



## FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2012: THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND THEIR GLOBAL REPERCUSSIONS

by Arch Puddington

The political uprisings that swept across the Arab world over the past year represent the most significant challenge to authoritarian rule since the collapse of Soviet communism. In a region that had seemed immune to democratic change, coalitions of activist reformers and ordinary citizens succeeded in removing dictators who had spent decades entrenching themselves in power. In some cases, protest and upheaval was followed by the beginnings of democratic institution building. At year's end, two countries with unbroken histories of fraudulent polling, Tunisia and Egypt, had conducted elections that observers deemed competitive and credible, and freedom of expression had gained momentum in many Middle Eastern societies.

Unfortunately, the gains that were recorded in Tunisia, and to a considerably lesser extent in Egypt and Libya, were offset by more dubious trends elsewhere in the region. Indeed, the overthrow of autocrats in these countries provoked determined and often violent responses in many others, most notably in Syria, where by year's end the Assad dictatorship had killed over 5,000 people in its efforts to crush widespread antigovernment protests. Similar if less bloody crackdowns took place in Bahrain and Yemen.

This pattern of protest and repression—with an emphasis on the latter—was echoed elsewhere in the world as news of the Arab uprisings spread beyond the Middle East and North Africa. In China, the authorities responded to events in Cairo's Tahrir Square with a near-hysterical campaign of arrests, incommunicado detentions, press censorship, and stepped-up control over the internet. The Chinese Communist Party's pushback, which aimed to quash potential prodemocracy demonstrations before they even emerged, reached a crescendo in December with the sentencing of a number of

dissident writers to long terms in prison. In Russia, the state-controlled media bombarded domestic audiences with predictions of chaos and instability as a consequence of the Arab protests, with a clear message that demands for political reform in Russia would have similarly catastrophic results. In other Eurasian countries and in parts of Africa, the authorities went to considerable lengths to suppress demonstrations and isolate the democratic opposition.

The authoritarian response to change in the Middle East had a significant impact on the state of global freedom at year's end. The findings of *Freedom in the World 2012*, the latest edition of Freedom House's annual report on political rights and civil liberties, showed that slightly more countries registered declines than exhibited gains over the course of 2011. This marks the sixth consecutive year in which countries with declines outnumbered those with improvements.

The continued pattern of global backsliding—especially in such critical areas as press freedom, the rule of law, and the rights of civil society—is a sobering reminder that the institutions that anchor democratic governance cannot be achieved by protests alone. Yet if there is an overarching message for the year, it is one of hope and not of reversal. For the first time in some years, governments and rulers who mistreated their people were on the defensive. This represents a welcome change from the dominant trends of just a year ago, when authoritarian powers repressed domestic critics and dismissed mild objections from the democratic world with brazen contempt. In 2010, China conducted a bullying campaign against the Nobel committee for honoring jailed dissident Liu Xiaobo, Russia imposed a second prison term on former oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky after a fraudulent judicial proceeding, and Egyptian president Hosni

Mubarak's National Democratic Party claimed to have won heavily rigged parliamentary elections with well over 80 percent of the seats.

In 2011, by contrast, the signal events were the overthrow of Mubarak, Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, and Libya's Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi; successful elections in Tunisia; and democratic ferment throughout the Arab world. Meanwhile, China's perpetual campaign of repression, directed at writers, lawyers, journalists, religious believers, ethnic minorities, and ordinary citizens who had spoken out against injustice and state abuses, seemed only to show the staggering fears and weaknesses of a regime that otherwise presents the image of a confident, globally integrated economic powerhouse. And in Russia, Vladimir Putin faced his first serious political crisis, as election fraud and the prospect of 12 more years without new leadership drew tens of thousands of protesters to the streets.

Whether the events of 2011 will lead to a true wave of democratic revolution is uncertain. Tunisia was clearly the greatest beneficiary of the year's changes. It experienced one of the largest single-year improvements in the history of the *Freedom in the World* report, rising from among the worst-performing Middle Eastern countries to achieve electoral democracy status and scores that place it roughly alongside such Partly Free countries as Colombia and Philippines. But much remains to be done, and there are some questions about the positions of the new leaders on such crucial issues as minority rights, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression. Egypt also made significant gains, but they have been overshadowed in many respects by the continued political dominance of the military, its hostility toward media critics, its campaign against human rights organizations, and its humiliating treatment of female protesters. In many other Arab countries, democracy movements have yet to reach even the initial milestone of forcing the resignation of their longtime rulers. The perceived success or failure of these efforts will either continue to inspire similar changes in the rest of the world, or bolster authoritarian calls for "stability" at any price.

## Freedom's Trajectory in 2011

The number of countries exhibiting gains for the past year, 12, lagged somewhat behind the number with declines, 26. The most noteworthy gains were in the Middle East—in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—and in three Asian countries—Burma, Singapore, and Thailand. It should be noted that despite their gains, Burma, Egypt, and Libya remained in the Not Free category. Moreover, while the Middle East experienced the most significant improvements, it also registered the most declines, with a list of worsening countries that includes Bahrain, Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Declines were also noted in a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, including Albania, Azerbaijan, Hungary, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

### Among other trends:

- **Glimmers of Hope for the Most Repressed:** Burma, which has ranked alongside North Korea as one of the world's most closed societies, experienced what many hope will become a major political opening. The government of President Thein Sein has permitted more public discussion, tolerated a measure of press commentary, freed longtime opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and cleared the path for her party's participation in elections. Another country that endured decades of brutal misrule, Libya, now has the potential for significant gains thanks to the overthrow of al-Qadhafi. Cuba, also one of the world's most repressive countries, experienced a small improvement linked to the limited reduction of economic restrictions by the government of Raúl Castro. Unlike in Burma, however, Cuba underwent no political liberalization.
- **(Some) Good News in Asia:** In a region whose dominant power, China, maintains the world's most sophisticated and comprehensive system of authoritarian political control, the recent trend has been largely positive. Aside from the improvements in Burma, the past year was notable for more open and competitive

elections in Singapore, whose unique variant of “guided democracy” has been in place for several decades. In fact, for the countries of Asia proper, practically every indicator measured by *Freedom in the World* improved to some degree.

- **Sectarian Strife in the Middle East:** The intensified violence between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq as U.S. forces completed their withdrawal touched on a broader threat posed by sectarianism to democracy’s future in the region. Differences among various strains of Islam complicated the crackdown on mainly Shiite protesters in Bahrain, and played a role in the crisis in Syria, principally propelled by President Bashar al-Assad’s desperate efforts to remain in power. Sunni-Shiite rivalry also presents a serious threat to political stability in Lebanon, while in Egypt, anti-Christian sentiment flared into violence during the year, with notable help from the military.
- **Long-Term Setbacks in Energy-Rich Eurasia:** The past year featured the continuation of a decade-long trend of setbacks for the wealthiest and most “modern” former Soviet countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. The level of freedom fell further despite rising popular demands for reform and warning signs from the Middle East. Indeed, beginning with the “color revolutions” of 2003 to 05, authoritarians in Eurasia have consistently responded to freedom movements outside their borders with intensified clampdowns at home. Year-end protests in Moscow and violent labor unrest in Kazakhstan should remind the world that repression does not in fact lead to stability.
- **Danger Signs for New Democracies:** Until recently, Ukraine, Hungary, South Africa, and Turkey were regarded as important success stories for democratic development. Now, increasingly, the democratic credentials of each is coming under question. The steepest decline in the institutions of freedom has taken place in

Ukraine, where a series of negative developments was punctuated by the conviction of opposition leader Yuliya Tymoshenko on dubious charges. In the past two years, Ukraine has moved from a status of Free to Partly Free and suffered deterioration on most indicators measured by Freedom House. Developments in Turkey are also worrying, given the country’s role as a model for democracy in Muslim-majority countries and its aspirations to regional leadership. While the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has instituted important reforms since coming to power, stepped-up arrests of advocates for Kurdish rights and the continued pursuit of the wide-ranging and politically fraught Ergenekon conspiracy case, which has led to lengthy detentions without charge, are both causes for concern. In Hungary, the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, taking advantage of a parliamentary supermajority, has pushed through a new constitution and a raft of laws that could seriously weaken press freedom, judicial independence, and a fair election process. And in South Africa, new media regulations and evidence of pervasive corruption within the African National Congress leadership threaten to undermine the country’s past achievements in peaceful democratic change.

## Results for 2011

The number of countries designated by *Freedom in the World* as Free in 2011 stood at 87, representing 45 percent of the world’s 195 polities and 3,016,566,100 people—43 percent of the global population. The number of Free countries did not change from the previous year’s survey.

The number of countries qualifying as Partly Free stood at 60, or 31 percent of all countries assessed by the survey, and they were home to 1,497,442,500 people, or 22 percent of the world’s total. The number of Partly Free countries did not change from the previous year.

A total of 48 countries were deemed Not Free,

representing 24 percent of the world's polities. The number of people living under Not Free conditions stood at 2,453,231,500, or 35 percent of the global population, though it is important to note that more than half of this number lives in just one country: China. The number of Not Free countries increased by one from 2010 due to the inclusion for the first time of South Sudan, a new state that was given a Not Free designation.

### FREE, PARTLY FREE, NOT FREE

*Freedom in the World* applies one of three broad category designations to each of the countries and territories included in the index: **Free, Partly Free, and Not Free**.

A **Free** country is one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media.

A **Partly Free** country is one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. Partly Free states frequently suffer from an environment of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and a political landscape in which a single party enjoys dominance despite a certain degree of pluralism.

A **Not Free** country is one where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied.

For more on how these designations are determined, see the Methodology section on page 33.

The number of electoral democracies increased by two and stands at 117. Three countries achieved electoral democracy status due to elections that were widely regarded as improvements: Niger, Thailand, and Tunisia.

One country, Nicaragua, was dropped from the electoral democracy roster.

One country moved from Not Free to Partly Free: Tunisia. One country, The Gambia, dropped from Partly Free to Not Free.

### ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL TRENDS

#### Middle East and North Africa: The Arab Spring's Ambiguous Achievements

Even in a region that was notorious for its leaders' disdain for honest government and civil liberties, Tunisia had long stood out for the thoroughness of its system of control and oppression. Its longtime strongman, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, had seemingly smothered all significant sources of opposition. Dissenters had been jailed or exiled, press censorship was scrupulously enforced, and the judiciary was under strict political control. This country seemed a highly unlikely setting for a democratic revolution.

Yet it is Tunisia that has emerged as the most dramatic success story thus far in the series of popular uprisings that took place across the Arab world during 2011. It has been transformed from a showcase for Arab autocracy to an electoral democracy whose new leaders have pledged themselves to moderation, adherence to civil liberties, and the rule of law. The press is critical and vibrant; there are practically no taboo subjects. Civil society has proliferated, and elements within the new leadership appear committed to tackling the problem of pervasive corruption, though achieving such deep institutional reforms will likely require many years of effort.

Some gains were also made in Egypt and Libya, but in both of these societies, the future prospects for democratic reform are still very much in doubt. In Egypt, governing authority shifted from the Mubarak regime to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a group of military leaders who have dispensed justice through military tribunals, engaged in periodic crackdowns on critical media, raided the offices of civil society organizations, mistreated women

activists, and engaged in violence against Christians. While a protracted election process, still under way at year's end, was conducted with an adherence to fair practices that stood in vivid contrast to the sham polls of the Mubarak regime, the dominant forces in the new parliament will be Islamist parties whose devotion to democracy is open to question. And while Libya has benefited greatly from the demise of the Qadhafi dictatorship, the country confronts an array of daunting political and security challenges, and has yet to hold its first elections.

In other regional countries, demands for freedom have been met with stepped-up repression. In the worst case, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad responded to widespread peaceful protests with a campaign of arrests, torture, and urban fusillades that took the lives of an estimated 5,000 Syrians by year's end. In Bahrain, a prodemocracy movement consisting principally of members of the Shiite majority encountered violent repression by the monarchy and intervention by the Saudi military. The government's tactics included mass arrests, torture, and the use of military justice in cases of political activists. In Yemen, security forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh killed hundreds of civilians as Saleh repeatedly slipped out of agreements on a transfer of power. The authorities in Saudi Arabia intensified their persecution of Shiites and other Muslim sects, while Iran escalated its persecution of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic leaders who were critical of regime actions. Lebanon suffered a decline in civil liberties due to the violent treatment of protesters and punitive measures against those demanding regime change in neighboring Syria. The United Arab Emirates also experienced a civil liberties decline after the government tightened restrictions on free speech and civil society and arrested those calling for political change.

Israel's relations with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and with other countries in the region, worsened as the year's tumult raised expectations and shook old assumptions. Israel also faced condemnation for a series of measures

that were either introduced in the Knesset or signed into law and were seen by critics as threats to freedom of speech. One measure that was enacted called for punishment of those who support boycotts against Israel or its institutions, including universities and businesses located in West Bank settlements.

### **WORST OF THE WORST**

Of the 48 countries designated as Not Free, nine have been given the survey's lowest possible rating of 7 for both political rights and civil liberties. These worst-rated countries represent a narrow range of systems and cultures. One—North Korea—is a one-party, Marxist-Leninist regime. Two—Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—are Central Asian countries ruled by dictators with roots in the Soviet period. Sudan is ruled by a leadership that has elements of both radical Islamism and a traditional military junta. The remaining worst-rated states are Equatorial Guinea, a highly corrupt regime with one of the worst human rights records in Africa; Eritrea, an increasingly repressive police state; Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with severe social controls; Syria, a dictatorship in the midst of a bloody crackdown; and Somalia, a failed state. The two worst-rated territories in the survey are Tibet—under Chinese jurisdiction—and Western Sahara, which is controlled by Morocco.

An additional 8 countries and territories received scores that were slightly above those of the worst-ranked countries, with ratings of 6,7 or 7,6 for political rights and civil liberties: Belarus, Burma, Chad, China, Cuba, Laos, Libya, and South Ossetia.

### **Asia-Pacific: Important Gains, Despite China and Conflict**

Over the past five years, the Asia-Pacific region has been the only one to record steady gains in the majority of indicators that are measured by

*Freedom in the World.* Progress is especially noteworthy in the countries of Asia proper, excluding the small Pacific island nations. The most impressive gains have come in the institutions of electoral democracy—elections, political parties, pluralism—and in freedom of association.

The embrace of free institutions has taken place in the face of significant regional obstacles, including, most notably, the influence of China. In recent years China has accelerated its efforts to project its power beyond its borders, and its Asian neighbors have been important targets of this effort. Despite several incidents in which critics of the Chinese government and exiled Chinese minorities encountered repression in Nepal, Indonesia, and Vietnam, the allure of the so-called China model—combining state-led economic growth, a Leninist one-party political system, and strict control over the media—has gained only modest traction in the region. Meanwhile, the Chinese leadership has demonstrated no serious interest in political liberalization at home, and has devoted impressive resources to internet censorship, the suppression of minorities, and the elimination of even oblique political dissent. In 2011, the authorities carried out a major campaign of repression in the wake of the Arab uprisings by censoring public discussion of the movement for Arab democratization, prosecuting or arbitrarily detaining scores of social-media commentators and human rights lawyers, and strengthening the online censorship of domestic social-networking services.

Another regional challenge is the explosion of civil and sectarian strife in South Asia. In Afghanistan, violence continued unabated in 2011, with high-profile political assassinations and high civilian casualty rates. In Pakistan, there was growing discord over enforcement of the country's blasphemy laws, punctuated by the murders of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, the minister for minority affairs, both of whom had criticized the blasphemy statutes. Bangladesh also suffered a decline due to the ruling Awami League's prosecution of opposition politicians and efforts to muzzle NGOs. On the other hand, India, the world's

largest democracy, showed increased room for peaceful demonstrations, particularly with the rise of an anticorruption movement that brought tens of thousands of people to the streets. Indian-administered Kashmir experienced a notable improvement in the space for open public discussion amid growing use of social media and a drop in violence.

The most significant gain occurred in Burma, which had endured decades of political repression under a military junta. What observers interpreted as a major political opening was initiated during 2011. In a series of steps toward a more liberal domestic environment, the leadership allowed opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy, to register and compete in forthcoming by-elections, eased press censorship, and legalized political protest. At the same time, many cautioned that it was still unclear whether the changes in Burma were durable or simply cosmetic improvements by the regime. In Singapore, the system of managed democracy engineered by the former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, was loosened, and opposition candidates gained popular support in national elections, though the system ensured that this did not translate into significantly increased representation in the parliament. Conditions also improved in Thailand, whose deeply polarized political life had been dominated by riots and crippling demonstrations for several years. A July election led to a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition party and the installation as prime minister of Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of controversial former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. However, there has been some backsliding on civil liberties since the end of November.

### **Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia: Stability and Stagnation**

The protests that roiled Moscow and other Russian cities in the wake of deeply flawed December parliamentary elections were stark reminders that no authoritarian leadership, no matter how sophisticated its methods, is immune to popular demands for change. While the

immediate trigger for the mass demonstrations were widely circulated YouTube videos that suggested ballot-stuffing and other forms of election fraud, the protests also reflected displeasure with the earlier announcement that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev had forged an agreement to swap positions at the end of Medvedev's term in 2012. The two men had failed to fulfill long-standing promises to reform Russia's corrupt, stagnant, and unresponsive government system, and the idea of Putin's return for a third and possibly fourth presidential term helped drive ordinary Russians to the unprecedented demonstrations.

There are many questions about the ability of the forces that led the postelection protests to influence future politics in Russia. But clearly Russia is not alone in its vulnerability to popular discontent with authoritarian leadership. As the 20th anniversary of the Soviet Union's disintegration was marked at year's end, most Eurasian countries were still subject to autocratic rule of one variant or another. Whereas prior to 2011 the "president for life" phenomenon was principally associated with the Middle East, it is today more likely to apply to the long-term leaders of the former Soviet Union.

The authoritarian temptation poses a threat even in countries with recent histories of free-wheeling democracy. Thus Ukraine suffered a major decline due to President Viktor Yanukovych's moves to crush the political opposition through a variety of antidemocratic tactics, including the prosecution of opposition political leader and former prime minister Yuliya Tymoshenko. Other "color revolution" countries also faced problems. Kyrgyzstan, recovering from a 2010 revolt against an authoritarian president, held national elections that were judged to be relatively fair and competitive. Nevertheless, deep divisions lingered between the majority Kyrgyz and minority Uzbeks, and little progress was made in bringing to justice those responsible for anti-Uzbek violence in mid-2010. In Georgia, President Mikheil Saakashvili continued to face

criticism for his apparent efforts to marginalize potential opposition figures.

Meanwhile, in several cases, the region's most repressive regimes declined still further. In Azerbaijan, the government of President Ilham Aliyev used force to break up demonstrations, jailed opposition activists, tried to neutralize the international press, and misused state power to evict citizens from their homes as part of grandiose building schemes. Kazakhstan suffered a decline due to the adoption of legislation that restricted religious belief. In December, conditions deteriorated further when the regime used violence in an effort to put down labor protests by oil workers. And in Belarus, the regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka held scores of political prisoners and adopted a series of bizarre policies—such as outlawing public clapping in unison—to prevent creative expressions of popular discontent over political repression and economic decline.

For most of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics, by contrast, the year was notable for the ability of most countries to weather the European economic crisis without major damage to the basic institutions of democracy. At the same time, a number of countries in the region remained highly vulnerable to precarious economies, the merging of business and political interests, and corruption. Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Western Balkans could face problems as Europe's economic woes persist.

Hungary poses the most serious problem in Central Europe. The government of Viktor Orbán has taken advantage of a two-thirds parliamentary majority to push through a new and problematic constitution without adequate input from the opposition, and a series of laws that are widely seen as threats to press freedom, judicial independence, and political pluralism. Albania experienced declines due to violence against demonstrators, flawed municipal elections, and the failure of the courts to deal effectively with major corruption cases. On the positive side, Slovakia was credited for having adopted legislation designed to shield the press from political intimidation.

The Balkans achieved mixed progress on the road to democratization and European Union (EU) accession. In July, Serbia's government finally surrendered the last of the 161 suspected war criminals indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, including Ratko Mladić, a leading figure in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre who had evaded arrest for 16 years. Mladić's extradition met with disapproval from over 50 percent of Serbia's population, triggering sizeable protests. Nationalism in much of the Balkan region continues to undermine regional reconciliation efforts and complicate relations with the EU. Pressures on free media increased across the Balkans, particularly in Macedonia, where an opposition-oriented television station and several newspapers were harassed and closed.

### Sub-Saharan Africa: Civil Society Under Pressure

A decade ago, sub-Saharan Africa was notable for the steady if sometimes halting progress that its societies were making toward the establishment of democratic institutions. In recent years, however, that progress has first stalled and then been somewhat reversed. The year 2011 gave evidence of moderate decline, with particular problems in countries where members of the opposition and civil society made pleas for change in emulation of protests in the Arab world.

Five of the 10 countries that registered the most significant declines in the *Freedom in the World* report over the two-year period from 2010 to 2011 were in Africa: The Gambia, Ethiopia, Burundi, Rwanda, and Djibouti. Likewise, over the five-year period from 2007 through 2011, Africa as a region has exhibited declines in each of the topical subcategories measured by *Freedom in the World*. Particularly substantial declines were recorded for rule of law and freedom of association.

The Gambia experienced the most notable decline over the past year. Its status moved from Partly Free to Not Free due to a presidential election that was judged neither free nor fair, and President Yahya Jammeh's suppression of

### LARGEST NET CHANGES IN TOTAL AGGREGATE SCORE, 2007–2011

| Declines   | Improvements                                     |
|--|--|
| The Gambia <span style="color: red;">-24</span>  | Tunisia <span style="color: green;">35</span>    |
| Madagascar <span style="color: red;">-19</span>  | Maldives <span style="color: green;">20</span>   |
| Mauritania <span style="color: red;">-19</span>  | Bangladesh <span style="color: green;">18</span> |
| Bahrain <span style="color: red;">-17</span>     | Pakistan <span style="color: green;">17</span>   |
| Ethiopia <span style="color: red;">-14</span>    | Tonga <span style="color: green;">16</span>      |
| Nicaragua <span style="color: red;">-13</span>   | Thailand <span style="color: green;">13</span>   |
| Ukraine <span style="color: red;">-13</span>     | Burma <span style="color: green;">11</span>      |
| Afghanistan <span style="color: red;">-11</span> | Egypt <span style="color: green;">10</span>      |
| Yemen <span style="color: red;">-11</span>       | Libya <span style="color: green;">9</span>       |
| Burundi <span style="color: red;">-10</span>     | Bhutan <span style="color: green;">9</span>      |

This table shows the countries with the largest net gains or losses in total aggregate score (0–100) between *Freedom in the World* 2008 and *Freedom in the World* 2012.

See page 14 for these countries' current status and ratings.

the political opposition, the media, and civil society in the run-up to the vote.

Five other regional countries experienced declines for the year. Ethiopia continued a decade-long trend of growing authoritarianism, with the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi making increased use of antiterrorism laws against the political opposition and journalists. In Sudan, the administration of President Omar al-Bashir engaged in stepped-up arrests of opposition leaders, banned a leading political party, used violent tactics against demonstrators, and persecuted the media. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni cracked down on critical members of the press in a year

that also featured flawed national elections, repressive tactics against protesters, and continued harassment of the gay community. Malawi witnessed pressure against journalists and violence against protesters as well as violations of academic freedom. Antigovernment protests were also met with repressive tactics in Djibouti, where the intimidation of opposition political parties was followed by the election of President Ismail Omar Guelleh to a third term in office.

Two countries with recent histories of political upheaval registered gains. Conditions in Côte d'Ivoire improved somewhat after Alassane Ouattara assumed the presidency, ending months of civil strife associated with incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to surrender power despite his defeat in 2010 elections. Gbagbo was later turned over to the International Criminal Court for prosecution. Niger experienced a major improvement in its political rights rating due to credible national and local elections that marked the end of more than a year of military rule.

### **Americas: Continuity Despite Populist Threat**

Over the past decade, left-wing populist leaders have risen to power in a number of Latin American countries, causing some to predict that the authoritarian model established by Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez would come to dominate the politics of the region. In fact, authoritarian populism has remained a minority phenomenon, as most societies have embraced the model of private-sector growth, social-welfare initiatives, and adherence to democratic standards established by leaders in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico.

Nevertheless, events in 2011 demonstrated that quasi-authoritarian populism still stands as a threat to the region's political stability. In the most serious case, Nicaragua suffered a steep decline in political rights due to irregularities in advance of and during the presidential election, which gave Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega another term in office. Likewise, Ecuador suffered a decline due to President Rafael Correa's intensified campaign against media

critics, the government's use of state resources to influence the outcome of a referendum, and a restructuring of the judiciary that was in blatant violation of constitutional provisions.

Chávez himself was preoccupied with medical treatment, mostly carried out under less-than-transparent conditions in Cuba, reportedly for prostate cancer. Chávez has announced that he will seek reelection in 2012, but the campaign promises to be more competitive than in the past due to the apparent unity of the opposition.

Violent crime, much of it generated by drug-trafficking groups, continued to plague societies throughout the region, causing ripple effects in the political system and contributing to a growing trend toward the militarization of police work. In Mexico, government institutions remained unable to protect ordinary citizens, journalists, and elected officials in many areas from organized crime. Mexican journalism in certain regions remains shackled by drug-gang intimidation, with some editors significantly altering coverage to avoid violent repercussions. In Venezuela, the kidnapping for ransom of professional baseball catcher Wilson Ramos stood out as a vivid reminder of the violent criminality that more commonly affects the population at large. In Brazil, the government's efforts to bring down crime in the most troubled urban districts in advance of the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament have been met by determined resistance from organized gangs.

In other developments, Guatemala registered an improvement in political rights due to progress made by an international commission set up to investigate impunity and corruption in the country's institutions. Puerto Rico suffered a civil liberties decline stemming from reports of widespread police misconduct and brutality.

### **Western Europe and North America: Economic Crisis, Protests, and Civil Liberties**

In the face of the most serious economic crisis in the postwar period, the countries of Western Europe and North America maintained their traditionally high level of respect for democratic standards and civil liberties. This was even the

case in countries that were compelled to make major cuts to social-welfare provisions in response to high levels of indebtedness. Throughout Europe, citizens mounted massive demonstrations to protest policies, often dictated by the EU and the International Monetary Fund, that called for fiscal austerity and the removal of various protections for many workers and industries. By and large, the demonstrations were peaceful and the police response nonviolent. The exception was Greece, where anarchists frequently set fires and threw projectiles at police, and the police responded with batons and tear gas.

It is unlikely that Europe's democratic standards will suffer serious setbacks in the wake of the ongoing debt crisis. Nonetheless, the region does face major challenges. A number of European countries are already confronted by problems associated with the influx of immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, and have shown little willingness to devise rational and humane policies toward their integration. Economic decline could well exacerbate polarization over immigration policy, as migrants seek refuge from upheavals in the Arab world and unemployment levels in some European countries are at record levels. Until recently a marginal phenomenon, the parties of the anti-immigrant right emerged as major forces in Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, France, Finland, and the Netherlands during the past decade, and they occasionally achieve voter support of over 20 percent.

Many European countries have opted for policies that restrict future immigration and, in some instances, asylum applications. A growing number have taken steps to curtail customs identified with Islam that much of the population

finds offensive. In 2011, women in France and Belgium were arrested in cases related to the wearing of ultraconservative Muslim female attire.

Also during the year, observers raised doubts about the durability of the current Turkish political model, in which a ruling party with moderate Islamist roots has committed itself to the norms of liberal democracy. While the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was credited with instituting important reforms during its early years in power, its recent behavior has triggered concern among supporters of press freedom and civil liberties. In the past few years, thousands of people have been arrested on charges of involvement with Kurdish terrorist organizations or participation in an alleged military conspiracy to overthrow the government. Those detained include journalists, scholars, and even defense lawyers.

Britain was rocked first by a series of urban riots, which many felt were handled poorly by the authorities, and then by a "phone hacking" case in which members of the tabloid press were accused of widespread abuse of privacy rights in pursuit of sensationalistic stories about celebrities and, most controversially, crime victims. At the same time, the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats indicated that a law aimed at reforming the country's punitive libel laws would be introduced in 2012. The measure is meant to deal with the phenomenon of "libel tourism," in which foreign individuals use the plaintiff-friendly English courts to press libel suits against critical journalists and scholars. If adopted, the new law would place the burden of proof on the plaintiff rather than the defense in libel cases. Press freedom advocates have

**REGIONAL PATTERNS**

|   | <b>Free</b> | <b>Partly Free</b> | <b>Not Free</b> |
|---|-------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Americas</b>                           | 24 (69%)    | 10 (28%)           | 1 (3%)          |
| <b>Asia-Pacific</b>                       | 16 (41%)    | 15 (38%)           | 8 (21%)         |
| <b>Central and Eastern Europe/Eurasia</b> | 13 (45%)    | 9 (31%)            | 7 (24%)         |
| <b>Middle East and North Africa</b>       | 1 (6%)      | 4 (22%)            | 13 (72%)        |
| <b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>                 | 9 (18%)     | 21 (43%)           | 19 (39%)        |
| <b>Western Europe</b>                     | 24 (96%)    | 1 (4%)             | 0 (0%)          |

described Britain's current libel laws as a serious menace to intellectual inquiry and the robust exchange of ideas.

The United States endured a year of deep political polarization and legislative gridlock. Despite the efforts of a bipartisan commission and a select committee of lawmakers drawn equally from both major parties, the legislative branch and the White House were unable to reach agreement on a plan to reduce the federal deficit to manageable levels. Even as Congress and the president failed to agree on key economic measures, left-wing critics of the country's wealth disparities and ties between politics and big business came together to launch the Occupy Wall Street movement. Beginning with an encampment near the financial district in New York City, the Occupy movement spread to cities across the country, with protesters camping out in parks or other public spaces for indefinite periods. After several months, municipal authorities moved to evict the protesters, often through peaceful police actions but in some cases using batons, tear gas, pepper spray, and arrests. Some observers voiced criticism of the police for employing confrontational tactics and military-style equipment when dealing with protesters.

In fulfillment of a pledge made during his election campaign, President Barack Obama revoked the policy known as "don't ask, don't tell," under which military personnel were not asked about their sexual orientation, but openly gay and lesbian individuals were barred from military service. In another step toward observance of homosexual rights, the state of New York legalized gay marriage through legislative action, joining a small number of other states that allow same-sex marriage or civil unions.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Winning Freedom, Sustaining Democracy**

As 2011 drew to a close, officials in Egypt made headlines by conducting a series of raids on NGOs that monitor human rights and promote democracy. Most of the targeted organizations

were Egyptian; a few were international groups (Freedom House was one of the latter). The authorities were insistent that the raids, which included the seizure of files and computers, were legal and technical in nature. Government officials emphasized and reemphasized that they believed human rights organizations had a role to play in a democratic Egypt. Their actions indicated otherwise.

In fact, the behavior of the Egyptian authorities, now and under Mubarak, reflects a deep-seated hostility to NGOs that support democracy and human rights. This in turn points to a broader institutional continuity between the current Egyptian state and the old regime that will present major obstacles to democratic development in the coming months and years, and similar dynamics may play out in other countries where authoritarian rule is being defied.

There were many heroes, many casualties, and many martyrs to freedom's cause in 2011. There were also many extraordinary achievements. Authoritarians who aspired to rule in perpetuity were toppled in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and autocratic heads of state in Yemen and Syria seem likely to follow. But unlike in communist Eastern Europe in 1989, today's oppressive leaders have for the most part refused to go quietly, without a fight. Some have adopted a rule or ruin strategy that threatens to condemn those who would supplant them to failure.

Indeed, one of the great disappointments of the Arab Spring is that its principal lesson—that people will eventually rise up against despotism and injustice—has been almost universally rejected by the world's authoritarian powers. Rather than responding to popular demands for freedom with, at minimum, a gradual plan of moderate reforms, despots in the Middle East and elsewhere have either tightened the screws or flatly excluded changes to the status quo. China fell into the first category with its frenzied campaign against political dissent. So too did Bashar al-Assad in Syria, with his repudiation of talks with the opposition and a murderous campaign against peaceful protesters across the country. Russia was front and center in the status

quo camp, with its imposed Putin-Medvedev leadership swap and shameless election-day violations.

Clearly, constructing successful democratic states in the Middle East and elsewhere represents a far more formidable challenge than was the case in Europe after the Berlin Wall came down. Adding to the difficulty is the role of China and Russia, both major economic powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council whose political elites have a stake in the failure of new and aspiring democracies. There is reason to believe that the influence of these two powers could become magnified in the near future. As the European debt crisis deepened in 2011, there were widespread reports that EU leaders were looking to Beijing for bailout assistance. Likewise, the Russian president traveled to several European capitals with a package of economic deals designed to help the beleaguered region in its time of need, with strings attached. Ultimately, China seems to have rejected serious involvement in Europe's woes, and nothing of significance materialized from Medvedev's initiative. But the very fact that the world's most successful league of democracies would countenance involving two of the world's great authoritarian powers in its financial rescue is a chilling commentary on the current state of both the global economy and the democratic world's political morality, not to mention its survival instincts.

What of the United States? Can it be relied on to stand as the international beacon of freedom given its present economic torpor and political gridlock? American politics have sent conflicting signals over the past year. The notion that it is time for America to shrug off its global commitments has been increasingly posited by foreign policy analysts and some political figures. A prominent candidate for the Republican presidential nomination has put himself squarely in favor of backing away from the world's problems, saying the United States should simply "mind its own business." Leading figures from both major political parties criticized the Obama administration for its role

in the NATO campaign that helped Libyan rebels overthrow the Qadhafi regime.

On the positive side, the Obama administration has evolved from its early discomfort with democracy as a foreign policy theme to a position where it episodically places its words, and in a few cases policy muscle, behind struggles for freedom abroad. Despite the unfortunate characterization that it was "leading from behind," America's firmness in assisting NATO's Libyan campaign was an important step. After initial hesitation, the administration has also cautiously supported the process of building democratic systems in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. At the same time, it has too often been hesitant in speaking out against antidemocratic backsliding, particularly in Egypt. President Obama himself has made several important statements about America's commitment to democratic change around the world, but he has failed to invoke the authority of the White House on specific cases. Instead it is Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who has publicly addressed violations of human rights in Russia, Hungary, and Turkey, and aligned the administration with the forces of change in Burma and elsewhere where prospects for freedom's growth have opened up.

If the past year has demonstrated that courage and sacrifice are essential to the achievement of freedom, a somewhat different set of characteristics are required to build the democratic infrastructure that will ensure long-term observance of political rights and civil liberties. These characteristics include the self-confidence needed to accept the complexities, and occasionally irresponsibility, of a free press; the fortitude to impose restrictions on oneself as well as on one's political opponents as part of the fight against corruption; and the perspicacity to accept that the judiciary, police, and other critical institutions must function without political interference.

In far too many parts of the world, these qualities proved to be in short supply during 2011. Thus in addition to singling out the full-fledged authoritarians for special attention, it is

imperative to shine the spotlight on leaders who, having come to power through legitimate democratic means, have set about systematically undermining the aspects of freedom that they find inconvenient. The temptation to create a quasi-authoritarian regime, in which standards that reinforce the leader's authority are embraced and those that complicate his goals are dispensed with, can have disastrous consequences for democracies with shallow roots. Prosecuting an opposition leader or closing a television station can be the first steps down a slippery slope, as witnessed in the careers of Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chávez, both of whom dragged seriously flawed political systems into new depths of dysfunction and stagnation.

Still, while the year 2010 ended on a pessimistic note, with authoritarianism seemingly on the march, the events of 2011 have presented more hopeful prospects. Unaccountable and oppressive rulers have been put on notice that their actions will not be tolerated forever. The year of Arab uprisings has reminded the world that ordinary people want freedom even in societies where such aspirations have been written off as futile. This is a lesson to which the world's leading democracies, especially the United States, should pay special heed. It should dispel free societies' persistent doubts about the strength and universal appeal of their institutions and values. The opportunities that have been opened up by brave people in Tunis and Cairo should prompt a reenergized democratic world to address the twin challenges of how dictatorships can be overturned, and how stable and durable fellow democracies can be built in their place.

*Eliza B. Young and Tyler Roylance assisted in the preparation of this report.*