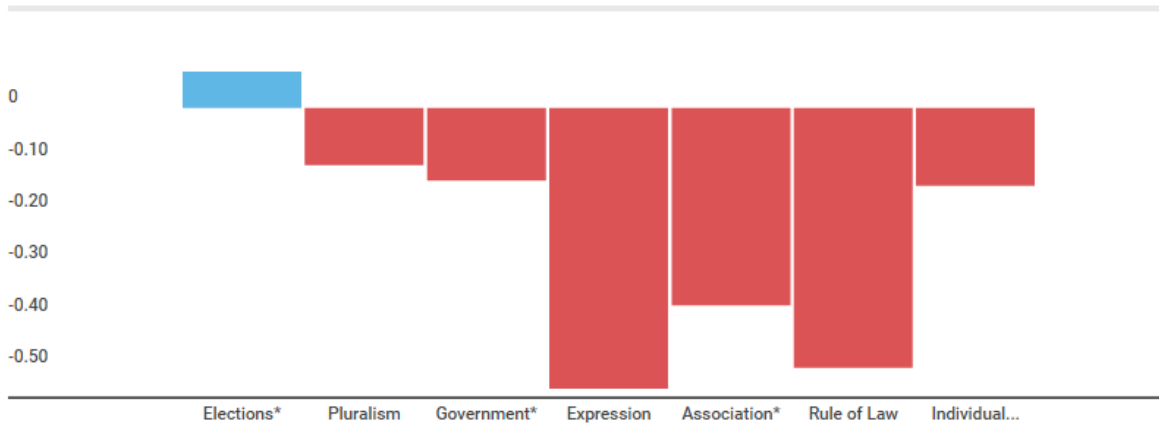
Thirty-six percent of the world's population lives in countries ranked as not free.

## Global Status By Population, Global Status By Country



The sharpest declines over a decade have occurred in the areas of freedom of expression, rule of law, and freedom of association.

### Key indicators in Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* survey declining over the past ten years



\*Scored on a 12-point scale. All other indicators are scored on a 16-point scale.  
Data from Freedom in the World 2016, available at [freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016](http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016)

Economic pressures have fueled the decline. Slumping economies have fomented public unrest which has been met with harsh crackdowns by many of the world's authoritarian

rulers. This is particularly the case in petro-autocracies for which energy resources and income has slipped as a crutch for their power. Many countries resort to anti-terrorism laws, blasphemy or insult laws and laws governing the registration and foreign funding of non-governmental organizations to effectively muzzle civil society and stamp out dissent. Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Russia, and Turkey, among others, all utilize such laws to varying degrees.

Ongoing conflicts in Syria and elsewhere, and threats from non-state actors, have driven the number of refugees and internally displaced persons to unprecedented levels, with 65.3 million people – or one out of every 113 people – displaced from their homes.<sup>1</sup> Let us not forget that the root cause is a human rights problem causing people to flee.

This crisis has been accompanied by rising xenophobic sentiment around the world including Europe. Xenophobia is growing in Western Europe, as evidenced by the Brexit vote, and has become incorporated into mainstream political discourse in Eastern Europe. In Poland, for example, the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party has espoused an anti-immigrant position and passed a counterterrorism law that curbs the freedoms of assembly and communication and places all foreigners under general suspicion. Only years ago, few would have predicted such a drastic backsliding in Europe.

In multiple countries we see how corruption and repression – inimical to U.S. strategic and economic interests – go hand in hand. Azerbaijan’s government is the very definition of a kleptocracy – a society where the leaders make themselves rich by stealing from the people. President Ilham Aliyev, who took over upon his father’s death, has seized and bulldozed lands to make way for flashy international sports competitions. He is so determined to cling to power and continue the corruption bankrolling his family and friends that he has launched a brutal crackdown on civil society, political opposition, and religious activists. Khadija Ismayilova, the reporter investigating the Aliyevs’ web of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

corruption, was imprisoned on trumped up charges for more than a year before being released in May in response to international pressure. She is prohibited from leaving Baku, and charges still stand against her.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin's regime uses state power and resources to enrich politically connected elites, who in turn do Putin's bidding. The Russian government continues to rely on violence abroad to boost nationalism and distract from economic woes and is clamping down on dissent at home. In 2015, 111 civil society organizations were placed on the list of "foreign agents," and a new category of "undesirable organizations" was introduced to ban foreign non-profit organizations in Russia. The National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundations have both been named undesirable.

Venezuela is experiencing a humanitarian crisis caused by years of undemocratic governance and wide-scale government corruption. The economy has tanked; there are widespread food shortages; and arrests have become a routine tactic of political persecution. So far in 2016, 2,030 people have been detained, with 1,600 detentions occurring in June 2016 alone. Ninety-six political prisoners remain behind bars.

In Mexico, the democratically elected government is faltering due to a lack of political will to address escalating drug-related violence, and rampant impunity for crimes and violence. Mexico remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, where it is not uncommon for reporters to be kidnapped and killed.<sup>2</sup>

Since its independence in the 1960s, Burundi has witnessed 40 years of sporadic violence fueled by ethnic and social tensions that has have resulted in widespread poverty. Its decade-long civil war, which ended in 2005, claimed the lives of 300,000. President Pierre Nkurunziza, democratically elected after the civil war, disregarded Burundi's constitution to run for a third term of office in July 2015, plunging the country into violence yet again, which continues to this day. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

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<sup>2</sup> <https://cpj.org/killed/americas/mexico/>

(OHCHR) noted recently that Burundi's political and security situation remains tense, with continued reports of enforced disappearances, abductions, extra judicial killings, and incommunicado detention of activists, amongst other grave violations. The UN reported 348 extrajudicial killings in the last year, and over 250,000 Burundian refugees have fled to neighboring countries. (I should note that the UN Human Rights Council ought to have suspended Burundi's membership, as it proved it could do with Libya when the late Colonel Gaddafi threatened to massacre his own citizens.)

In Egypt, the el-Sisi government's current campaign of repression is a wide-ranging and brutal assault on the fundamental rights of Egyptians, which surpasses the scale of repression under former President Hosni Mubarak. This crackdown has decimated the political opposition, crushed civil society, and muzzled a range of independent voices. And, by leaving no room for peaceful dissent, it has made Egypt less stable. The incidence of terrorist attacks has increased dramatically since Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took power in 2013. Given this record, despite our continued bankrolling, the United States cannot see Egypt's government as an ally in good standing serving our interests

We see some particular threats to human rights cutting across many cases. Minorities are often subject to abuse. From ISIS' campaign of genocide against Yazidis and Christians in Syria and Iraq, to the use of blasphemy laws in places like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Malaysia, to the assassination of atheists in Bangladesh, religious minorities remain a target for violence and state repression around the world.

Women's economic aspirations and the broader economies of their countries continue to suffer from unequal rights to property and inheritance as well as discriminatory practices that prevent women from working outside the home. Despite modest increases in women's political representation and the election of a number of female heads of government, 2015 saw few examples of genuine progress.

Vicious, violent attacks against LGBTI persons are still prevalent around the world, as evidenced by the recent murder of an LGBTI rights activist hacked to death in Bangladesh,

and the nightclub attack in Orlando. Violence against LGBTI persons routinely goes unpunished, and in more than 70 countries same sex relationships are criminalized.

If you look at such details, the global decline in freedom has made the world less hospitable to U.S. interests and underscores the need for U.S. attention to and investment in fostering pluralism and democracy.

### **Supporting Human Rights Strengthens Security Interests**

As Senator Lindsey Graham is rightly fond of saying, foreign aid is national security spending by another name. It is far preferable to spend a small amount in the present to strengthen good governance and maintain peace than to spend a large amount in the future attempting to completely rebuild governance institutions after nations have devolved into war, or a large amount of money and lives on military intervention.

Moreover, there is a difference between the superficial appearance of stability based on repression and the true stability that democracy brings. One argument popular with undemocratic leaders is that the crushing of dissent is necessary to maintain peace and stability. In fact, harsh rule often foments unrest, and unquestioning support for repressive regimes works against U.S. security interests.

Ethiopia is a prime example. Viewed as a key partner in the war on terror, its harsh repression of dissent raises questions about its long-term viability as an effective partner in this mission. The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) just marked its 25<sup>th</sup> year in power. In the most recent parliamentary elections held last year, the EPRDF announced a 100 percent victory belying credibility, having allegedly "won" every single seat in parliament and the regional councils.

Two laws – the Charities and Societies Proclamation, which restricts local civil society organizations' access to foreign funding, and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which allows the detention of suspects for up to four months without charge – have been used to imprison journalists and bloggers, opposition leaders, and civil society activists. They are

designed to quash all dissent. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly documented torture in Ethiopia's prisons.<sup>3</sup> As Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, have long been targets of arbitrary detention, repression, and displacement. In November 2015, the EPRDF decided to expand the boundaries of the capital at the expense of farmers and communities living in the surrounding areas of the Oromia region. This decision was made without adequate consultation with affected communities and sparked widespread protests resulting in the arrests of tens of thousands, including "students, teachers, musicians, opposition politicians, health workers, and people who provided assistance or shelter to fleeing students."<sup>4</sup> At least 400 have been killed by Ethiopian security forces; an unknown number remain in detention; and torture continues to be reported.<sup>5</sup> Protests like these break out because citizens have no other ways to engage in the political system or express discontent, which increases instability.

In fiscal years 2013 and 2014, Ethiopia received no democracy and governance funding from the United States, despite receiving a total of more than \$1.2 billion in foreign assistance. In fiscal year 2015, Ethiopia received nearly \$651 million in foreign assistance, but only \$1.25 million was designated for rule of law, good governance, and civil society. Everything else went into financing and training Ethiopia's military, and several noble efforts: addressing climate change, and the provision of health care, food aid, and education. But, there cannot be peace and stability if the government restricts political space and suppresses legitimate dissent with force. And without peace, there can be no reliable access to food or health care or education. A country cannot free itself from dependence on foreign aid without strong and accountable governance. U.S. tax dollars will be wasted as long as Ethiopia lacks rule of law, pluralism, and respect in practice of the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/10/18/ethiopia-political-detainees-tortured> and <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests>



rights of all. The United States would be far wiser to fund a more comprehensive approach to development. We should work to strengthen human rights in Ethiopia to enable a truly peaceful, prosperous, and more reliable security partner.

### **Supporting Human Rights Strengthens Economic Interests**

In the same way that security is unsustainable without fair, democratic institutions and rule of law, so, too, is economic development. Inclusive economic growth requires a strong and enforced legal framework, protection of property rights, freedom of association, and effective, accountable institutions. Governments built on respect for human rights and rule of law tend to foster transparent, stable environments that are conducive to the establishment and unfettered operation of private enterprise.

Strong growth in certain repressive states sometimes gives the misleading impression that authoritarianism is good for business.

The People's Republic of China is a perfect example of this. For years, many wondered if China's model of state-led capitalism offered a viable alternative to the Western model. Many argued that because China was such an economic powerhouse and because our economies were so interlinked we should not – or could not – speak out about China's egregious human rights abuses.

[A recent Freedom House report](#) found that repression has worsened under President Xi Jinping – intensifying for those commonly targeted in China, such as ethnic and religious minorities, activists, and journalists, and expanding to those not typically targeted for punishment, such as civic-minded entrepreneurs.

As China's economy has slumped, the CCP's efforts to censor the media and crackdown on dissent have intensified to a disturbing extent. In response to the 2015 stock market drop, Xi's government unleashed aggressive interventions in the market itself, initiated a new crackdown on civil society, and enhanced censorship and propaganda surrounding economic reporting. Wang Xiaolu, a respected financial reporter, was arrested for

accurately reporting news about the downturn and forced to confess wrongdoing on national television<sup>6</sup>. Within a 48-hour period in July 2015, over 200 individuals involved in public-interest legal activism were taken into custody in a nationwide sweep. As many as 33 remain in custody one year later. Other targets, whose work the authorities had previously tolerated, included financial journalists, public health advocates, labor rights activists, and women's rights defenders. Prominent businessmen and securities traders were also rounded up, adding new risks to doing business in China. Just last week, on July 3, China's Cyberspace Administration declared that all news stories are prohibited from using social media sources unless first approved by authorities.

This April, China's legislature passed a sweeping, deliberately vague and subjective law, set to take effect January 1, 2017, that will impact more than 7000 foreign NGOs and their local Chinese partners, including groups working on health, environment, and education.<sup>7</sup> This law requires foreign NGOs wishing to operate within China to register with the government, and tightly restricts the type of groups allowed to register. Those registering will be required to hand over detailed information about their objectives, finances, and staff. It is unclear exactly how this law will impact American businesses and universities attempting to operate in China.

Many American business executives are walking on eggshells navigating China's business environment. The American Chamber of Commerce in China's 2016 Business Climate survey found that anticorruption and intellectual property rights remain a concern for Americans doing business in China.<sup>8</sup> Four out of five companies reported being negatively affected by Chinese internet censorship.<sup>9</sup> The AmCham survey indicates other top challenges are "increasing concerns about transparency, predictability and fairness of the regulatory environment and the ability of foreign companies to participate in the ongoing

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.com/crackdown-stock-market-reporting-shakes-chinas-financial-journalists-presents-threat-2142028>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/asia/china-foreign-ngo-law.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/asia/china-foreign-ngo-law.html?_r=0)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/amchan\\_china\\_climate\\_2016.pdf](http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/amchan_china_climate_2016.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/article/china-media-bulletin-issue-no-112-february-2016>

reforms in order to serve China's market."<sup>10</sup> Seventy-seven percent of respondents to the AmCham survey "feel that foreign businesses are less welcome than before in China," and one third of respondents said they are not planning to increase investment in China.<sup>11</sup>

Human rights and freedoms impact the economic bottom line. Weak rule of law and opaque, arbitrary governance increase the risks for U.S. investments and business operations. And without independent media, information is distorted. What happens to China's economy – which accounts for roughly 15 percent of global GDP and is rampant with manipulated economic statistics and falsified revenues statements – impacts not just the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people, but also the United States and international community.<sup>12</sup> If U.S. policymakers and business leaders want strong economic development we ought to be concerned with the state of human rights worldwide and we ought to press China and other authoritarian governments on these issues. Rule of law, freedom of expression, and democracy are not the only factors behind good economic performance, but more often than not they provide long-term political stability and resilient, corrective mechanisms that form a foundation for safe investment and steady growth.

### **Investing in "Wins" is Crucial**

In the same way the United States ought to ensure that our foreign assistance is a wise investment by bolstering good governance and rule of law, so too, should we ensure that we are investing in our "wins." If foreign assistance that disappears the moment a country shows improvement, U.S. efforts will be for naught if that country is unable to sustain its success at key moments.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/amchan\\_china\\_climate\\_2016.pdf](http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/amchan_china_climate_2016.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/amchan\\_china\\_climate\\_2016.pdf](http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/amchan_china_climate_2016.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.economist.com/news/business-and-finance/21662092-china-sneezing-rest-world-rightly-nervous-causes-and-consequences-chinas>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/12/28/heres-why-it-matters-that-china-is-admitting-that-its-statistics-are-unreliable/>; <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/958306.shtml>

Tunisia is the one success of the Arab Spring, which began when Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest unemployment and unaccountable governance. It is a poignant example of how political liberties are tightly intertwined with economic and social aspirations. Tunisia held democratic elections under a new constitution and became the one country in the Arab world ranked as free by our Freedom in the World report.

But, Tunisia's nascent democracy is still in danger, and in many ways serves as a cautionary tale. The economy is struggling. Terrorist attacks spilling over from chaos and extremism in neighboring countries and ISIS recruitment in the country tempt Tunisia's government to take steps which might imperil its path toward democratic consolidation – undercutting the positive elections and an admirable new constitution to ensuring civil liberties and respectful pluralism in practice.

If counterterrorism trumps democratization or if the United States decreases support at this key moment, then successes gained could be lost.

In Burma, we've also seen improvements. A massive voter turnout produced an overwhelming victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections for longtime opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), a remarkable turnaround in a country that until recently ranked among the world's most repressive.

But, there is a long way to go. Meaningful democratic reforms will not be possible without the support of military leaders, who still exercise a great deal of control of many institutions. The Burmese parliament lacks capacity. More than 60 political prisoners remain jailed while 189 activists are awaiting charges.<sup>13</sup> And, ethnic and religious tensions persist, with widespread discrimination and violence against the Muslim Rohingya and continued attacks against the predominantly Christian Kachin. It is unclear whether the new NLD government is prepared to take the political risk of defending the fundamental rights of minorities.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://aappb.org/2016/06/aapp-b-monthly-chronology-of-may-2016-and-current-political-prisoners-list/>

This is why Freedom House has a project in Burma working on religious pluralism to facilitate a successful democratization. And, it's why U.S. policy must continue to closely monitor and invest in Burma.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The end goal of foreign assistance is for states to need it no longer – to become peaceful and prosperous on their own. But, the United States' foreign assistance will not effectively empower recipients' self-governance and self-sufficiency if our security and economic strategies disregard the importance of human rights and democracy.

If we are serious about enabling nations to build free, flourishing, peaceful societies, there are several things policymakers should do:

1. *The United States should make democracy and human rights integral to our foreign policy.* All too often, we pay lip service to these principles while sacrificing them for short-term expediency. Democracy and human rights should instead influence our decisions at key moments in critical places. In Egypt, for example, the U.S. government has criticized the most egregious abuses of the el-Sisi regime but largely carried on business as usual. While President el-Sisi portrays himself as a bulwark of stability, his repression in fact fuels further unrest. A more effective U.S. policy would use the leverage of military assistance to pressure the el-Sisi regime to loosen its controls on Egyptian society and give Egyptians avenues for peaceful dissent, which in turn would contribute to stability in the country.
2. *Democracy and human rights should be a consistent component on our foreign policy agenda, raised at the highest levels, from the U.S. President on down, even in the most complex of relationships.* While some tradeoffs with U.S. security or economic interests arise in certain places like China in the immediate term, a more forward-looking U.S. policy would keep democracy and human rights on the agenda, without weakening our message. [A Freedom House study](#) found that, when it comes to

China, the democratic nations studied almost always allowed immediate economic and strategic interests to override support for democracy and human rights. This is a mistake. Indeed, standing by our values bolsters – rather than demeans – our credibility with the Chinese regime on other issues.

3. *The United States should be both a leader and an international partner on democracy and human rights issues. We should work to generate solidarity among democracies to invest in human rights and democracy support, and then we should work jointly with our allies to accomplish shared goals in these areas. As history and experience has taught us, efforts to generate change are often most effective when they are pursued by like-minded democracies together.*
4. *We should support civil society consistently, as civil society groups are key agents of peace and prosperity in their countries. We should support them both in word and in action, and should not allow our military or economic aid to prop up repressive governments that squash independent groups and peaceful dissent.*
5. *Congress should pass and the President should sign the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which would impose visa bans and asset freezes on foreign officials responsible for gross human rights violations or large-scale corruption. This legislation would serve as an important and effective foreign policy tool by introducing targeted sanctions on individual officials and imposing tangible consequences on perpetrators.*

Reversing the decade-long slide in human rights and democracy Freedom House documents is important to American and universal values. But all the more, we have a *stake* in that work – for stability and growth which are truly sustainable. The United States needs to get out of its funk, and apply the assets it has to help those fighting for pluralism. And these steps are low-cost and high-value investments precisely suited to a time of husbanding resources for what is most important.