

FORUM:	General Assembly
ISSUE:	Protecting Human Rights Amid Increasing Authoritarianism and Political Repression
STUDENT OFFICER:	Youngjun Yoon
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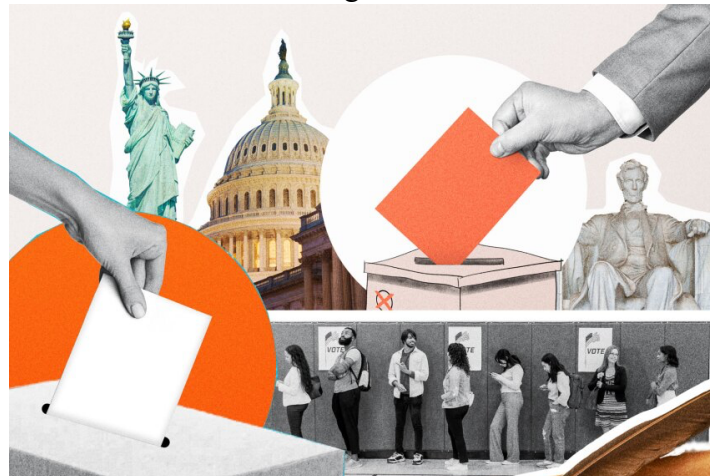
Introduction

Recent years have witnessed abrupt reversals for global democracy and human rights. Freedom House says global freedom dropped for the 19th year in 2024: political rights and civil liberties deteriorated in 60 nations and improved in just 34. Article 19's Global Expression Report 2023 identifies that about 80% of humankind now resides within those states where freedom of expression is more curtailed than at the commencement of the millennium. The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2024

Democracy Index sets a new all-time low of 5.17 out of 10 and identifies that less than half the planet's citizens are living within democratic government. Individually, these developments constitute a global resurgence of authoritarianism that transcends regions and ideologies and has impact both upon entrenched one-party regimes and democracies falling toward illiberalism.

Judicial autonomy is being compromised;

legislatures and oversight institutions are being eagerly co-opted; and independent media and civil society are being intimidated or closed down – whilst global mechanisms are struggling to react. Because this decline is a fast and structural one, only a prompt, sustained, and long-term reaction will do; symbolic or short-term steps will neither safeguard institutions, nor bolster human-rights defenders, nor maintain accountability.



Background

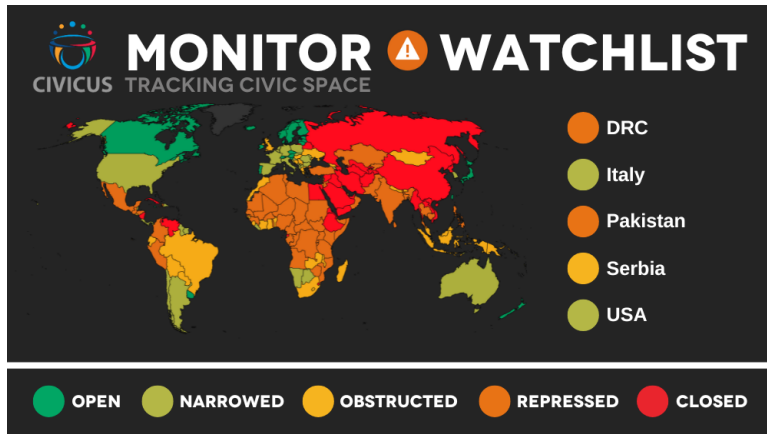
Eras of economic or political upheaval have had the pattern of being accompanied by repression. Fascist dictatorships broke out in fervent interwar Europe; likewise, recent setbacks of authoritarian rule have had their push come from accelerations of digitization, geopolitical competition, and homegrown



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turbulence. Regimes have routinely invoked pandemic of COVID-19 as much as national security narratives as reasons for censorship, surveillance, and repression of the civil sphere.

As per the CIVICUS Monitor, an independent online platform that tracks and rates the state of civic space in countries around the world, nearly seven in every ten individuals across the globe live within societies that have been ranked as either “Closed” or “Repressed” for civic space — the highest proportion yet. With developing technology, autocratic regimes have attained previously unmatched ability for watching citizens and squeezing opposition. The intersection of political aspiration with



technological ability places the world at present as being extremely risky for the future of global human rights. Beyond the immediate threats posed by surveillance technologies, protecting human rights is crucial because the concentration of monitoring and enforcement power in the hands of a few corrodes checks and balances and gradually robs citizens of meaningful

participation in public life. When states and private actors can track, profile, and silence critics with impunity, marginalized groups — who already bear the heaviest burdens of discrimination — are hit first, civic trust frays, and the space for independent media, dissent, and creative problem-solving withers away. Defending rights therefore preserves the very institutional and social conditions that allow abuses to be exposed and corrected, that sustain democratic legitimacy, and that enable inclusive economic and social progress. In short, protecting human rights today is both a moral duty and a practical safeguard against technological and political harms that would otherwise deepen inequality and destabilize societies worldwide.

Problems Raised

Curtailement of Civic Space

One of the key issues is radical constriction of civic space – the legal, political, and cultural space of civic action. A minority of autocratic regimes have the habit of using general laws as instruments of criminalizing opposition and closing critics down. Russia’s “foreign agent” and “extremism” laws have, for instance, been turned into weapons against media sources, NGOs, and activists crushing independent civil society. All over the world, journalists get beaten with violence or imprisonment for reporting protests or criticism of rulers. Civil society is assaulted worldwide in 116 of 198 nations and territories, asserts CIVICUS. Nation-state authority often disperses or prohibits peaceful assemblies: 2024 detention

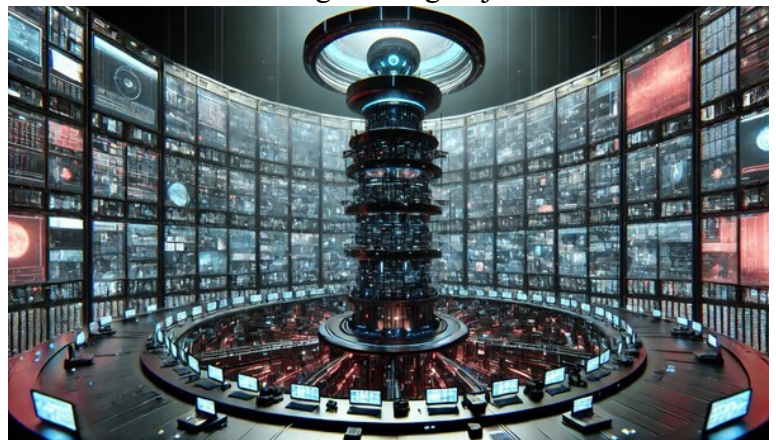


of protesters being the most prevalent rights violation documented, as having occurred in at least 76 nations. These steps include not only freedom of association and freedom of speech violation, but they provide citizens with no genuine device of promoting their interests, being part of government, and commenting on government.

Expansion of Surveillance and Digital Control

Authoritarian regimes increasingly utilize technology as instruments of monitoring and control over populations. Russia, e.g., obliges internet services to keep users' traffic information on hand for perusal by government entities, and it has laws on the books authorizing hacking of journalists'

equipment. In the 2022 Iranian protests fomented by Mahsa Amini's assassination, the government shut downed mobile internet across the nation as part of cutting off information flow. Even liberal democracies get ensnared in such developments, through exporting surveillance equipment. Novel instruments



like online-social monitoring, on spyware of sorts after NSO Group's Pegasus, and AI-driven censorship tools enable repressive states to silence opposition increasingly with very few legal restrictions. The combined effect is historic encroachments on private life and civic activity, and it jeopardizes very much the ideal of the free society.

International Actions

United Nations Mechanisms and Reports

The UN has devised many monitoring instruments as responses to rights violations. The Human Rights Council (HRC) applies the Universal Period Review (UPR) of the human-rights situation of each member, offering peer review and recommendation every several years. The Council further uses Special Rapporteurs/independent experts on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly issues, and extrajudicial killing, who investigate violations and present their reports. Special Rapporteurs had registered shutdowns of internet and online repression across some states. On paper, those procedures outline transparency and diplomatic pressure: those very states under consideration have pledges of responding to submissions of civil society and ideas of other states. However, enforcement is weak. The UPR and HRC have no binding enforcement mechanism; compliance relies on ethical or political pressure. The pressure



of autocratic regimes is always invoked as tools of deferring each other. Council meetings can be politicized equally as well: vetoing of trade votes by opposition, and strong states have defied or disregarded UN censure of their behavior. Nonetheless, UN procedures facilitate an international attention on abuses. Such situations as Iran's 2022 repression have been widely cited within UPR reports and SR reports, providing an enduring record. In certain situations, UPR recommendations have inspired national movements: through complaining in Geneva, activists can gain UN pressure as national reform urging. The UPR is effective at drawing international attention to human rights issues but often struggles to translate that attention into concrete action, as many governments dismiss or ignore recommendations.

Targeted Sanctions and International Advocacy

Western nations and regional groups have increasingly employed targeted sanctions as punishment for regime insiders of human rights violation. The European Union and United States, for instance, have employed asset freezes and traveling bans on scores of regime insiders in Russia, Iran, China, and elsewhere for rights violations. The EU employed the measure in July 2025 on five Russian judges on its list of human-rights violators after they convicted a political dissident. Such punishments can be symbolic exhibitions of international censure and as much of a personal nuisance for regime insiders. Some regimes themselves have imports of outside repression-technology, e.g. the EU now employs an embargo on exporting surveillance and interception gear that can be diverted by repressive authorities. Global NGOs and media have more than their share of influence as well: institutions like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International publish extensive reports and pressure government capitals to keep rights issues on the diplomatic table. Multilateral institutions like the UN likewise publish rights-connected resolutions or statements, and democratic-country courts occasionally seek prosecutions using universal jurisdiction against foreign regime insiders. Even with these tools, problems persist. Sanctions can be politically circumscribed – repressors typically retain power in the face of individual sanctions, and certain states have healthy home economies as insurance against such action. Sanctions can have a “rallying around the flag” effect, offering repressive regimes a propaganda coup. Moreover, China and Russia have constructed alternative high-technology and financial systems as a counterweight to the effect of action initiated in the West. Short-term, focused sanctions and lobbying keep pressure on tyrants and gratify beleaguered activists, but individually seldom



topple sitting regimes. They have highly circumscribed sphere of their own and success that is variable, depending on the extent of global consensus backing them. But they still belong to very few concrete options available on the table for liberal democracies other than going for military action.

Although Sanctions and advocacy don't usually work on their own, they are important because they help hold countries accountable over time. Targeted restrictions let both victims and perpetrators know that rights violations will not be ignored. Coordinated advocacy by NGOs and multilateral bodies keeps these issues on the global agenda. Over time, these kinds of actions can hurt the legitimacy of the regime, make it harder to get into global financial and technological systems, and strengthen international norms that say repression is wrong. In this way, sanctions and advocacy are not quick fixes; they are important tools for keeping pressure on, stopping future abuses, and supporting larger diplomatic or domestic efforts to bring about democratic change.

Key Players

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

With offices in New York, Human Rights Watch is a powerful global NGO that conducts serious research, fact-finding missions, and public campaigns to expose atrocities such as mass detention, censorship, and political detention in oppressive regimes. It applies continuous pressure through "naming and shaming" governments and mobilizing international media and policy makers to action. HRW's annual country reports and real-time alert mechanisms are extensively used across UN platforms and referenced by democratic nations imposing sanctions or diplomatic protests. Its efforts help keep the world focused on countries such as Belarus, Myanmar, and China, and are frequently an early indicator of rights emergencies.



Human Rights Foundation (HRF)

Founded in 2005 with a particular focus on authoritarian states, HRF supports independent activists and exiled dissidents in countries such as Russia, Venezuela, and North Korea. It organizes the Oslo Freedom Forum annually, campaigns for political prisoners, and provides tools such as the Freedom Fellowship for high-risk defenders. Its leadership by figures like Russian dissident Yulia Navalny positions it at the intersection of global campaigning and civil society opposition. HRF also utilizes media and litigation to implicate regimes.

International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)

A Geneva-based NGO of legal experts, the ICJ promotes the rule of law and judicial independence as a core defense against authoritarianism. In its Centre for the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, the ICJ assists and monitors efforts to resist court-capture and suppression of independent legal practitioners. It campaigns at the UN agencies and assists national litigation and legislative reform in states under siege from their courts. The body helped to develop pioneering norms like the Limburg Principles and the Yogyakarta Principles, basing international law against repression.



Possible Solutions

Strengthening International Legal Frameworks

A key solution is to bolster international law and monitoring of rights. This includes encouraging all states to ratify and implement core treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its optional protocols. Universal ratification of the ICCPR and stronger enforcement of existing instruments would establish common norms and legal accountability. The UN Human Rights Council's mandate could be expanded: for instance, giving special rapporteurs more resources or creating rapid response mechanisms. States could also consider a new binding treaty or protocol on digital rights and surveillance, addressing how technology must conform to human-rights standards. Legally, international courts could be more systematically used: universal jurisdiction trials of officials for serious abuses would raise the stakes for repression. Examples show that when legal pressure is applied, even authoritarian governments sometimes partially relent – for instance, judicial review at the UN has prompted Bangladesh to repeal a draconian media law. Encouraging national legal reforms is also vital: donor countries and UN agencies can support rule-of-law projects that train judges, lawyers, and police in rights-based practices. Overall, a stronger framework of treaties, monitoring bodies, and legal remedies would give human-rights defenders more tools and make it harder for governments to act with impunity.

Supporting Civil Society and Independent Institutions

Another pillar is empowering the very actors who suffer most under repression. Governments and NGOs should direct financial, technical, and political support to independent journalists, human-rights activists, and NGOs operating in repressive environments. This can take the form of grants for legal defense, secure communications, and capacity-building. In practice, international donors already fund programs like training for digital security for example, NGOs in El Salvador have trained LGBTQ+ activists in using encrypted messaging and VPNs to evade surveillance. Expanding such programs globally would help activists protect themselves and document abuses. Providing asylum or refuge programs for threatened dissidents can also preserve human-rights work in exile. Additionally, global coalitions of civil society, such as networks of human-rights defenders or journalists, should be strengthened through communication channels, conferences, and joint campaigns. Their investigative reports feed into international bodies and mobilize public opinion worldwide. Likewise, media freedom can be defended by establishing safe havens and cross-border collaborations; when one country censor reporters, media in neighboring countries or exile can amplify censored news. Governments should resist authoritarian measures by imposing “halo effect” safeguards: for instance, multinational corporations, including tech firms, could adopt human-rights due diligence, refusing to sell surveillance tools to regimes known for abuses. In sum, investing in civil society and media acts as a grassroots bulwark against authoritarian control and keeps international attention on repressive regimes.



Enhancing Diplomatic and Regional Cooperation

Complementing these solutions, states should seek unified diplomatic action. Democracies can form coalitions to present common demands at the UN: for example, a “Democracy Caucus” could collectively propose resolutions or joint statements, ensuring that condemnation of abuses carries more weight. Regional organizations must also act: the African Union, ASEAN, and OAS have human-rights commissions that should be empowered and funded to address breaches by member governments. Effective early-warning systems can be established, so that when a country shows signs of democratic erosion, its regional peers can act to deter escalation. Finally, public diplomacy campaigns should



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emphasize that human rights are universal values, not Western impositions – this counters authoritarian narratives. Engaging moderate voices within authoritarian states, such as businessmen who prefer stability, or younger reformist, can open internal pressure for reform. In practice, this means funding exchange programs, scholarships, and dialogues that build trust and show the benefits of openness. Taken together, legal, institutional, and technological interventions – supported by broad international solidarity – can create a more robust defense of human rights in the face of rising authoritarianism.

Glossary

Authoritarianism

A system of government characterized by strong central control and limited political freedoms.

Civil society

The sphere of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning democratic society.

Digital Surveillance

The use of digital technology to monitor individuals or groups, often by state actors.

Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

A process through which the human rights records of UN Member States are reviewed by other Member States.

Special Rapporteur

An independent expert appointed by the UN to examine and report on specific human rights themes or country situations.

Human Rights

Fundamental rights inherent to all individuals, regardless of their nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status.

Political Repression

The act of a state or other authority using force or other means to control or suppress the political activities, beliefs, or expressions of its citizens



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