

# **DECLINING DEMOCRACY AND THREATS TO MEDIA FREEDOM**

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HEARING: THE DANGERS OF REPORTING ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
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## **Introduction**

Chairman Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Subcommittee, it's an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written statement be submitted for the record.

The fundamental right to seek and disseminate information through an independent press is under threat. According to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* data, freedom of the press has been deteriorating around the world over the past decade, with new forms of repression taking hold in open societies and authoritarian states alike. The trend is linked to a global decline in democracy itself, which Freedom House has been tracking for the past 13 years.

I will make four main points today. First, media in the world's least free societies have faced an intensification of traditional challenges. Second, in some of the most influential democracies, large segments of the population are no longer receiving independent news and information. Third, as democracies retreat from holding press freedom up as a gold standard, China is filling the gap with an authoritarian information model. And finally, the erosion of press freedom is both a symptom of and a contributor to the breakdown of other democratic institutions and principles. These points will be elaborated in our forthcoming new report, *Freedom and the Media*, which will be released in early June.

## **Dangers in Dictatorships**

The worsening records of Not Free states, combined with the negative trend among Free countries, have driven overall decline in global press freedom. The decline in global press freedom is most acute in Europe, previously a bastion of well-established freedoms, and in Eurasia and the Middle East, where many of the world's worst dictatorships are concentrated.

Over the past five years, countries that were already designated as Not Free in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report were also those most likely to suffer a decline in their press freedom scores, with 28 percent of Not Free countries experiencing such a drop. Partly Free countries were almost equally likely to experience a gain as a decline in press freedom, reflecting the volatility of these middle performers and the complex forces influencing their trajectory.

Established autocratic governments continue to tighten the screws on dissenting voices because any breach in their media dominance threatens to expose official wrongdoing or debunk government narratives. Their methods are an intensification of what we have seen for years: draconian laws, media shut downs, arrests, and violence. Recent examples include new legislative restrictions in Belarus, further arrests and convictions in Lebanon, and heightened insecurity and fatalities in war-torn Yemen.

What is striking is that these governments continue to feel threatened despite already having near total control over the political system and the flow of information. In 2018, Freedom House downgraded the press freedom scores for Belarus, Cameroon, China, and Yemen from 1 to 0 on a 4-point scale. All of these countries are Not Free in our ratings. These developments illustrate the ways in which already difficult environments can grow steadily worse in the absence of meaningful international support for media independence and other fundamental rights.

Trends in press freedom differ by region. Since 2014, there has been no net change in the average press freedom score for the Americas or Asia-Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa has seen a slight increase of 3 percent. But the average scores in the two least free regions of the world, Eurasia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), declined by 9 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

Reporting in Saudi Arabia often means courting danger. The Kingdom's performance on our metrics has declined since Mohamed bin Salman was named crown prince in 2017, despite his reformist reputation. This year has already seen at least eight new arrests and detentions. Journalists can be targeted under a number of capricious laws, including a vaguely worded 2017 counterterrorism statute that criminalizes, among other things, reporting on the king or crown prince "in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute." Once charged, journalists must confront a judiciary completely lacking independence. Anyone—reporters or otherwise—wishing to post news or commentary online must first register with the authorities.

Even in the regions where average scores were more stable, press freedom has come under threat in individual countries. A new privacy law in Nepal restricts collection of the personal information of any individual, including public officials, exploiting legitimate concerns about privacy to suppress media scrutiny of political leaders' conflicts of interest or corruption. In Pakistan, security agents have allegedly warned journalists against coverage of taboo subjects, such as abuses by the military, or given them instructions on how to cover specific political issues. The regime in China has worked to close off the last remaining avenues for accessing uncensored information by increasing pressure on private technology companies to police the content on their platforms more assiduously.

### *Violence is a main driver of declines*

The recent downgrades Freedom House has been tracking can be attributed to a range of legal, political, and economic factors, but some stand out as more concerning and pervasive. Notably, violence and harassment aimed at particular journalists and media outlets have played some role in 63 percent of the countries with a press freedom score reduction over the past five years. Among the 209 countries and territories that we cover, we have identified the use of violence against journalists or media professionals in 95 of them. That is, by our measures, almost half of all countries and territories have seen physical attacks on the press. Just a week ago, Yavuz Selim Demirağ from the nationalist opposition newspaper *Yeniçağ* was beaten outside his home in Istanbul. Although six attackers were taken into custody, they have already been released, claiming that they beat the journalist over a traffic dispute.

The 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi is, of course, the most prominent recent case, but Freedom House has reduced freedom scores for many other examples. Journalists in El Salvador received death threats in 2015 after they uncovered stories of police abuse and extrajudicial killings. A Malian journalist who was outspoken about rampant political corruption was shot in the chest in 2017. Also that year, a Tanzanian journalist investigating the murders of local officials disappeared, and his fate remains a mystery.

As Khashoggi's murder advertised to the world, repressive regimes have increasing reach across the globe, reaching beyond their borders to target expatriates, exiles, and diasporas who disagree with them. Freedom House found 24 countries around the world—including heavyweights like Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran—that have recently targeted political dissidents abroad with practices such as harassment, extradition requests, kidnapping, and even assassination.

### **Attacks on press freedom in democracies**

In some of the most influential democracies in the world—particularly Hungary, Serbia, and India—large segments of the population are no longer receiving independent news and information. The problem has arisen in tandem with right-wing populism, which has undermined basic freedoms in many democratic countries. Populist leaders present themselves as the defenders of an aggrieved majority against liberal elites and ethnic minorities whose loyalties they question, and argue that the interests of the nation should override democratic principles like press freedom, transparency, and open debate.

Among Free countries in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report, 19 percent (16 countries) have endured a reduction in their press freedom scores over the past five years. This is consistent with a key finding of *Freedom in the World*—that democracies in general are undergoing a decline

in political rights and civil liberties. Press freedom in Europe—where four out of every five countries are Free—dropped by 8 percent over the past five years.

Viktor Orbán’s government in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić’s administration in Serbia have had great success in snuffing out critical journalism, blazing a trail for populist forces elsewhere. Both leaders have consolidated media ownership in the hands of their cronies, ensuring that the outlets with the widest reach support the government and smear its perceived opponents. In Hungary, nearly 80 percent of the media are owned by government allies.

Antimedia rhetoric is spreading to neighboring states. Leaders of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria, part of that country’s ruling coalition, have increased their verbal attacks on journalists, for instance by claiming without evidence that certain outlets spread lies. Score declines linked to economic manipulation of media—including cases in which the government directs advertising to friendly outlets or encourages business allies to buy those that are critical—were more common across Europe over the past five years than in other parts of the world. Such tactics of influence and interference are a relatively recent phenomenon on the continent, which has generally displayed strong support for press freedom since the fall of the Berlin Wall 30 years ago.

India, the world’s most populous democracy, is also sending signals that holding the government accountable is not part of the press’s responsibility. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has supported campaigns to discourage speech that is “antinational,” and government-aligned thugs have raided critical journalists’ homes and offices. The media have become widely flattering of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is up for reelection amid allegations that the government issues directives on how the press should cover his activities and intimidates journalists who push back. The government has also been selective in the allocation of television licenses, effectively excluding unfriendly outlets from the airwaves.

It has become painfully apparent that a free press can never be taken for granted, even when democratic rule has been in place for decades.

## **China Fills the Gap**

As democracies ignore their own long-term interests and waver in their support for press freedom, China has been filling the void. Tight media controls and suppression of free speech are key features of China’s authoritarian governance, where the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has developed the world’s most multilayered, dynamic, and sophisticated apparatus of media control. The global expansion of Chinese state media regularly makes international headlines, but this is only one of a host of strategies the CCP employs to influence media reporting, content dissemination, public debate, and in some cases, electoral politics, outside China. And where the potential for undermining press freedom has not been activated yet, the groundwork is being laid for future influence, if—or more likely when—Beijing decides to deploy it.

Chinese authorities influence news media content around the world through three primary strategies: promoting the CCP's narratives, suppressing critical viewpoints, and managing content delivery systems.

Through a variety of distribution partnerships and through social media, Chinese state media reaches hundreds of millions of people in numerous countries and languages, and efforts to more deeply penetrate foreign markets show no sign of an ebb. A November 2018 *Financial Times* investigation found that the Chinese state-run television broadcaster CCTV provides free content to 1,700 foreign news organizations. Between September and November 2018 alone, Xinhua News Agency signed news exchange agreements with wire services in Australia, Belarus, Laos, India, and Bangladesh. CCP narratives are also embedded in foreign media by proxies and allied figures, including Chinese diplomats, friendly media owners and journalists, and foreign politicians with business interests in China. For example, New Zealand member of parliament Todd McClay—who attended a CCP-organized dialogue in 2017—recently referred to reeducation camps in Xinjiang as “vocational training centers,” echoing the terminology used by the Chinese government to justify detention and political indoctrination of over one million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities.

The CCP and its agents, allies, and proxies also work to suppress critical coverage of China abroad. Diplomats pressure local journalists and at times have engaged in outright harassment in order to curb criticism, as in early 2019, when Chinese diplomats in Sweden and Russia intimidated reporters who had written critically about the country's economy or in support of democracy in Taiwan. The CCP has also successfully co-opted media owners, who then marginalize critical reporting, notably in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and outlets serving the Chinese diaspora, but occasionally in English-language media. Co-opting further extends to advertisers, satellite firms, technology companies, foreign governments, and international organizations, who take action to prevent or punish the publication of content critical of Beijing.

Finally, over the past five years, new technologies for the management of content delivery has opened new avenues for Chinese government influence abroad. In Africa, the Chinese television distribution firm StarTimes, which has become a key player in the continent's transition from analog to digital, holds the power to determine which stations its viewers are able to access. Although privately owned, StarTimes has benefited from a close relationship with the Chinese government and occasional subsidies. Meanwhile, Chinese tech giant Tencent's ubiquitous WeChat instant messaging service now also reaches an estimated 100 to 200 million people outside of China.

China's increasing number of news distribution deals, agents' more frequent and egregious acts of media suppression, and the institutionalization of Chinese content delivery systems abroad, point to escalations in the aggressiveness with which Chinese officials attempt to suppress independent news coverage abroad, spread the CCP's own narrative, and ultimately undermine the watchdog role played by independent media in democratic settings.

## Freedom of the Press Is Integral to Democracy

The breakdown of global press freedom is closely related to the broader decline of democracy that Freedom House has tracked for the past 13 years. Although the press is not always the first democratic institution to be attacked when a country's leadership takes an illiberal turn, repression of free media is a strong indication that other political rights and civil liberties are in danger. Assaults on media independence are frequently associated with power grabs by new or incumbent leaders, or with entrenched regimes' attempts to crush perceived threats to their control.

While the threats to global media freedom are real and concerning in their own right, their impact on the state of democracy is what makes them truly dangerous. A free and independent media sector that can keep the population informed and hold leaders to account is as crucial for a strong and sustainable democracy as free and fair elections. Without it, citizens cannot make informed decisions about how they are ruled, and abuse of power, which is all but inevitable in any society, cannot be exposed and corrected.

## Recommendations

If the United States imposes no consequences for restrictions on the media abroad, free press could be in danger of virtual extinction. With this in mind, Congress should:

- ***Ensure actions by US officials do not excuse or inspire violations of press freedom.*** Democratic nations, especially the United States, have a particularly important role to play in maintaining media freedom. Words matter, and when the United States verbally attacks the press or fails to immediately and vigorously condemn attacks such as that on Khashoggi, it sends a signal to undemocratic leaders around the world that attacks on the press and crimes against journalists are permissible.
- ***Take strong and immediate action against any violations of media freedom globally*** through press statements, phone calls, meetings, letters, and the imposition of targeted sanctions on perpetrators. This includes speaking out against violence against journalists and failure to identify and prosecute attackers, restrictions on media access, blocking of websites, and censoring of particular topics.
- ***Stand up publicly for the value of a free press, and support civic education that will educate the next generation.*** Press freedom is one of the most fundamental pillars of our democracy, and our constitutional protections are stronger than in any country of the world. Americans easily forget this amid media mudslinging and incendiary commentary. It is up to our leaders and our teachers to remind us of the value we gain from professional journalists who hold those in power to account.

- ***Ensure US foreign policy and assistance prioritizes support for democratic principles, including media freedom, as fundamental to national security and economic prosperity.*** As is frequently mentioned, the goal of foreign assistance is for countries to no longer need it. It is foolish for the United States to invest funding overseas without shoring up press freedom. Foreign aid supports independent media by providing training in technical capacity and emergency assistance. Media development funders should also make sure to include exile and diaspora media in funding, training, and other assistance opportunities for Chinese-language media and might consider allocating dedicated resources for these outlets separate from internal China funds.
- ***Support social media as an alternative outlet for free expression in repressive environments.*** Innovative alternatives to state-controlled media regularly spring up on social media, including recent cases in Venezuela, Armenia, and Sudan. Technology can be used to circumvent restrictions and keep reporters anonymous where needed. The United States should provide funding for technology that increases free expression.
- ***Pass legislation aimed at enhancing the publicly available information about Chinese media influence activities.*** One example of such legislation is S.480/H.R.1811, the Countering the Chinese Government and Communist Party's Political Influence Operations Act, which would require the formation of a long-term strategy to counter the Chinese government's political influence operations, including those utilizing the media. The Department of Justice should also thoroughly review media being disseminated in the United States by the Chinese government or linked outlets and the registration requirements under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, including Chinese language media.

## Conclusion

Press freedom is under threat around the world, dovetailing with the overall decline in global democracy. Populist leaders are undermining independent media, and dictators are doubling down in traditional means of repression. China is pushing its own authoritarian information model in less autocratic contexts.

Experience has shown, however, that press freedom can rebound from even lengthy stints of repression when given the opportunity. The basic desire for democratic liberties, including access to honest and fact-based journalism, can never be extinguished, and it is never too late to renew the demand that these rights be granted in full.

Thank you, I look forward to your questions.