

# DEFENDING AGAINST RISING AUTHORITARIANISM

2020 marked the 15th consecutive year that Freedom House reported a decline in global freedom, including not only authoritarian regimes like China, Russia, and North Korea, but democratic backsliding in established democracies like Hungary, India, and the United States. USGLC's [Roadmap for U.S. Global Leadership: Report on Reports](#) identified several areas of consensus in a review of recommendations by over 120 think tanks across the political spectrum ahead of the 2020 presidential election to defend against rising authoritarianism:

- Strengthen tools to combat disinformation by authoritarian regimes;
- Coordinate with allies on authoritarian challenges;
- Bolster digital technology standards; and
- Elevate human rights in relations with authoritarian regimes.

## BY THE NUMBERS:

- **75%:** Nearly [75% of the world's population](#) lived in a country that faced democratic deterioration in 2020.
- **78:** Elections were postponed or cancelled in at least 78 countries or territories from February 2020 to March 2021, [according](#) to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- **158:** Freedom House [identified](#) 158 countries where new restrictions have been imposed on protests since the global pandemic began.

## COMBATTING DISINFORMATION

Disinformation -- defined by UNESCO as "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country" -- has been used to interfere with elections, influence public opinion, and manipulate information by countries [including](#) China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

### **Key Facts:**

- 81 countries have [used](#) social media to spread computational propaganda and disinformation about politics.
- Facebook and Twitter [revealed](#) private firms used constitutional propaganda on behalf of a political actor in 48 foreign countries, and removed more 317,000 accounts and pages between January 2019 and December 2020.
- Iranian actors [created](#) social media accounts that targeted the United States and published over 1,000 pieces of online content on the U.S. since early 2020.

## BOLSTERING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY STANDARDS

Authoritarian regimes have increasingly used digital technology capacities like surveillance and censorship to curb dissent and democratic movements domestically and internationally, prompting calls to bolster digital standards to prevent and respond to cyber espionage as well as prevent dependencies on authoritarian regimes for digital technologies.

### **Key Facts:**

- China pioneered digital age censorship with its “Great Firewall” of a state-controlled internet and high-tech repression, and it has [exported](#) surveillance and monitoring systems to at least 18 countries.
- Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE control [approximately](#) 60% of all 5G networks, while Chinese National Intelligence Law requires Chinese 5G suppliers to comply with demands to turn over data and enable surveillance or network-disruption activities.
- Iran is running two surveillance operations in cyberspace, using various methods to spy on more than 1,000 dissidents in Iran, the UK, the U.S., and 10 other countries according to [Check Point](#), an American-Israeli multinational software company.

## ELEVATING HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights abuses have been well documented in China, Venezuela, Myanmar, Iran, Russia, and beyond, with the COVID-19 pandemic providing additional opportunities for governments to crackdown on individual liberties, the right to assemble, and freedom of the press.

### **Key Facts:**

- More than one million Uighurs have been imprisoned by the Chinese government since 2017, and those not detained have been subjected “to intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced sterilization,” according to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#).
- Between 2016 and 2019, police and security forces killed more than 19,000 people in Venezuela, alleging “resistance to authority,” [according](#) to Human Rights Watch.
- In Myanmar, [over](#) 700 civilians have been killed since the military coup in February 2021, and more than 2,250 have been [arrested, charged, or sentenced](#).

## BIPARTISAN CONSENSUS

- **Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ):** “We must also lead a serious attack on the lifeblood of these autocrats, the kleptocratic ways in which they loot public coffers to sustain themselves and erode freedom globally. We must maintain consistent and continuous pressure on authoritarian governments to stop them from abusing the rights of their citizens and exporting disinformation and other tools of repression abroad... We must not be silent in the face of human rights violations for fear of offending a security partner.”
- **Senator Jim Risch (R-ID):** “Russia has exported repressive laws and tendencies to its allies in the region, which in turn have allowed authoritarian leaders to crack down and repress independent media, civil society and political opposition. The United States has an enduring interest in a prosperous and stable Western Hemisphere and democratic institutions are the best guarantors of prosperity and stability.”
- **Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX):** “We are truly in an ideological struggle, fighting for democracy against authoritarianism and promoting freedom over oppression for 40 years.”

- **Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY):** “And there is no shortage of work ahead for our legislative body and [the Foreign Affairs Committee], it is critical that we look ahead to the realities and challenges of the 21st century financial crises. Pandemics climate change and the rise of authoritarianism are indeed worldwide problems that have far reaching domestic impacts.”
- **Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ):** “We’re seeing unprecedented threats to our democracy and a disturbing rise [in] authoritarian actors. Anti-democratic forces have capitalized on the rapidly evolving information environment to spread disinformation and misinformation and exploit fissures in our society. The only way to reverse these trends is through a whole of society approach. Working with partners and allies who share our values.”