

## Introduction

Freedom House has prepared this overview report in conjunction with the 61st session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. We present our findings on countries and territories that represent the worst environments for political rights and civil liberties.

The reports are excerpted from the Freedom House survey *Freedom in the World 2005*, which surveys political rights and civil liberties in 192 countries and 14 major territories. The ratings and accompanying essays are based on events from December 1, 2003 through November 30, 2004. The 18 countries and 3 territories profiled in this report are drawn from the total of 49 countries—a quarter of the world’s total—and 9 territories that are considered to be Not Free and whose citizens endure systematic and pervasive human rights violations.

Included in this report are eight countries judged to have the worst records: Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Turkmenistan. Also included are two territories, Chechnya and Tibet, whose inhabitants suffer intense repression. These states and regions received the Freedom House survey’s lowest rating: 7 for political rights and 7 for civil liberties. Within these entities, state control over daily life is pervasive and wide-ranging, independent organizations and political opposition are banned or suppressed, and fear of retribution for independent thought and action is part of daily life. In the case of Chechnya, the rating in large measure reflects the fallout of a vicious conflict that in the last 11 years has disrupted normal life and resulted in some 200,000 deaths.

The report also includes ten further countries near the bottom of Freedom House's list of the most repressive: Belarus, China, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Laos, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. The territory of Western Sahara is also included in this group. While these states scored slightly better than the “worst of the worst,” they offer very limited scope for private discussion while severely suppressing opposition political activity, impeding independent organizing, and censoring or punishing criticism of the state.

Massive human rights violations take place in nearly every part of the world. This year's roster of the “most repressive” includes countries from the Americas, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and East Asia; they represent a wide array of cultures and levels of economic development. This report from Freedom House to the United Nations focuses on states and regions that have seen some of the world’s most severe repression and most systematic and brutal violations of human dignity. Our report seeks to focus the attention of the Commission on states and territories that deserve investigation and condemnation for their widespread violations.

The fundamental violations of rights presented in this report are all the more alarming because they stand in sharp contrast to the significant expansion of human liberty over the last three decades. In that period, dozens of states have shed tyranny and embraced democratic rule and respect for basic civil liberties. There has also been growing public support around the world for the values of liberal democracy including multiparty competition, the rule of law, freedom of association, freedom of speech, the rights of minorities, and other fundamental, universally valid human rights. According to our global survey *Freedom in the World*, (whose findings can be accessed online at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)) at the beginning of 2005, of the 192 countries in the

world, 89 (46 percent) are Free and can be said to respect a broad array of basic human rights and political freedoms. An additional 54 (28 percent) are Partly Free, with some abridgments of basic rights and weak enforcement of the rule of law. In all, 2.8 billion people—44 percent of the world's population—live in Free states in which a broad array of political rights are protected.

There is also growing evidence that most countries that have made measured and sustainable progress in long-term economic development are also states that respect democratic practices. This should hardly be surprising as competitive, multiparty democracy provides for the rotation of power, government transparency, independent civic monitoring, and free media. These in turn promote improved governance and impede massive corruption and cronyism, conditions that are prevalent in settings where political power is not subject to civic and political checks and balances.

The expansion of democratic governance over the last several decades has important implications for the United Nations and other international organizations. Today, states that respect basic freedoms and the rule of law have greater potential than ever before to positively influence global and regional institutions. But they can only achieve that potential within international bodies by working cooperatively and cohesively on issues of democracy and human rights. Nowhere is the need for international democratic cooperation more essential than in Geneva at the UN Commission on Human Rights.

In 2002, Freedom House and the U.S.-based Council on Foreign Relations sponsored an Independent Task Force on the United Nations that recommended the establishment of a democracy caucus at the UN to promote the values of human rights and democracy and to ensure that countries committed to respect for these fundamental principles occupy leadership positions within the UN system. We therefore strongly applaud the creation of a UN Democracy Caucus under the leadership of Chile. We hope that this year the Democracy Caucus can play an important role in placing under scrutiny and criticism the rights practices of many of the countries identified in this report as among the “worst of the worst” in their rights practices. By focusing on specific countries with the worst records in terms of rights, the UN Democracy Caucus can contribute to reinvigorating UN human rights system, which many observers believe is suffering a crisis of credibility as a result of its past record of inaction against gross human rights violators.

Freedom House distributes this information about the “most repressive” societies in the hope that it will spur the UN Commission on Human Rights and the UN Democracy Caucus to condemn and take determined and principled action to improve the deplorable rights situation in these countries. We express our support for the courageous human rights defenders engaged in struggles for dignity and freedom, who work at great risk to hasten the day when dictatorships will give way to genuine pluralism, democracy, and the rule of law.

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