

# BUCKING THE DEMOCRATIC RECESSION

By the Democracy & Human  
Rights Working Group

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*The Democracy & Human Rights Working Group is a nonpartisan initiative bringing together academic and think tank experts and practitioners from NGOs and previous Democratic and Republican administrations, seeking to elevate the importance of democracy and human rights issues in U.S. foreign policy. It is convened by Arizona State University's McCain Institute for International Leadership. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the positions of individual members of the group or of their organizations.*

**Why should the United States care about the state of democracy around the world?** Free nations are more economically successful, stable, reliable partners, and democratic societies are less likely to produce terrorists, create incentives for mass emigration, proliferate weapons of mass destruction, or engage in aggression and war. This means that the advance of democracy benefits not just the United States, but bolsters stability and peace around the globe. The fact that democracy is under stress in many parts of the world – including among our allies – means that the Administration must meet this moment with leadership and resolve. The United States is safer and more prosperous in a more democratic world and should take the lead, as it has for decades, in advancing this cause, not by imposing our values and system on others but by supporting indigenous forces around the world seeking a more democratic future for their countries and in their own unique ways. Indeed, history has proven that investing in other countries as they transition – both economically and politically -- can pay extraordinary dividends, as was the case with the Marshall Plan after World War II as well as with South Korea – now one of the most significant U.S. trading partners – after the Korean War. The United States must remain engaged in the struggle

for democracy as a global leader, not only for moral, but also for national security reasons.

Freedom around the world is facing serious challenges, both externally and internally. Authoritarian regimes like Russia and China are not only continuing their repressive practices internally; they are also exporting their toxic models to other countries and touting them as an alternative model. Non-state actors engaging in violent tactics and terrorism also pose a threat to our way of life. Internally, a number of democratic or transitional countries are experiencing turmoil as a result of the rise of populism, mass migration, limited economic opportunities, and disillusionment with elected governments. Unfortunately, the common narrative in Washington is that the United States cannot really make a difference to support democracy globally given the current democratic recession. This paper provides some examples to counteract this narrative and offers some crucial cases of recent democratic openings that represent critical places for engagement.

In recent years, an overarching piece of bad news has been Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World report. This year's issue is titled "Democracy in Crisis" and notes that 2017 was the 12th consecutive year in which there has been a decline in global freedom. While 71

countries showed a net decline in political and civil liberties, only 35 demonstrated gains. Some of the countries that declined – such as Hungary, Poland and Turkey – are most troubling as they represent a backsliding in democratic practices and principles after being positive examples of democracy and freedom for many years prior. Even longstanding democracies are facing challenges, from economic struggles to migration to populist movements that make it difficult to find common ground for reform.

Despite the decline in global freedom tracked by Freedom House, however, there are still 88 countries rated as “Free” in 2018 compared with 44 “Free” countries in 1973. According to International IDEA’s 2017 report titled, *The Global State of Democracy: Exploring Democracy’s Resilience*, since 1975 there has been broad global progress on all aspects of democracy, but that progress has flattened since the mid-1990s. While there have been ups and downs in individual countries, however, there are “no broad tendencies of progress or decline, [which] signifies democratic steadiness at the highest levels in world history.” Further, the IDEA report finds that the number of electoral democracies has increased since 1975 – from 46 to 132 in 2016 – and that the majority of those established after 1975 are still in existence with almost no

reversal among established democracies. In public opinion polls in countries all over the world, people overwhelmingly choose democracy as the best form of government.

Establishing a democratic system of government is a long-term endeavor that requires sustained commitment and support. At the same time, when critical elections are taking place, or reform legislation is being considered in parliament, it is also important to provide necessary advice and capacity building in that moment to allow for transparent and accountable processes to take place. Support from the United States for such forces can, in some cases, make a huge difference. In this time of deep concern about the state of global democracy, it is even more important not to retrench or give up. A 2018 national survey jointly commissioned by Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute, and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, called the Democracy Project, found that Americans overwhelmingly feel it is critical to remain engaged. A 91 percent majority believes “we have a moral obligation to speak up and do what we can when people are victims of genocide, violence, and severe human rights abuses.” Further, an 84 percent majority believes that “when other countries become democratic, it contributes to our own well-being.”



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# NOTABLE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

The following countries are examples of places where notable democratic progress has been made in the last several decades and where U.S. and other Western support for democratization has played a significant role. However, continued engagement remains important, especially in those countries, such as Tunisia, where democracy is not yet fully consolidated.

## COLOMBIA

Twenty years ago, Colombia's democracy was sliding toward collapse – the product of weak institutions, insurgency, organized crime and drug trafficking. Today, Colombia has just completed a vigorous electoral campaign in which the top issues were no longer lawlessness and the inability to govern large swaths of the country but the economy, corruption and implementation of the peace agreement concluded with the country's largest guerrilla group. Colombia's turnaround was secured through the sustained support and U.S. engagement provided through "Plan Colombia" and the political will of successive Colombian government and political leaders produced this turnaround. Approved by the U.S. Congress in 2000 with bipartisan support, "Plan Colombia" is shorthand for wide-ranging U.S. cooperation to assist in combating drugs, guerrilla violence and related institutional and social problems.

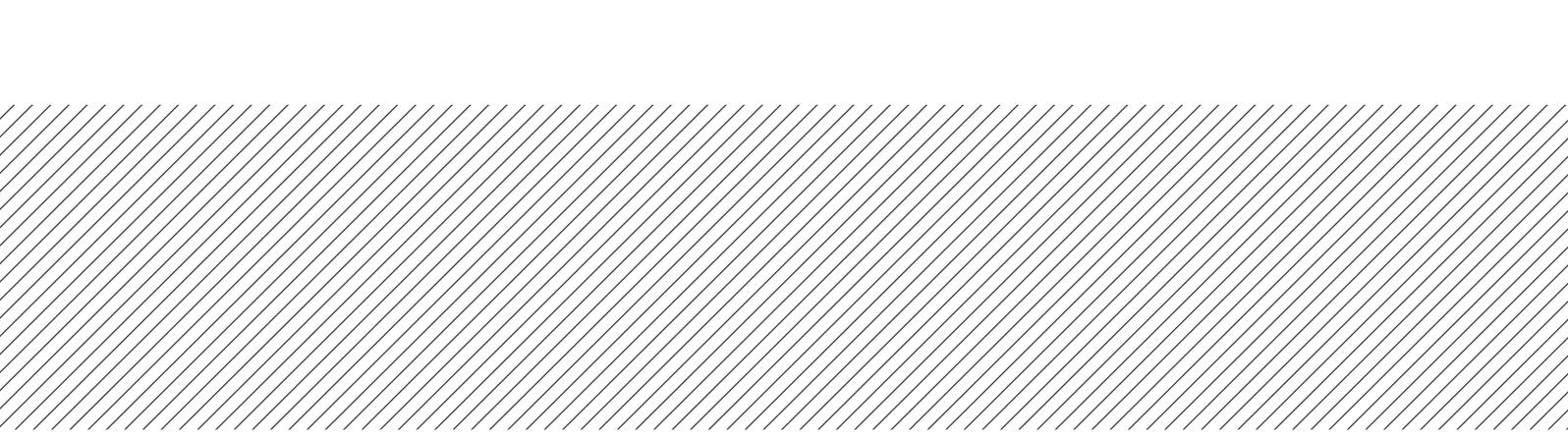
Democracy assistance was a small but critical component of this support, including institution-strengthening within the central government, legislature, political parties, local governments and civil society organizations. Certainly, Colombia faces continued security and governance challenges, including increases in drug production, drug trafficking, political polarization, and difficulties in implementation of the controversial peace agreement. However, the country's democratic institutions are proving capable of managing such stresses and as its economy has grown and the country's democratic institutions become more effective, needs for external support have diminished considerably.

## GHANA

Since 1992, Ghana has undergone multiple peaceful transfers of power, including after its seventh national election in December 2016. Defying a tired narrative of war, famine, and poverty in Africa, Ghana and several other nations in the region have successfully proven that dictators and one-party states are not the keys to stability or economic success. Ghana enjoys a strong and independent media, a dynamic civil society, and a healthy private sector that has been growing for decades. Its democratic transition was nurtured by international support in the 1990s and the early 2000s, and democracy assistance from the United States and elsewhere has played a pivotal role in ensuring that credible and transparent elections continue to take place. Preserving these achievements will require a more equitable distribution of the gains of the country's economic progress over the coming years and a commitment to the democratic institutions that have come to be expected by all Ghanaians.

## INDONESIA

After the fall of General Suharto in 1998 at the end of 30 years of military rule, Indonesia adopted a new democratic constitution with provisions for decentralized governance, a free press and freedom of expression, and the removal of the military from its formal role in governing. The first democratic elections in decades were held in 1999 and the military's direct participation in the legislature came to an end; in 2004, the first direct election of the president occurred. Democratic progress was marred by violence in East Timor and certainly heavy-handed measures were taken in the other provinces that threatened to break away. However, the transition was not derailed; the world's largest Muslim-majority country was set on a democratic path. U.S.-Indonesia strategic and economic relations benefit both countries, particularly in countering a rising China and extremism in Southeast Asia.



There are several reasons for Indonesia's success. The Reformasi movement, calling for an end to military rule, embraced democratic values from the beginning. Key nationwide Islamic organizations promoted democratic norms and supported the transition. The international community played a critical role in launching programs facilitating the transition in areas such as governance, human rights, parliamentary strengthening, civil society capacity building and constitutional reform. Indonesia still faces challenges in areas such as extremist violence, separatist tensions, and the erosion of freedom of religion and belief. However, the survival of Indonesia's democratic process attests to the commitment of the Indonesian people who have struggled to ensure a democratic future for all Indonesians.

## MACEDONIA

In a region marked by inter-ethnic violence, Macedonia seceded peacefully from Yugoslavia in 1991, though it has had some bumps in its path to becoming a stable democracy. In 2001, armed conflict between Macedonia and Albania required the intervention of the United States and Europe. More recently, in 2015, a years-long political crisis ensued after news broke of a government-sponsored wiretapping and surveillance program. This crisis was only resolved through mediation by the United States and Brussels, leading to democratic elections in May 2017 that installed a government committed to addressing endemic corruption and other systemic abuses, as well as refocusing its attention toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Since it became independent, Macedonia has received consistent support from the international community, which has had a lasting presence in the country and has provided technical assistance and training in its transition to democracy.

## TUNISIA

After sparking the Arab Spring in 2011, Tunisia remains the only “Free” country in the Arab world, based on Freedom House’s ratings. Since then it has been a fairly consistent reformer, having held four successful elections, a constituent assembly, and an inclusive and widely lauded constitutional development process. It is also pursuing decentralization after holding its first municipal elections on May 2018 ,6. Throughout this transition period, the United States and Europeans have provided support for elections, political party and civil society development, and constitution and legislative writing. However, it is critical not to walk away too soon. Economic frustrations remain, as well as endemic corruption, and members of the old regime continue to try to push their agenda through the legislative process. For Tunisia’s democratic gains to be sustained, the international community must remain involved and engaged.

## UKRAINE

While Ukraine became independent in 1991 after the breakup of the Soviet Union, it took two revolutions (the first in 2004 and the second in 2014) for Ukraine to really make progress toward economic reform, privatization and the protection of civil liberties. It has not been an easy transition. Russia’s invasion and annexation of the Crimean peninsula and its continuing military aggression in Donetsk and Luhansk pose the greatest obstacles, while corruption is another enormous challenge to the country’s advancement. Despite these challenges, Ukraine has pursued significant reforms and established numerous credible democratic institutions with the support of the U.S. and other Western public and private actors. To sustain the momentum, Ukrainian reformers will need considerable international support to strengthen anti-corruption bodies and to hold transparent and credible elections -- both parliamentary and presidential -- in 2019.

# RECENT DEMOCRATIC GAINS OR OPENINGS

Contrary to the recent narrative of democratic gloom, various countries have made important democratic gains or experienced democratic openings in the last few years. These cases represent crucial opportunities for the United States and other pro-democratic actors to provide diplomatic support and democracy assistance to help to preserve current gains and sustain progress going forward.

## ARMENIA

On April 2018, 13, after Serzh Sargsyan was appointed Prime Minister by the ruling party – despite promises to step down after his two five-year terms as president ended – mass street protests ensued against what the people considered a corrupt and authoritarian government. Sargsyan resigned on April 23 and opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan was elected prime minister on May 8. Parliamentary elections are expected to be held in the coming year. This electoral transition creates the opportunity for greater pluralism and rooting out systemic corruption.

## ECUADOR

The election of former Vice President Lenin Moreno as president in April 2017 brought with it significant openings and reforms away from the generally repressive rule of his predecessor, Rafael Correa. President Moreno has reduced pressure on the media, begun engaging with civil society and opposition representatives, and proposed the restoration of term limits, among other initiatives. As part of a crackdown on corruption, his own vice president was convicted of “illicit association” and received a six-year jail sentence last December in a case involving a Brazilian construction company.

## THE GAMBIA

The 2016 presidential elections brought opposition candidate Adama Barrow to power

after over two decades of despotic rule by President Yahya Jammeh. Jammeh left office only after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent troops in to oversee a peaceful transfer of power. In April 2017, competitive legislative elections were held and since then, exiled journalists and activists have returned, political prisoners have been released, government ministers have declared their assets to an ombudsman, and media sector reform has begun.

## LIBERIA

Decimated by civil war between 1989 and 2003, Liberia has taken solid steps toward strengthening its democracy, including holding three national elections generally considered to be free and fair. Significant support from USAID, the European Union, and others helped pull the nation back from the brink of a decimated economy. Former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who held office from 2006 through the beginning of 2018, was Africa’s first elected female leader and widely considered a model of good governance. While current President George Weah, a former soccer star, faces significant challenges, including inflation and corruption, the country has reason for hope: UN peacekeepers withdrew this spring, concluding their -15year mission was a success. Malaysia: On May 2018, 9, the opposition coalition, led by Mahathir Mohamad, won a surprise victory over Prime Minister Najib Razak’s ruling coalition, ending six decades of its rule. As part of a corruption investigation that has followed, the central bank governor, the attorney general, and the anti-graft chief have resigned. Though not without complications, these developments potentially mark a huge turning point for Malaysia’s democratic future.

## NIGERIA

The 2015 general election marked the first electoral defeat and transfer of power from

an incumbent ruling party in Nigeria's -57year history. Ahead of these elections, there were widespread concerns that the close political contest would lead to electoral violence across the country. However, the elections took place in relative peace, with fewer violent incidents than in previous elections. The absence of widespread electoral violence has widely been attributed to extensive preventive efforts undertaken by the Nigerian electoral commission, civil society groups, and international donors. International partners supported electoral administration reforms, early warning mechanisms and peace messaging, and engaged in coordinated diplomacy urging the main candidates to call for peace. While President Muhammadu Buhari was elected on promises to reduce graft, address insecurity, and take on other policy initiatives, the country has seen an increase in violence ahead of the 2019 presidential elections, human rights are consistently violated by militant groups and security services, and corruption remains an endemic challenge.

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Two countries that have endured decades of dictatorship and repression but now are showing signs of potentially being open to reforms are

**Ethiopia and Uzbekistan.** Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, elected in April 2018, has taken numerous radical steps to reform his country and restore public trust. In addition to releasing thousands of political prisoners, announcing plans to liberalize the economy, inviting exiled political leaders to return home, and initiating major institutional reforms in the security and justice sectors, he has called multi-party democracy Ethiopia's only option. This month, Ethiopia and Eritrea normalized relations, putting an end to decades of bitter conflict.

In Uzbekistan, the 2016 death of long-time dictator Islam Karimov opened the door to new leadership. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has begun taking modest steps to ease repression, including the release of some prominent political prisoners, demonstrating a willingness to engage with civil society, and inviting Human Rights Watch – whose office was shut down in 2011 – to send a team to Uzbekistan to meet with government and civil society members. While there is a very long way to go, this could be the beginning of a movement toward pluralism and political competition, and the United States and the international community should support those efforts.

**While ultimately the establishment of democracy depends on the will of the people of a country, the support of the United States and other pro-democracy actors is often key to sustaining and strengthening those efforts.**

**With this support, the current challenges to freedom can be faced and reversed, making the world a more prosperous and safer place.**

**MCCAIN  
INSTITUTE**



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