

# Tyranny Tracker

**A Democracy Index  
Built to Inform Action**

 Human  
Rights  
Foundation

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**→ Welcome to the  
Tyranny Tracker  
Launch Event at the  
Freedom Tower**

Dear friend,

As you may already know, the Human Rights Foundation (HRF) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes and protects human rights globally, with a focus on countries ruled by authoritarian regimes.

HRF's focus follows the belief that human rights advocacy should prioritize exposing and denouncing the actions of authoritarian regimes, because these regimes heavily repress or abolish the mechanisms of self-correction that democracies have. Democracies largely respect the basic freedoms of expression and association, and the independence of the judiciary, in a way that allows political opposition leaders, independent media, and civil society organizations to continuously criticize government policy, while giving judges the independence to provide an effective check on abusive government action, all of which in turn tends to lead to better policy outcomes.

When HRF was founded in 2005, it focused predominantly on calling attention to the abuses of authoritarian regimes in Latin America. Over time, and with the emergence of our flagship Oslo Freedom Forum in 2009, HRF expanded its mission statement — and its accompanying legal advocacy, programs, campaigns, and events — to be global in scope.

With this shift, and facing the situation that, in our view, existing quantitative global democracy indexes unwittingly skewed results toward inconsistency or overinclusion, HRF incrementally developed its own “Tyranny Tracker” — a qualitative democracy index based on a proprietary methodology that guides our political regime analysis and ultimately leads to the definitive list of authoritarian regimes that are the target of our work.

The Tyranny Tracker's methodology is heavily informed by political science literature as much as by our two-decade-long experience advocating on behalf of dissidents before international legal institutions. Underpinning our analysis on the core classical liberal pillars of electoral competition, freedom of dissent, and institutional accountability, we classify all national governments in the world as democratic, hybrid authoritarian, or fully authoritarian regimes, and choose to focus our work on the last two regime types.

We designed the Tyranny Tracker as a resource for a target audience that goes beyond the academic world, with a view to inform the action of (a) philanthropists looking for systemically worthy causes to invest in, (b) asset managers and business leaders seeking to track and minimize their exposure to the whims of tyrants, (c) policymakers in democracies seeking to identify what regimes to shortlist for sanctions and to comprehend the nature of the refugee crises they face, (d) journalists seeking to cover countries and issues that would otherwise go unnoticed, and (e) pro-democracy activists worldwide looking for a one-stop tool to persuade global leaders to be tougher on tyrants while standing in solidarity with the people they oppress.

As an index conceived to be transparent and accessible, the Tyranny Tracker also aims to educate students at all levels about the nature of authoritarianism. We are conscious of the fact that other excellent tools exist in the world of democracy indexes, including those by Freedom House, V-Dem, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and International IDEA. By launching our own tool to the public today, we do not intend to replace the existing tools — features of which we have studied and learned from in creating our own tool — but instead we hope to contribute to the healthy competition and complementarity in the market of freedom and democracy indices.

In closing this introduction, we would like to express a special thank you to four important individuals: Thor Halvorssen, our founder and CEO whose action-oriented DNA is the original engine behind this index; our president, Céline Assaf-Boustani, a former member of our legal and policy team who understands exactly why the Tyranny Tracker was an idea in urgent need of becoming a reality; and, finally, to Tim Reynolds and Álvaro Salas-Castro, respectively the Founder-Chairman and the CEO-President of the Reynolds Foundation, a philanthropic organization that is quickly becoming a leader in the global freedom movement and that has blessed us with the privilege of generously supporting the Tyranny Tracker's creation and consolidation.

And thank you for taking part in this important day for our organization.



**Javier El-Hage**  
Chief Legal  
and Policy Officer



**Roberto González**  
Chief Advocacy  
Officer



**Malaak Jamal**  
Director of Policy  
and Research



# At a Glance

Authoritarianism continued to dominate in 2025, with 75% of the world's population, or 6.1 billion people, living under authoritarian regimes. Of that figure, 3.1 billion people lived under hybrid authoritarian regimes, while the remaining three billion lived under fully authoritarian regimes. Countries led by democratic governments covered a mere 25% of the world's population, or 2.9 billion people.

In 2025, trends of authoritarian consolidation continued across Africa. Incumbent autocrats retained power through a mix of constitutional manipulation, uncompetitive elections, and repression. Military coups, terrorism, and armed conflicts fueled authoritarianism as well.

In the Americas, the fully authoritarian regimes of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela saw an increase in repression of dissidents, democratic opposition leaders, and civil society activists. In hybrid authoritarian El Salvador, the ongoing "state of exception" for security challenges continued to be leveraged to enact measures that seriously undermined democratic institutions. Elections were held in the hybrid authoritarian regimes of Bolivia and Honduras with relative success, opening the doors to peaceful transitions of power.

In the Asia-Pacific region, democratic erosion continued as major protests, mostly youth-led, erupted across the region. Indonesia and Nepal witnessed Gen Z-driven mobilizations, while Hong Kong, Thailand, and Burma, for example, experienced the ongoing consolidation of authoritarian control. Notably, in 2025, dictatorships in the region blatantly cooperated to facilitate transnational repression against dissidents abroad.

In Europe and Central Asia, ruling parties in hybrid regimes, such as Hungary, Georgia, and Serbia, entrenched themselves through the capture of key institutions, clientelism, and unfair election campaign advantages. Romania and Moldova each faced Russian interference efforts in their elections, which sought to undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Ukraine narrowly persisted in its democratic efforts, as it entered the third year of Russia's full-scale invasion.

In the Middle East and North Africa, authoritarian regimes continued to hold onto power through sham elections, such as in Egypt, and maneuvers against the opposition, such as in Jordan. Elections in Iraq took place with genuine competition, but saw a continuation of established power despite reformist pressure. Conflicts in the region continued to negatively impact human rights.

# Methodology

The Tyranny Tracker uses a unique methodology developed by HRF's legal and policy research team. Our qualitative methodology takes a holistic approach that considers the broader context and evolving conditions within each country.

The Tyranny Tracker classifies countries as democratic, hybrid authoritarian, or fully authoritarian, with each type reflecting relatively lower to higher levels of tyrannical rule. Tyrannical rule is used as a synonym for non-democratic or authoritarian rule. Tyrannical or authoritarian regimes are characterized by substantial levels of political repression — meaning the repression of political freedom or what we have called freedom of dissent — in a way that impedes authentically free and fair elections.

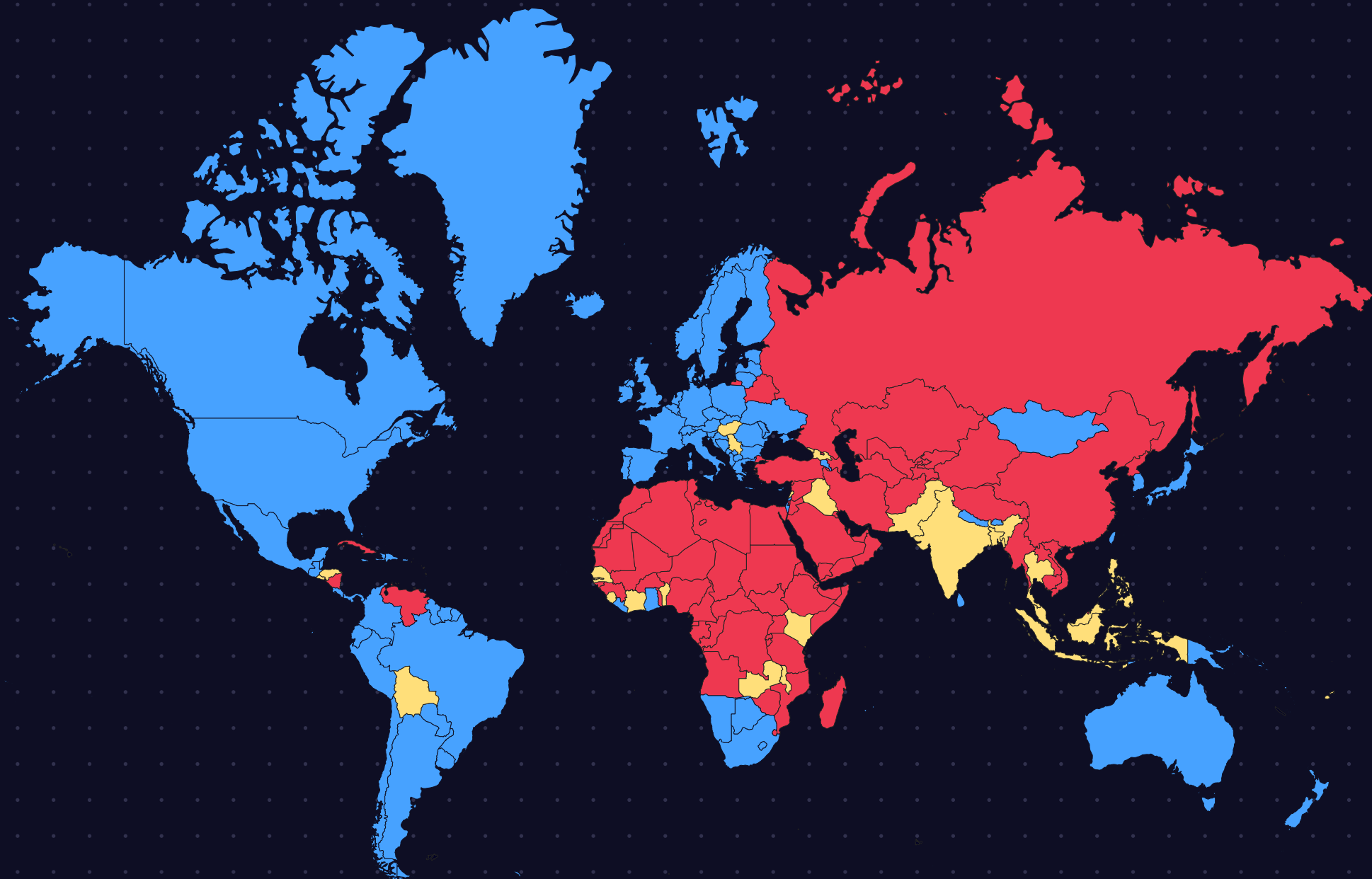
The Tyranny Tracker researchers are experienced professionals with relevant language skills and formal education in political science, international relations, or constitutional law, and many are from the region they research. Classifications are determined by coding the situation on the ground across three pillars: electoral competition, freedom of dissent, and institutional accountability. HRF's regional policy leaders and research fellows perform the research and rank whether these pillars are largely present, weak, or absent in each country. The researchers conduct in-depth qualitative research using a checklist of 45 indicators to evaluate all pillars, relying on a systematic approach developed by HRF that ensures consistency across country codings.

The Tyranny Tracker's qualitative assessments draw on a range of sources, including HRF's own in-house research, an extensive human rights network, expert interviews, academic literature, and information published by credible local and international news sources and civil society organizations. Their analysis undergoes a rigorous review process by regional, methodology, and research experts, the director of policy and research, chief legal and policy officer, chief advocacy officer, and, in close-call cases, by external experts within HRF's community.

**Democratic** governments uphold core principles of respect for fundamental freedoms and government accountability through free and fair elections, freedom to dissent, and autonomous institutions. Democratic elections largely ensure competitive participation and accountability. Freedom to dissent is guaranteed through fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and access to diverse information, enabling open criticism and challenges to those in power without fear of retaliation. Democratic institutional frameworks check the power of a governing authority, enabling horizontal accountability and promoting transparency, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

**Hybrid authoritarian** regimes create uneven electoral competition, limit dissent, and constrain institutional autonomy. While they may hold elections and allow opposition parties to participate, the electoral process is heavily skewed in favor of the governing authority, making opposition victories unlikely. Freedom of dissent is restricted, with independent media, civil society, and critics facing retaliation in the form of legal harassment or direct physical coercion. Institutions may retain partial independence but are frequently manipulated or co-opted to serve the governing authority's interests. Maintaining a façade of democratic practices, governing authorities in these systems undermine core principles of accountability, fairness, and genuine political opposition while consolidating power.

**Fully authoritarian** regimes stifle meaningful electoral competition, basic political freedoms, and independent institutions. Electoral competition is absent or so manipulated that opposition parties and candidates have no realistic chance of winning elections. Freedom of dissent is overtly suppressed, with independent media, civil society, and critics facing systematic retaliation. Institutions are either completely subservient to the regime, functioning as tools to consolidate power and suppress opposition, or retain minimal independence while they are constrained and manipulated to weaken accountability. By eliminating effective opposition, stifling public debate, and dismantling checks on authority, these systems ensure the governing authority's dominance through coercion, repression, and institutional control.



# Regional Highlights

## Africa

- Ninety-one percent of the region's population live under authoritarian regimes. About 54% of the population live under fully authoritarian regimes and 37% live under hybrid authoritarian regimes, while only 9% live under democratic governments.



## Successful and Failed Coups

Adding to a trend of military takeovers across the region since 2020 (Chad, Mali, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon), 2025 ended with two successful military coups and a foiled attempt. In October, amid a wave of mass pro-democracy protests in Madagascar, the army stepped in, removed the incumbent authoritarian ruler Andry Rajoelina, and imposed two years of transitional military rule. The following month in Guinea-Bissau, military allies of the unpopular incumbent president, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, blocked the release of presidential election results, deposed Embaló, and detained opposition leaders. In December, a group of soldiers in Benin attempted a coup, criticizing authoritarianism, repression, and the management of the country under President Patrice Talon, as well as the deteriorating security situation in the country's northern regions.

## Consolidation of Military Rule in the Sahel

As the long-standing insecurity crisis in the western Sahel worsened, the military regimes of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger — which form the Alliance of Sahel States — further tightened their hold on power by outlawing democratic opposition and by postponing elections or returns to civilian rule indefinitely. In Mali, General Assimi Goïta, the leader of the military regime, granted himself a renewable five-year presidential mandate and dissolved all political parties. In Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traoré's military junta disbanded the independent electoral commission and transferred oversight of elections to the military-controlled Ministry of Territorial Administration. In Niger, General Abdourahamane Tiani extended his rule until 2030 and subsequently dissolved all political parties. Elsewhere in western Africa, Guinean military ruler General Mamady Doumbouya and Gabonese military ruler Brice Oligui Nguema staged unfair and uncompetitive presidential elections in which they excluded their most serious opponents and claimed 86% and 94% of the vote, respectively.

## Longstanding Dictators Extend Their Rule

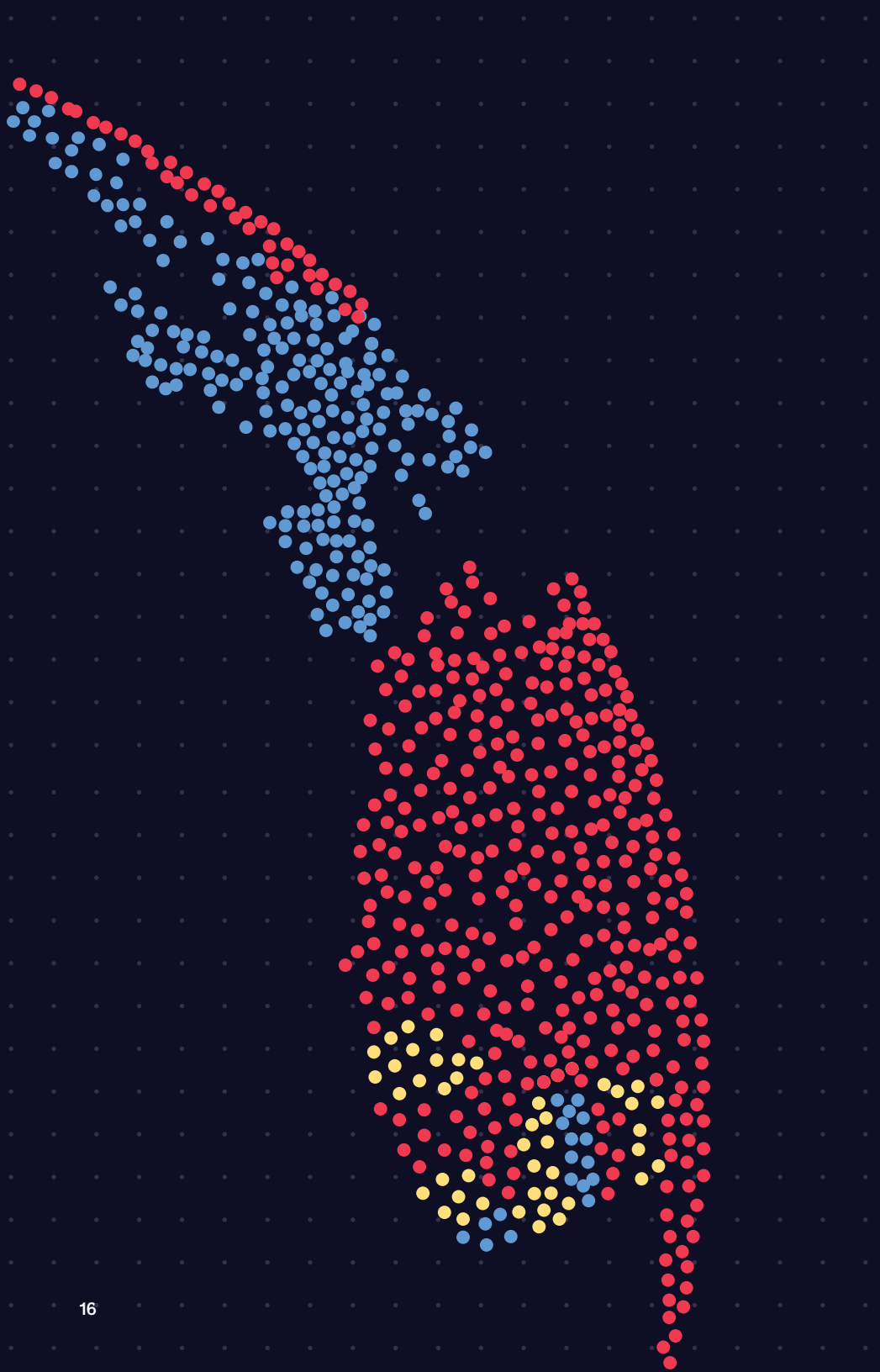
In Cameroon, dictator Paul Biya, who has been in power for 43 years, claimed an eighth consecutive term in fraudulent presidential elections in October. Biya forced his main rival, Issa Tchiroma, into exile and repressed protesters who marched in opposition to the rigged election results. In Côte d'Ivoire, authoritarian ruler Alassane Ouattara claimed a fourth term after excluding his main political rivals from the ballot. In Togo, dictator Faure Gnassingbé shifted the political regime from a presidential to a parliamentary system, which allows him to rule indefinitely as the country's new president of the Council of Ministers. In Djibouti, authoritarian ruler Ismail Omar Guelleh orchestrated a constitutional change allowing him to scrap the presidential age limit and seek a sixth term to extend his 26 years in power.

## Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Consolidation

In Tanzania, the October sham elections in which dictator Samia Suluhu Hassan claimed an implausible 97% of the votes took place with the main opposition party banned from the ballot and its leader, Tundu Lissu, in jail on trumped-up treason charges. The polls were preceded and followed by a wave of state terror in the form of arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and judicial persecution targeting opposition members and supporters, regime critics, human rights defenders, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens.

In Kenya, William Ruto's administration brazenly assaulted the democratic checks and protections provided in the country's landmark 2010 constitution. In response to growing dissent and protests, the regime resorted to defiance of court orders, attempts to undermine the independence of the judiciary, lethal suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations, arbitrary searches and seizures, detentions, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances of critics.

In 2025, Malawi and Seychelles stood out as the only African nations to hold competitive elections.



## Security and Conflict

Authoritarian regimes often claim they seek security while they exploit crises as justifications to delay elections or rule without accountability. This is the case for Burkina Faso and Mali. From Tigray to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to Sudan, authoritarian regimes were also at the forefront of wars and devastating humanitarian catastrophes in 2025.

## Americas

- Seven percent of the region's population live under authoritarian regimes. About 93% of the population live under democratic governments, while about 3% live under hybrid authoritarian regimes and 4% live under fully authoritarian regimes.

## Authoritarian Consolidation

In 2025, the revolution that brought the communist dictatorship to power in Cuba turned 66, making it the longest-surviving authoritarian regime in the Western Hemisphere. Cuba's totalitarian regime continued to consolidate its control amid a deep economic and social crisis of its own making. The one-party state preserved its monopoly over political life, outlawing pluralism, criminalizing independent journalism, and arbitrarily detaining critics, activists, and peaceful protesters. Credible organizations reported that more than one thousand political prisoners remained in detention, including hundreds imprisoned since the mass protests of July 11, 2021. Despite selective prisoner releases linked to negotiations with the Vatican and foreign governments, the regime kept many protest-related detainees behind bars, re-imprisoned some who were released, and forced others into exile. It also intensified surveillance, censorship, and harassment of dissidents in the island. Persistent power outages, shortages of basic goods, and the near-total absence of civil liberties fueled continued social unrest and accelerated the exodus of Cubans seeking to escape repression.

In Nicaragua, repression of civil society continued to increase as Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, consolidated power. In January 2025, the Nicaraguan National Assembly promulgated a constitutional reform that placed Ortega and Murillo at the head of the judiciary, legislature, and executive — effectively abolishing the separation of powers in Nicaragua. The co-presidents have also acted to create a succession mechanism that would preserve power within the Ortega-Murillo family, thereby setting the ground for a dynastic dictatorship reminiscent of the Somoza family that ruled over Nicaragua in the 20th century.

Throughout 2025, the regime in Venezuela continued its crackdown on the democratic opposition, after fraudulently staying in power in January despite having demonstrably lost the July 28, 2024 election. Political parties that posed a threat to Nicolás Maduro's PSUV party were either barred from participating in elections or taken over by regime loyalists. As a result, the ruling political coalition increased its dominance over the National Assembly, claiming 256 of 285 available seats during the 2025 legislative elections. The majority of the remaining seats were distributed to sham opposition parties.

By December 31, 2025, the end of the Tyranny Tracker's yearly analysis, Maduro had yet to be arrested in Caracas on narcoterrorism charges by US law enforcement acting extraterritorially in execution of a long-

standing arrest warrant. The majority of Venezuelans inside and outside the country reacted to Maduro's capture with hope, but the resulting passing of the torch to a notorious overseer of torture and his vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, has triggered uncertainty about the prospects of a democratic transition. HRF has repeatedly called on the international community to maintain the pressure on the Venezuelan dictatorship in order to facilitate a transition to democracy as soon as possible.

## Opportunity for Transition From Hybrid Authoritarianism

In 2025, Bolivia held competitive general elections that resulted in a peaceful transfer of power, ending nearly two decades of hybrid authoritarian rule by the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party. The vote was widely recognized as free and fair, and the transition was accompanied by the release of several political prisoners, including opposition leader and Santa Cruz governor Luis Fernando Camacho, who had been detained under the previous regime. The new authorities inherited institutions weakened by systematic political interference and the erosion of judicial independence during the MAS years. However, the orderly handover and early steps to restore due process have created a real opportunity to rebuild key democratic institutions that were co-opted under the MAS regime, including the Constitutional Tribunal.

In November 2025, Honduras conducted general elections under tense conditions marked by partisan threats, technical irregularities, and heated allegations of fraud from multiple camps. Despite these challenges and intense pressure on electoral authorities, voting day itself was generally calm, and the process ultimately produced a result that most international observers characterized as largely free and fair. The protracted tally and postelection disputes highlighted the fragility of institutions under the outgoing Libertad y Refundación government, but the election nonetheless preserved a basis for democratic competition and offers a cautious opening for Honduras to strengthen electoral integrity and democratic institutions in general.

## Security Challenges and States of Exception

Some political leaders leveraged enduring security challenges, including the expansion of organized crime groups, to enact measures that undermine democratic institutions across the Americas. El Salvador and Honduras have been governed under prolonged states of exception since 2022. These states of exception have been linked to serious human rights violations, and in the case of El Salvador, they have been part of a systematic attack on dissent, independent journalism, and civil society, as well as the independence of the judiciary.



## Asia-Pacific

- Eighty-seven percent of the region's population live under authoritarian regimes. About 38% live under fully authoritarian regimes, while an estimated 49% live under hybrid authoritarian regimes. Around 13% of the population live under democratic governments.

## Post-2024 Election Wave Repression

The 2024 election wave across the Asia-Pacific region led to the installation of new governments that, throughout 2025, continued to sustain repressive practices. This post-election period was marked by continued constraints on civil liberties, limited political competition, and weakened institutional accountability. Overall, the region experienced widespread democratic erosion, with only a handful of states demonstrating pockets of resilience amid the wider downturn. Singapore became the latest to demonstrate the hollowing out of formal electoral processes in the region through its parliamentary polls in May 2025 that handed the ruling People's Action Party its fourteenth term in office.

## Youth-Led Political Movements

Youth-led protest movements in the region have precipitated major political change. Throughout 2025, Indonesia saw multiple nationwide protests galvanized by youth and civil society against corruption, nepotism, economic mismanagement, and systematic stifling of fundamental freedoms by the hybrid authoritarian regime of Prabowo Subianto. The protests culminated in August and September, when over 4,000 were arbitrarily arrested and at least 10 were killed in ensuing incidents of police brutality.

Following Indonesia, Gen Z-driven mobilizations in Nepal, where dozens were killed, forced the resignation of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and brought to power former Supreme Court Chief Justice Sushila Karki, the country's first female prime minister and a figure outside the entrenched political elite. In Bangladesh, the interim administration led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, installed following the "July Revolution," has continued toward introducing reforms aimed at correcting past failures under former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Among these was the promulgation of the momentous July Charter, a political accord that enshrines commitments by local political actors to prevent an authoritarian relapse.

## Pockets of Democracy Amid Authoritarian Consolidation

South Korea exemplified democratic resilience in 2025. Mass protests following the surprise declaration of martial law by President Yoon Suk-yeol in 2024 provided sufficient momentum for Yoon's impeachment and a presidential snap election in June 2025, which allowed for the peaceful transfer of power to opposition leader Lee Jae-myung.

In contrast, other states in the region continued to see a consolidation of authoritarian rule. 2025 marked the ongoing demise of political opposition in Hong Kong, with the dissolution of the city's largest and oldest pro-democracy party, the Democratic Party, in April. Two months later, the League of Social Democrats, one of Hong Kong's last remaining pro-democracy parties, also announced its disbandment. In Thailand, former Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, who came to power after joining hands with pro-establishment parties, was removed from office by the Constitutional Court over her handling of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict. She was the fifth prime minister to be removed by the Court in recent history. Meanwhile, lèse-majesté laws continue to be abused to stifle criticism of the monarchy throughout the year, with at least 300 cases having been instituted against 284 individuals as of October 2025. In Burma, after more than four years of civil war, the military junta staged three-phased elections starting in December 2025, a sham orchestrated to reinforce military rule.

## Transnational Repression

Throughout 2025, authoritarians in the Asia-Pacific region continued to cooperate to facilitate transnational repression against dissidents abroad. Early in the year, Thailand forced the repatriation of at least 40 Uyghurs to China, where they face serious persecution by the Chinese Communist Party. Thai officials also arrested Australian journalist Murray Hunter following a complaint filed by Malaysia, and forcibly returned indigenous activist Y Quynh Bdap pursuant to Vietnam's request. Similarly, Cambodian activists exiled in Japan reported being coerced into discrediting fellow activists and pro-democracy voices, and being visited by Cambodian military officers for posting critically about the government on social media.



## Europe and Central Asia

- Thirty-eight percent of the region's population live under authoritarian regimes. About 62% of the population live under democratic governments, while an estimated 36% live under fully authoritarian regimes and 2% live under hybrid authoritarian regimes.



## Democracy Surviving in Extremis

Democracy in Ukraine narrowly persisted in 2025 despite great challenges. Despite the suspension of elections while the country remains under martial law, the concentration of executive power in the presidency and the National Security and Defense Council, and a shrinking civic space, accountability mechanisms in Ukraine remain operative and responsive to bottom-up mobilization. A controversial proposed reform of the country's most prominent anti-corruption agencies, established to help fulfill the European Union's (EU) accession rule-of-law standards, triggered mass protests and sharp criticism from international partners. In response, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy submitted legislation reinstating the functional independence of anti-corruption bodies.

## Foreign Threats to Democracy

In Romania and Moldova, authoritarian actors illustrated their growing capacity to influence election outcomes in countries they consider strategically significant. In both countries, authorities confronted the dilemma of whether to curb such interference or adhere to established institutional norms, even at the risk of allowing distorted competition.

In Romania, this tension crystallized in the Constitutional Court's unprecedented annulment of the first round of the 2024 presidential election. Independent candidate Alexandru Georgescu's unexpected surge, from polling at roughly 5% to securing 23% of the vote, prompted scrutiny following the declassification of intelligence suggesting systemic campaign finance irregularities and covert foreign-linked funding, likely involving Russia. While legally binding, the decision to annul a certified election was highly contentious. The May 2025 rerun, narrowly won by pro-EU candidate Nicușor Dan, was deemed free and fair overall. However, the controversy contributed to lingering distrust in electoral and judicial institutions among large segments of the public.

Moldova faced a more overt interference campaign. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has intensified hybrid tactics aimed at derailing Moldova's EU integration trajectory. The September 2025 presidential election, won by incumbent Maia Sandu, was marred by disinformation, AI-generated deepfakes, staged protests, and a Russia-orchestrated vote-buying scheme involving roughly 130,000 citizens and \$15 million laundered through networks linked to fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor.

## Hybrid Regimes and Islands of Civic Resistance

The entrenchment of ruling parties in hybrid authoritarian Hungary, Georgia, and Serbia has relied on the strategic capture of key institutions, clientelism, and unfair campaign advantages that all but guarantee incumbent victories while preserving a façade of competitiveness. Given the limited capacity of formal institutions to constrain executive power, civic mobilization has gained renewed prominence, as evidenced by persistent student demonstrations in Serbia and protests against electoral fraud and "foreign agent" legislation in Georgia.

Recognizing the potential of organized nonviolent action, these regimes have either circumscribed constitutional protections for freedom of assembly or escalated repression outright. In March 2025, Hungary's ruling Fidesz party moved to ban Pride events, sparking some of the largest demonstrations in Budapest in years. In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party's consolidation of control over the security apparatus facilitated arbitrary detentions and intensified judicial persecution of the mainstream opposition, including the United National Movement party.

## Authoritarian Consolidation

Despite significant opposition gains at the polls, the ongoing persecution of political opponents and the hollowing out of accountability institutions signal authoritarian consolidation in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The arrest and prosecution of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March 2025 — on 142 charges carrying potential prison sentences exceeding 2,000 years — illustrated the regime's reliance on judicial repression to restrict political competition. Muted international responses and fading domestic protests have enabled the regime to mete out repression without facing external condemnation, civic mobilization, or dissent within the judiciary and security apparatus.

## Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

- Ninety-eight percent of the region's population live under authoritarian regimes. 88% of the population live under fully authoritarian regimes, while an estimated 10% live under hybrid authoritarian regimes. About 2% of the population lives under a democratic government.

## Stability Through Repression and Conflict

People across the region faced continued authoritarian consolidation and repression of all forms of political opposition and dissent. Authoritarian regimes continued to maintain and gain further control over domestic politics through vague and repressive laws, such as restrictive media laws in Qatar and Oman. Dictators in the region continued targeting dissenters with violence, exemplified by the summary execution of journalist Turki Al-Jasser in Saudi Arabia in June 2025. Ongoing geopolitical conflicts also threatened the human rights of people in the region, including the Israel-Hamas conflict and the war in Yemen.

With the toppling of the Assad regime by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in December 2024, Syria entered a period of transition. Amid waves of sectarian violence and extrajudicial killings involving both transitional government forces and remnants of the former regime, separatist pressures in the northeast, south, and coastal regions, and troubling signs of continued kleptocracy and opacity within key governance roles under the transitional government of former HTS militant commander Ahmed al-Sharaa, many in Syrian civil society nonetheless maintain cautious optimism. That optimism rests on the possibility that the transition culminates in free and fair elections, the adoption of a genuinely pluralistic constitutional order, and a decisive end to internal violence — conditions without which regime change alone will not yield a free, united, or peaceful Syria.

## (S)elections Across the Region

In 2025, parliamentary elections took place in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. During the Iraqi elections, which were among the only ones in the region to feature genuine competition, established political actors maintained power despite reformist pressure, signaling the marginalization of protest-linked candidates and the co-optation of independents. In Egypt and Syria, the respective military and transitional regimes held elections with hand-picked candidates and, at times, a selected electoral college of voters. In Egypt's November 2025 polls for the House of Representatives, the el-Sisi regime annulled ballots from multiple districts, despite only permitting pro-regime candidates to run for office. In Syria, 70 members of the new parliament were appointed directly by the interim president. The remaining 122 members were chosen by a limited electoral college of just 6,000 Syrians, without representation from the three regions that have not fully recognized the interim government's authority.

## Outmaneuvering the Opposition

In countries that did not hold elections this year, regimes still took steps to restrict opposition parties and consolidate their authoritarian control over domestic politics. In Jordan, the monarchy declared the Muslim Brotherhood an illegal organization, raided its offices, and banned its promotion. The ban came seven months after the Islamic Action Front, Jordan's most prominent opposition party affiliated with the Brotherhood, won a plurality of seats in the 2024 parliamentary elections. The regime in Kuwait took measures to dismantle the opposition by purging voter blocks of more than 40,000 naturalized citizens and retaliating against dissenters during the ongoing suspension of parliament announced by decree in 2024. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied's regime escalated crackdowns, extending the sentences of opposition leaders like Rachid Ghannouchi.

# 2025 Tyranny Tracker Researchers

Sophia Aepfelbacher

Ali Al Bayaa

Samuele Arioli

Mariana Atala

Emilia Bebić

Brahima Bilali

Kristen Clemens

Javier El-Hage

Luciana Fortuna

Amara Galileo, Ph.D.

Roberto González

Priya Guduru

Malaak Jamal

Mohamed Keita

Sergei Korotkov

Pavel Kutsevol

Nolwenn Mahé

Wiriranai Masara, Ph.D.

Gorazd Ordanoski

Chiara-Lou Parriaud

Alvaro Piaggio

Ezequiel Podjarny

Zara Rancheva

Tigran Sargsyan

Charles Sutherland

Hannah Van Dijke

Li-Chien Wei

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