A New Report by Freedom House Finds That Democracy is in Decline Globally for the 16th Year in a Row

The pro-democracy advocacy organization Freedom House recently released a report showing that worldwide democracy has again declined in 2021, continuing a 16-year trend. The findings are largely attributed to troubling autocratic gains that have come at the expense of democracy, with the report detailing how 60 countries have suffered from a decline in civil and political rights while only 25 have shown improvement. Alarmingly, 8 in 10 global citizens now live in partly free or not free countries, according to the Freedom House Index. Additionally, collaboration between dictators has become increasingly common. Autocratic governments have worked to strengthen economic ties between their regimes, likely trying to negate the effect of sanctions often implemented by the international democratic community. On a positive note, this past year did see major pro-democracy movements emerge in response to coups in countries like Tunisia, Myanmar, and Sudan, demonstrating that the desire for freedom and democracy remains strong among many of the general populations around the world.

Authoritarian governments such as those in China and Russia have gained significant clout, allowing them to support other repressive leaders abroad and blunt any efforts by the international community to punish them. For example, Chinese and Russian envoys to the United Nations have worked to dilute any coordinated global response to the military coups in Myanmar and Sudan. These dictatorships have also been successful in challenging the idea that democracy is the path to success and security. This shift in international norms towards autocracy has emboldened many leaders to drop any pretenses of free and fair elections, opting instead to more openly rig elections or prevent opposition parties from running. Many countries have thus begun to roll back civil liberties and human rights protections as a result. Authoritarian governments have been cooperating in transnational repression to silence dissidents, using tools like detention, rendition, coercion by proxies, and digital surveillance.

Another growing concern is the threat from within, as freedom is also being eroded in both new and established democracies. This is even noticeable in countries like the United States, where rioters stormed the Capitol to overturn the results of a legitimate presidential election. The United States, seen as the beacon of democracy around the world, has declined by 10 points in the Freedom House index. Internal forces have been exploiting the shortcomings of many democratic systems, using them to promote hatred, misinform the public, and justify power grabs. Elected leaders in other large democracies like Brazil and India have also threatened or taken anti-democratic actions, and new democracies themselves have struggled too. Tunisia, the only country to emerge from the Arab Spring as a democracy has witnessed an autocratic backslide, with President Kais Saied unilaterally dismissing the prime minister, indefinitely suspending parliament, and shutting down judicial watchdogs in recent months.

This combination of collaboration between authoritarian regimes and internal turmoil in some democracies has shown the need for the latter to secure their fundamental principles. Democracies also need to expand and connect with other such governments around the world to counter the rise in authoritarianism – which should be a key component of each's foreign and domestic policy. Support for countries must also not hinge on the short-term economic, military, or geopolitical goals, but rather the weakening of authoritarianism. Despite the overall gloomy report, many pro-democracy advocates remain hopeful, highlighting that the global demand for freedom and democracy remains strong. Ultimately, every day people throughout the world are risking their lives to secure the liberties and rights that all citizens should be afforded.